

1. Profit and Loss

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[0 : 0 0] Well, you might like to turn with me to Mark's Gospel, and if you have one of these Pew Bibles, these Visitor's Bibles, you'll find our reading on page 844.

I'm going to read from Mark chapter 8, verses 31 to 38. Not from verse 27, but I'll pick it up at verse 31.

Let me just say this first. We're going to be looking here at some words of Jesus, some very direct words of Jesus, which open up the very heart of what it means to be a Christian, what it means to be a follower of his.

And I'm conscious that there may be folk here today who are very interested in being a Christian, very interested perhaps in becoming a Christian, but don't quite know what's involved in getting started as a Christian.

Now, if you're in that situation, let me say this, that I'd be very happy to meet with you on a few occasions, to read the Bible with you and to help you to make a start. And I know there are others here in the church and on the staff of the church who would also be very happy to do that.

[1 : 0 5] So if that's your position, do make yourself known to me afterwards and we can arrange something. So Mark chapter 8, verse 31. Jesus here is speaking to his disciples.

And he began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed, and after three days rise again.

And he said this plainly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and seeing his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, Get behind me, Satan, for you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man.

And he called to him the crowd with his disciples and said to them, If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.

For whoever would save his life will lose it. But whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospels will save it. For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his life?

[2 : 2 2] For what can a man give in return for his life? For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of Man also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.

This is the word of the Lord and may it indeed be a blessing to us this afternoon. Well now, I'm due to be here for three Sundays. Sunday, Wednesday lunchtimes.

Today and the next two Wednesdays, God willing. And in each of them, I want us to look together at one of the Bible's great questions. The questions that God or the Lord Jesus asks in the Bible.

And today's great question comes from Mark 8 verse 36, if you'd like to look with me at that verse again. Jesus says, For what does it profit a man, what use is it to a man, to gain the whole world and forfeit his life?

Now let me say something first about the great questions which are asked in the Bible. They're very different from the kind of questions which are asked by journalists and politicians generally.

[3 : 31] We get very used to the questions that our journalists and our politicians and other commentators put across on the news every day. For example, will there be a general election in 2009 or 2010?

Or when will the recession be over? Are there little green shoots of recovery to be discerned already or are there not? Or how seriously should we take the threat of swine flu?

Now I don't know about you, but questions like that make me yawn. We hear them so often, don't we? They send us to sleep after we've heard them two or three times. And they seem to come round again and again in a very predictable cycle.

They're almost recycled, aren't they? So every few years we have this question about when will the next general election be? And every few years there's a health scare. Do you remember Mrs. Curry and Salmonella and the chickens?

Remember SARS? What happened to SARS? If people get very excited about these things for a month or so, then it's off the agenda again. But the questions that God asks are very different.

[4 : 41] They wake us up. Because they're so penetrating. And they are so unexpected. They're about reality. They force us to face things about ourselves and about God which are really important.

So listen to this one of Jesus again. What does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his life? Now do you see what he's saying in that question?

He's picturing a man who somehow gains the whole world. Now at one level, that's a preposterous picture. Because no man could possibly gain control or power over the whole world.

Even the President of the United States of America only rules a small proportion of the world. And he's only there for four years or eight years. And even while he's there, he's having his heels snapped at by his opponents all the time.

Or think of the wealthy, wealthy people. They publish this list of the hundred wealthiest people. People like Bill Gates and Warren Buffett. The richest men. They only possess a tiny, tiny proportion of the world's wealth.

[5 : 43] Or think back over history to men like Alexander the Great or Napoleon Bonaparte. Even Adolf Hitler. They wanted to gain mastery over large swathes of the world.

But they soon found that they were up against insuperable odds. Nobody could ever gain mastery over the whole globe. And yet, for the sake of making his point, for the sake of his argument, Jesus asks us to picture such a man.

Some world conqueror. A man who rules the five continents of the world. Who commands all the world's armies. Who controls all the world's wealth. A man who only has to lift a little finger.

And everybody does exactly what he asks. Now, says Jesus, is there any profit in a man gaining domination over the whole world? Is there any profit in a man having the six billion inhabitants of the globe at his beck and call?

Is there any profit in a man controlling all the world's wealth if he can only do so at the cost of his eternal life? Now, the answer is very clear.

[6 : 49] And the answer is no. Why? Because in Jesus' estimate, an individual's eternal life is worth infinitely more than all the wealth and glory of the world.

Now, look with me at the two verses that lead up to verse 36. Because I think they will help us to understand better the force of Jesus' question. In verse 34, you'll see that Jesus calls the crowd to him.

