

The Value of a Human Soul

Text: Mk 8:34-38 ⁱ

34 And calling the crowd to him with his disciples, he said to them, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. 35 For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel’s will save it. 36 For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul? 37 For what can a man give in return for his soul? 38 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.”

Introduction

Who managed to watch the news report this week about one of Leonardo da Vinci's paintings being auctioned for in excess of \$450,000,000

Problem is that not everyone even agrees that da Vinci painted it! Then yesterday, while watching the news, I was quite amazed to learn that an original drawing of Tin-Tin was auctioned for more than \$500,000 (£380 000)!

Now, I love art and have a real appreciation of the incredible gifts of some of the artists who have enhanced and enriched the world as they have. But if you're anything like me, you would probably battle to even begin to comprehend those kinds of figures, let alone understand that someone would be willing to pay such an enormous price for a single painting or drawing – good as they may be.

My immediate instinct was to ask, “How many people could have been fed with \$450,000,000? How many people could be housed or educated with \$500,000? Would that money not have been better spent on enriching many lives rather than simply decorating one wall?”

Of course, it reveals just what our materialistic world holds as valuable, doesn't it? What is it that would cause a person with that amount of money to attach more worth to one painting than a thousand people?

It also raises an important point. Have you ever considered the fact that everything has a potential value?

If you want to buy a certain kind of car, you know that it will cost a certain amount of money. The more prestigious the brand, the bigger the price tag.

If you want to live in a certain area, you know it will cost you a certain amount of money. The higher up

the hill you go, the more you pay for a place to live. Even a view has a price tag.

Coffee has a value, doesn't it? But since I love coffee, we won't question its value too much this morning!

Some people even go so far as to put a value on a body part. Famous pianists might be willing to ensure their fingers for millions of pounds. The same could be said of sports stars who may ensure their legs for extraordinary amounts, or singers their voices. We attach value to all sorts of things these days, don't we?

But have you stopped to consider the value of a human soul? What price do you put on someone's soul?

Amazingly, in a world that clamours to put a value on almost everything, many people don't even think to appraise the one part of us that is arguably the most valuable part of who we are .

The world system as we know it today would have us believe that we are nothing more than material beings; a collection of cells, a conglomeration of chemical processes; nothing more than the matter we see.

But that is clearly not how Jesus sees things. He teaches about life extending far beyond the grave. He turns the world's value system on its head and teaches His disciples that gaining one thing may well mean losing another, that holding too tightly to the things of this world at the expense of a relationship with God can be incredibly costly and that no amount of money can adequately pay for even one human soul. Jesus turns a materialistic worldview completely on its head!

36 For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul? 37 For what can a man give in return for his soul?

In the process, Jesus reveals the value that God places on a single human soul. You can gain the whole world yet forfeit your soul, and you are left with nothing. In other words, one human soul is actually more valuable than all the wealth of the world combined! Which brings me to the first point:

We can undervalue our own soul

In this simple statement Jesus reveals the immeasurable value God places on one human soul - your soul!

You can gain all the wealth this world has to offer, but still, it is still far less valuable than your soul.

You can amass all the talent, own all the property, have all power, rule every single nation on this planet, and still, it would fall hopelessly short in God's estimation of the worth of your soul.

Isn't that amazing? And incredibly, that is the value God places not only on your soul, but on every human soul!

And it isn't merely a glib phrase on His part. No! God says it because He means it and then proves it by occupying the very cross that He predicted awaited Him. Jesus goes to the excruciating agony of the cross not only in the foreknowledge of what your soul will cost Him, but in the full knowledge of it too! You see, Jesus is the Alpha and the Omega, the one who knows the end from the beginning. To a God unbound by time, prophecy is history!

And Jesus is revealing the very value of a human soul on the very back of His prophecy about His imminent crucifixion, knowing what that will cost Him.

Do you think, just maybe, that God places a high value on your soul?

Yet amazingly, our modern world system places very little worth, if any, on anything that isn't material; physical, animate. This world system measures value in pounds and pence, in the physical and the aesthetic. Ironically, we value the part of ourselves that is the least valuable!

We often measure our worth by the one part of us that is not eternal.

And so we make heroes of people who are gifted at kicking, passing, bowling or hitting a piece of leather.

We measure importance by positions and possessions. But all of these things are temporary. Yet we place so very little (if any) value on the one part of us that never ever dies.

We so often invest in everything else at the expense of our souls and then come to understand the futility and madness of it the very first second we step into

eternity. Jesus makes this abundantly clear when He says:

36 For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul? 37 For what can a man give in return for his soul?

So, what exactly is a soul?

Well, we could wax theological this morning and have a debate about whether we as human beings are dichotomous or trichotomous beings, i.e. people made up of two parts or three, and whether or not the soul is the same as the spirit or two different parts of the inanimate part of what constitutes a human being, but I will leave that discussion for another day, except to say that the Bible teaches clearly about us having a body, soul and spirit, and uses three distinct words for each.