And he's been talking to Peter and his disciples in the previous few minutes. But at verse 34, he calls to the crowds who are... Generally, there were big crowds milling around him with the disciples.

And he calls everybody to him to listen to his teaching. So what he's about to say now is for everybody. Now, that's a very encouraging thing, don't you think? What Jesus has to say is for everybody without exception.

You might have come here to church today because of a little tiny spark of interest in wanting to find out about Christianity and about Jesus. So this is a message for you.

[7 : 52] It's not just a message for those who are already disciples of Jesus, but for you as well. And you will see in verse 34, and I hope that this will encourage you, that Jesus is asking anyone and everyone to become his follower.

Not just his 12 disciples, but any person in the whole crowd who is prepared to listen to him can become his follower. So what does he say to those who are thinking of becoming his follower?

I'm conscious that you may be sitting on the back row here and you may have your feet half pointed towards the door because you want to make a quick escape if the going gets tough. But stay, stay, if you're feeling like that.

Because the words of Jesus are worth listening to. They've transformed the lives of countless millions of people. So here's what he says to the crowd in verse 34.

If anyone wants to come after me... Now, that's a good start, don't you think? He knows that there are people around who want to come after him.

[8 : 54] People who want to take him as their leader. People who are perhaps following nobody at the present, whose lives are aimless, a bit like a ship without a rudder. If anyone wants to leave an aimless life and start to have a true guide and captain and friend, then there are certain things, says Jesus, that that person must do.

Now, what are they in verse 34? What does a person need to do or to be so as to be a Christian, to discover the wonderful friendship and guidance of the Lord Jesus? Well, it is not quite what you might expect.

There are two things in verse 34 that a would-be disciple must do. The first is, in Jesus' words, let him deny himself.

Now, that's a rather shocking thing for people like us to read because the values of the world around us are quite different, opposite values. The world around us says, indulge yourself, please yourself, gratify yourself, satisfy yourself in all your desires, pamper yourself, spoil yourself, assert yourself.

You can even go to night school classes in self-assertiveness, can't you, these days? But Jesus says, deny yourself. Is he mad?

[10 : 13] Is he a spoil sport? Or might he just be on the trail of something which our modern world has forgotten all about? Now, he's not saying, deny yourself certain things, like chocolate biscuits or cigarettes.

He's saying something much more radical. He's saying, deny yourself. The self is the problem. It's the self, the very self that needs to be denied.

The self is rather like a tyrant inside. It demands to have its way. But its way will always conflict with Jesus' way. The self will always want to be top dog.

The theme song of the self is, I did it my way. So a person cannot serve self and Jesus. Either we deny ourselves and serve Jesus, or we deny Jesus and serve ourselves.

We can't have it both ways. But which of the two is the better master to have in the end? The self or the Lord Jesus? To deny self will mean to hand over the keys of every room in the house of our life to him.

[11 : 23] The key to every department in our lives, so that he becomes master. Our master at home, in the domestic scene, our master at work, our master at play, master of our energies, our time, our skills, our money.

I wouldn't deny myself in order to serve some rotten master. But who could be a better master to serve than Jesus? Isn't it better in every way to deny self and serve him than to deny him and serve that cross little tyrant within me, which is myself?

So there's the first thing. Let him deny himself. Then secondly, says Jesus, let him take up his cross and follow me. That looks, I know, a little bit like two different things, but I think it's really one thing.

Because to take up the cross is to follow in the steps, the pathway of Jesus. Do you remember how when Jesus was, perhaps a couple of years into his public life, he only had about three years of public life and ministry, but when he was a little more than halfway through, the time came when he set his face resolutely towards Jerusalem and he went there fully on purpose to die.

He knew that his destiny was to die in Jerusalem. In fact, if you look back to verse 31 here, you'll see that he was teaching his disciples that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed.

[12 : 53] And after three days, rise again. He knew that before there could be resurrection and joy, there had to be a death, his death, a terrible death.

So in verse 34, Jesus is saying, as it is going to be for me, so it must be for my followers. Anyone who wants to be my disciple must take up his cross.

Now you'll remember that when it came to Jesus' own death, he literally had to pick up his cross and carry it through the streets of Jerusalem. He wouldn't have carried the vertical beam and the horizontal beam.

That would be too heavy for anybody. But he would have picked up that horizontal beam and stumbled and staggered with it until he could go no further and somebody else had to take it for him. And in Roman law, any man who was condemned to be crucified had to carry his cross beam through the streets of the city to the place outside the city where the crucifixion was going to take place.

And the crowds around knew that this was the drill. This is what happened. If the crowds ever saw a man being driven through the streets of the city carrying a great heavy bulk of wood across his shoulders, they knew that that man was walking to his death.

[14 : 03] That within an hour or two, he would have had long, sharp nails hammered through his wrists and his ankles and that he'd be strung up there between heaven and earth and that within 24 hours or 48 at the most, agonizing hours, he would die.

Now Jesus says to any would-be follower of his, if you're going to be one of my people, you must take up your cross and follow in my footsteps.

What happens to me may happen to you as well. Now what might this mean for Christian people today? It means that Christians sometimes will be called upon literally to die because of their allegiance to Jesus.

I know it hardly ever happens in a country like ours these days. But in the Middle East today, in various Far Eastern countries, certainly in some countries in Africa, Christian people are losing their lives every day because they're not prepared to renounce their faith when they're required to by some anti-Christian regime.

In every one of the last 20 centuries, Christians have been called upon to lay down their lives for the sake of Jesus. And in the 20th century, there have been more Christian masters than in all of the previous 19 centuries put together.

[15 : 20] And in the 21st century, it looks as if things are going the same way. Now as I say, in Western countries like ours, few Christians are actually called upon to lay down their lives, at least for the present.

But we need to see that it's only possible to be a Christian publicly. Jesus always called people to himself publicly. And as soon as you are known in your circle of friends or at work or whatever to be a Christian, you risk a lot of flack.

So if you say to people that you believe that Jesus is the only saviour and the only way to God, you may become very unpopular. Or when you say that the ethical standards of the Bible are non-negotiable standards, again you won't be popular.

So even in the Western world, even in Scotland or England, Christians will come under pressure for our faith. Now if you're not a Christian and you're listening to all this, you may be saying to yourself, this is all terribly gloomy.

I mean, who wants to be a Christian when you have to deny yourself and take up your cross and possibly face death? I thought Christianity was a happy business. But this preacher seems to be making it sound like a very unhappy and dreadful business.

[16 : 31] Now friend, if that's what you're thinking, look at verse 35 and I think it will all begin to make a bit more sense because verse 35 is explaining what Jesus has just said in verse 34.

So here's 35. For whoever would save his life will lose it. But whoever loses his life for my sake and the Gospels will save it.

In other words, Jesus is saying, there is a topsy-turvy principle at work here. It seems to any ordinary person, any sensible person, that to deny yourself and take up your cross is the fast route to gloom and despair and death.

But it's not. The truth is that the person who loses his life or her life for Jesus and for the Gospel is the person who saves their lives in the end. They may lose their life on earth, but their life is safe eternally.

And yet the person whose chief concern is to save or preserve his life is the person who will lose his life in the end. So what kind of a person is the one who is committed to saving or preserving his own life?

[17 : 42] It's the person whose big aim is to protect himself and to shore himself up with all manner of securities. Self-preservation is his middle name. Self-preservation is his motto.

So he works very hard for years and years to surround himself with solid bricks and mortar and to make his bank balance as fat as it possibly can be. He gets very worried when there's a recession because he fears that all those years of hard-earned pennies are going to slip away through his fingers.

I want to be comfortable, he says. I want to be secure. So he looks carefully at his insurance policies. He takes great steps to protect his health. But he surrounds himself with elaborate safety nets of many kinds.

But sooner or later, even if he should prolong his life to be 90 or even 100, he reaches the end of his life. And then, where is he? Jesus says in verse 35, whoever will save his life will lose it.

That man lived for himself. He didn't deny himself so as to follow the only man worth serving. he decided to serve himself. And he ended up losing everything.

[18 : 55] His God, his place in heaven, his hope, his joy of being with Christ forever. But then on the other side, what kind of man or woman is it who loses his life for the sake of Jesus and the Gospel?

Well, this is the person who comes to see that Jesus is the only ultimate reason for living. This person wants to serve Jesus because of the way that Jesus has served him.

He realizes that without Jesus, he's a lost soul, without meaning and purpose in this life and without hope in eternity. He comes to see just how valuable his life is to Jesus.

He comes to understand why Jesus went to the cross. He learns from the Bible that although God has made him and God loves him very deeply, he has become alienated from God, estranged from God because of his sinfulness.

It hits him, perhaps with force, that he's never thanked God, that he's never lived consciously under God's loving leadership. He's lived for himself. He has been a self-serving man.

[20 : 06] The God who has loved him, who gave him his very life, who has sustained his life through all these years from the moment of conception, who has showered him with blessings large and small throughout the years, this is a God that he does not know and does not acknowledge.