Indeed Heb 4:12 goes so far as to say that there is a very close link between the soul and the spirit, almost

as if to make them one and the same, yet drawing the same distinction as we would see between joint and marrow.

Hebrews 4:12 - For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.

And to make matters even more interesting, there are two separate words in the Greek for the human spirit and the human soul, namely *pneuma* and *psuche*, yet both can be translated as breath!

But for the sake of our discussion today, let's simply look at the two aspects of humankind – the physical or visible part of us and the spiritual or unseen part of us.

Clearly, Jesus was referring here to the spiritual part of us and reveals it to be far more valuable than anything and everything in the physical realm.

The soul is defined in different ways in various Scriptures:

It is defined as the immaterial, invisible part of us.

As the disembodied part of us after we die – i.e. the part of us that lives on even when our bodies expire.

As the seat of our personality and free will.

As the sentient element of us which enables us to perceive, to reflect, to feel, to desire, to reason.

As the spiritual dimension to us that is able to commune and communicate with God.

So think of your soul and spirit as those parts of you made in the image of God that are able to commune and communicate with Him, and that never truly dies.

Our bodies will pass away. They will expire. I have noticed how much slower my body moves these days. I used to be quite quick. Now even my shadow overtakes me! Our bodies decay. They age. Eventually they quit altogether.

But not the spirit. Not the soul.

This is the part of us that Jesus was referring to here. And since it is the part of us that exists outside of the dimension of the natural, physical world, and both outlives and outlasts it, it stands to reason that it is far more valuable than everything in the natural world combined – even if just so far as durability is concerned!

Gold is seen as valuable because it doesn't rust. How much more valuable, then, the part of you that neither rusts nor decays!

Yet how much time do we consider or invest in this part of who we are in a material world that barely acknowledges its existence?

We fear death so much precisely because we don't necessarily see or embrace the aspect of ourselves that cannot die.

It is so easy to undervalue our own soul!

The author of Ecclesiastes was guilty of that very thing, wasn't he?

Arguably written by none other than King Solomon, the wealthiest of Israel's kings, Solomon, who spent a great deal of his life pursuing earthly things often at the expense of eternal matters, came to a very sobering conclusion:

Ecc 1:1- 3 - The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem. 2 Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity. 3 What

does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?

He then pretty much shares the futility of a life chasing pride, pennies and petticoats before concluding:

Ecc 12: 13-14 - The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. 14 For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil.

In other words, there is a part of us that lives beyond the grave and that must give an account to Almighty God. It is quite a gloomy, yet divinely inspired glimpse into the life of a man who spent so much time chasing material things including knowledge, riches, beauty, wealth, only to realise at the end of it all that it was as futile as chasing the wind!

It is only the eternal things that actually matter when all is said and done.

The same truth is reiterated through the lives of Daniel and Nebuchadnezzar, two men whose stories played out at the same time in history yet who lived very different lives with a very different focus indeed.

If ever you want an example of a man who invested in the spiritual aspect of who he was and enjoyed the fruit of peace and blessing that went along with it, and juxtapose his life against that of the man who had everything yet saw such little value in his soul, you need look no further than king Nebuchadnezzar.

Daniel was a young Jewish exile taken very much against his will to Babylon.

He was a God fearing, God honouring, God seeking young man forced to live out his faith in a godless environment and a foreign land.

Can you imagine how it must have felt to be a man set apart for God yet having to work on a daily basis with the musicians and soothsayers of the day?

Here is a young man who was literally stripped of everything; his freedom, his country, his history, his heritage, his home, his very name!

From a material point of view, Daniel had pretty much lost everything when you come to think about it.

Yet he is the young man intent on seeking God. On praying when all prayer but that offered to Nebuchadnezzar was banned. Who invested in his spiritual life even when the cost of doing so came with the threat of death.

Yet he is also the man at peace in the lion's den.

Then there is King Nebuchadnezzar - the man in that time in history who had more than any other. He had pretty much everything.

The supreme ruler of the world superpower of the day, his word was pretty much law. In fact, an edict had been passed calling for people to worship him. He was seen as a god.

He had all the wealth you could think of. Probably pretty much every accolade under the sun. A host of people at his beck and call.

Yet he saw God and the things of God as being of very little, if any value at all.

But for all his fame and fortune, he was a man with very little peace. And then suddenly everything is taken from him, including his own senses, and for seven years, he is driven mad.