God has been as much a stranger to him as the emperor of Japan. And then he learns from the Bible that the wages of sin is death, that because he has chosen for all these years to ignore God and live without him, God can only respond by punishing him in the end with rejection and condemnation.

But then this person, this man or woman, comes to hear that God has sent Jesus to bear the death penalty that his sins have required. And Jesus has borne that penalty for him in his place.

This is where the love of God is seen, at the cross of Jesus. Our man comes to see that in dying on the cross, Jesus has borne the punishment. he has accepted the wages of sin.

The punishment of death that the man should have received has been taken by Jesus and Jesus has been there as his substitute. And because of the death of Jesus, he is spared, he is set free, he is delivered from death row.

[21 : 29] During the Second World War, in one of the concentration camps, there was a Christian pastor whose name was Maximilian Kolber. He was a German, I think, but he was in prison under the Germans.

And one day, he and a number of prisoners were sitting together in a fairly large room and the camp officers came to select one or two people to be executed on that particular occasion.

And a man was pointed out and told that he must come forward because he was going to be executed. So this man broke down and he pleaded with the camp officers and he said, have mercy upon me, I'm a married man with children.

Couldn't you just think of my wife and children? And Maximilian Kolber, seeing the scene in front of him, stood up and quietly walked across to the camp guard and said that he'd like to have a word with him.

And as he spoke to him, he requested that he might be allowed to be executed in place of this other man who was married with children. He explained that he had neither wife nor children and he'd be glad for the other man to be spared and for him to die for him.

[22 : 36] And Maximilian Kolber's request was granted. Now that's the way Jesus has acted for you and me.

The person who loses his life for the sake of Jesus and the gospel is the person who understands what Jesus has done in dying for him. And he's filled with gratitude and joy that Jesus should have served him like that at such great cost.

He says, if Jesus has done that for me, how could I possibly do anything but live for him? It will be a privilege for me, a joy for me to deny myself and take up my cross and follow him.

In fact, I would be a fool to go on serving myself when I can serve a master like Jesus. So it may seem strange at first sight to think that denying ourselves and taking up the cross and following Jesus could be anything but doom and gloom.

But it's the opposite of doom and gloom. It's the pathway to joy and to reality. But the truth is that the person who's determined to save his life will finally lose his life.

[23 : 46] Whereas the person who loses his life for Jesus' sake, who gives up all right to self-determination for Jesus' sake, is the one who finds real life in the end, both in this world and in eternity.

And this great question that Jesus asks in verse 36 is simply rubbing the point home. He picks up the theme of losing one's life from verse 35 and in verse 36 he shows just how awful is the prospect of losing one's life eternally.

And you see in verse 36 he's balancing two things against each other. He says, is it a profitable exchange to gain control of the whole world at the cost of your life?

Of course not. To have the whole world in your pocket for a few years would be a disastrous thing to possess if, as a consequence, you lose your eternal life.

Nothing is more valuable than to live forever with God as a redeemed, forgiven person. Now the sad truth, friends, is that many people are prepared to forfeit eternal life for the sake of something far less valuable than the whole world.

[24 : 58] One person will say, I just can't come and follow him because it would ruin my reputation. I would lose my reputation. That person isn't forsaking eternal life for the sake of gaining the whole world, is he?

Merely for the sake of preserving his reputation. Another person refuses to follow Christ because he knows that he would have to stop being a fraudulent businessman and he'd have to start being honest.

Another person refuses to follow Jesus because he knows that he would have to give up an adulterous relationship. Now people like that are not forfeiting eternal life for the sake of gaining the whole world.

They're forfeiting eternal life much more cheaply. Is it worth it? For the sake of an adulterous relationship, for the sake of a bit of extra cash in the pocket, for the sake of preserving a certain kind of reputation, if it's a disastrous thing to forfeit eternal life in order to gain the whole world, isn't it utter folly to forfeit eternal life so as to hold on to something which is not even worth having in the first place?

What does it profit a man, says Jesus, to gain the whole world and yet to forfeit his life? We'll bow our heads and we'll pray together.

[26 : 21] our dear Lord Jesus, you spoke to the crowd and you beckoned and called to anybody who had ears to hear that they might respond to your message.

We thank you for showing us in these words of yours that it would be a disastrous thing even to have possession of the world at the cost of our eternal life.

So we pray that you will help us, that you will be gracious to us, bring home to our hearts the truth of this call of yours and this message and that you will help each one of us to respond so that we might follow you and find the joy of eternal life to be had both in this life and in the world to come and we ask it for your dear name's sake.

Amen.