Nebuchadnezzar's Prayer

28 All this happened to King Nebuchadnezzar. 29 Twelve months later, as the king was walking on the roof of the royal palace of Babylon, 30 he said, "Is not this the great Babylon I have built as the royal

residence, by my mighty power and for the glory of my majesty?” 31 The words were still on his lips when a voice came from heaven, “This is what is decreed for you, King Nebuchadnezzar: Your royal authority has been taken from you. 32 You will be driven away from people and will live with the wild animals; you will eat grass like cattle. Seven times will pass by for you until you acknowledge that the Most High is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and gives them to anyone he wishes.” 33 Immediately what had been said about Nebuchadnezzar was fulfilled. He was driven away from people and ate grass like cattle. His body was drenched with the dew of heaven until his hair grew like the feathers of an eagle and his nails like the claws of a bird. 34 At the end of that time, I, Nebuchadnezzar, raised my eyes toward heaven, and my sanity was restored. Then I praised the Most High; I honoured and glorified him who lives forever. His dominion is an eternal dominion; his kingdom endures from generation to generation. 35 All the

peoples of the earth are regarded as nothing. He does as he pleases with the powers of heaven and the peoples of the earth. No one can hold back his hand or say to him: "What have you done?" 36 At the same time that my sanity was restored, my honour and splendour were returned to me for the glory of my kingdom. My advisers and nobles sought me out, and I was restored to my throne and became even greater than before. 37 Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and exalt and glorify the King of heaven, because everything he does is right and all his ways are just. And those who walk in pride he is able to humble.

So it is clear that we can undervalue our soul.

We can neglect our own soul

This is nowhere more evident than in the parable Jesus teaches about the rich man in

Luke 12:15-21 - And he said to them, “Take care, and be on your guard against all covetousness, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.” 16 And he told them a parable, saying, “The land of a rich man produced plentifully, 17 and he thought to himself, ‘What shall I do, for I have nowhere to store my crops?’ 18 And he said, ‘I will do this: I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. 19 And I will say to my soul, “Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.”’ 20 But God said to him, ‘Fool! This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’ 21 So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God.”

Jesus concluded that life is not measured by how much you own.

This man neglected his soul through

Wrong preparation – He chased the wrong treasure

V15, 21 - And he said to them, “Take care, and be on your guard against all covetousness, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.” ... 21 So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God.”

Wrong anticipation – He chased the wrong pleasure

v19 - And I will say to my soul, “Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.”

He was working so hard to enjoy his retirement, yet it never came. Sadly, he ended up neglecting and ultimately forfeiting his soul for the wrong dream that turned out to be nothing more than a mirage in the desert!

This man neglected his soul through

Wrong anticipation – He used the wrong measure

v20 But God said to him, ‘Fool! This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’ 21 So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God.”

So... We can **undervalue** our souls

We can **neglect** our souls.

But finally, Jesus teaches something even more sobering – arguably the most sobering point of all:

We can lose our own soul

The reality is that eternity awaits each and every one of us, believer and atheist alike.

Mt 25:45-46 - “He will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.’ 46 “Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.”

We will all live beyond the grave. We will all stand before the judgement seat of Christ. We will all ultimately acknowledge His Lordship. And some will be forever lost.

Heb 9:27 – ...it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment.

Question is: How prepared will we be when we stand there?

Closing Illustration

There was a famous singer-songwriter in the 60s & 70s called Jim Croce. Has anyone heard of him? Well, you may have heard of one of his songs – a song that became a hit single in 1974. A beautiful love song.

The words are as follows:

If I could save time in a bottle
The first thing that I'd like to do
Is to save every day
Till Eternity passes away
Just to spend them with you

If I could make days last forever
If words could make wishes come true
I'd save every day like a treasure and then,
Again, I would spend them with you

But there never seems to be enough time
To do the things you want to do
Once you find them
I've looked around enough to know
That you're the one I want to go
Through time with

But as beautiful as those words are, what many people don't realise is just how sadly poignant they would prove to be. You see, Jim Croce never came to experience the time he wanted to save in a bottle.

On Thursday, September 20, 1973, during Croce's *Life and Times* tour, and the day before his ABC single "I Got a Name" was released, Croce and five others died when their chartered Beechcraft aeroplane crashed into a tree during take-off.

While on his tours, he grew increasingly homesick, and decided to take a break from music and settle with his wife and infant son when his *Life and Times* tour ended.

In a letter to his wife which arrived days after his death, Croce told her he had decided to quit music and stick to writing short stories and movie scripts as a career, and withdraw from public life altogether.ⁱⁱ

But it was never to be.

Friends, God has given each of us one human soul. What we do with it is entirely up to us.

My prayer is that each of us will recognise its value, invest in its growth and prepare for its destiny.

So let me leave you with a pertinent question:

What are you investing the bulk of your time and energy in?

By our actions we reveal what we believe to be our greatest treasure. Have you truly taken a moment to consider the value of your own soul, and more to the point, just how valuable it is to God? And if so, what are you doing about it?

ENDNOTES:

ⁱ Unless otherwise stated, all Scripture quotations are from the Holy Bible, English Standard Version, copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

ⁱⁱ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jim_Croce