

Capital Gains: Eternal Losses

by John Vissers

Jesus calls us to a costly discipleship, where we must deny ourselves and take up our cross to follow him, and in doing so, we will find our true life in him.

Duration: 27:50

Scripture: Matthew 6:33, Matthew 16:24-26, Mark 8:34, Luke 9:23, 1 Corinthians 1:18

Topics: "Eternal"

Description

The sermon transcript discusses the temptation to save one's own life and gain the whole world. It highlights the paradox that in trying to save one's life, they may actually lose it. The speaker references the story of Jim Elliott, who lived and died according to the values of the Kingdom of God, understanding that sometimes in order to gain something, one must be willing to lose something. The sermon concludes by posing the question of what one is willing to exchange for their soul and emphasizes the importance of following Jesus Christ to discover one's true identity and purpose.

Transcript

Turn with me, if you will, this morning to Matthew 16 and verse 24, where we'll read just three verses this morning as the basis for our reflections from God's word. Well-known words concerning the cross and self-denial and discipleship. Then Jesus told his disciples, if any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.

For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life, or what will they give in return for their life? Let's pray together. Let your gospel come now, O Lord, not only with words but also with power, with the Holy Spirit, with conviction, and with full assurance, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen. You are no fool to give up what you cannot keep to gain what you cannot lose. These are not the words of a stockbroker or an investment banker or a financial planner or a mutual fund manager or a market analyst, which is probably a good thing given the way the markets have been performing in recent weeks.

But these are the words of a young man named Jim Elliott. And in the 1950s, Jim Elliott gave up a promising career in order to give himself to the Church of Jesus Christ in South America, to the indigenous peoples there and their struggles and to the cause of the gospel. And shortly after he penned those words

in his daily journal, Jim Elliott was dead.

A young man, a missionary of the gospel, killed because he identified with Christ and he identified with Christ's Church and he identified with the people for whom he longed to bring the gospel of Jesus Christ. His body was left to rot on a beach with the bodies of his colleagues. You are no fool to give up what you cannot keep to gain what you cannot lose.

You see, Jim Elliott lived and he died according to the upside down values of the kingdom of God and he saw the values of this world as the lens of God's economy, that sometimes in order to gain something, you have to lose something. Earthly gains, capital gains can lead to eternal losses, while earthly losses can sometimes lead to eternal gains. And that's what Jesus is trying to drill into his disciples in Matthew 16 in our text this morning.

The disciples had been with Jesus now for some time and Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem and the disciples needed to understand that Jesus was going to suffer at the hands of the religious leaders, that he was going to be put to death by the political authorities and that he was going to be raised to life again on the third day. And the disciples needed to understand that the kingdom of God was going to be inaugurated through the suffering and death of Jesus. This was not going to be a glorious revolution in which they would gain worldly wealth or political power or social status.

Jesus was going to a cross and those who wanted to be his followers had to identify themselves with him. They had to deny themselves and take up their cross and follow Jesus. They had to identify with Jesus, the Christ, the son of the living God.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer once said that when Christ calls us, he bids us come and die. And that's what Jesus was doing here. He was calling his disciples, calling them to the cross to come and die.

And Jesus doesn't just stop though with this call to costly discipleship. He's not finished with his disciples yet because he lays out the odds very clearly. He reminds them that those who want to save their life will lose it, but that those who lose their life for the sake of Jesus, for the sake of the kingdom of God, will find it.

What's the point, he says, of gaining the whole world if you forfeit your soul and lose your life? What will you give in exchange for your soul or in return for your life? Is there anything in this world that is really worth that much? I want you to notice in the first place that these words describe a temptation. They describe a temptation. And the temptation is to try and save your own life.

And the temptation is to try and gain the whole world. The temptation is to think that by gaining the whole world, you can save yourself. This, you'll recall, is the temptation which Jesus himself faced.

In the desert, when tempted by the devil, in Matthew chapter 4 and verse 8, the devil, the text says, took Jesus to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. And the devil said, all this I will give you if what? If you will bow down and worship me. Jesus was tempted to gain the whole world, not according to the plan and the will of God, but by the devil's means.

But Jesus knew that if he yielded to that temptation, he would have been selling his soul and forfeiting his life and forfeiting God's plan. If Jesus faced this temptation, my friends, then how much more do we struggle with it? You see, Jesus knew that he was striking at the very heart of faith and life with these words. Whoever wants to save his life is not willing to identify with Jesus because following Jesus means

identifying with him, relinquishing your life to him and following him to the cross.

Discipleship involves crucifixion. Discipleship involves death. It involves mortification.

There is therefore no possibility of both being a disciple and saving or preserving one's life. Those who want to save their lives, Jesus says, will not enter the kingdom, but will be condemned at the judgment. Now that's the truth of the Gospel.

And it's the truth of the Gospel that the Apostle Paul later discovered in his own life, that he had to identify with Christ and be united with Christ at the very core and center of his being. In Galatians 2.20, he writes, I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me and the life I live in the body I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me. Or remember the words of Philippians 3.10, I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings be coming like him in his death and so somehow to attain to the resurrection from the dead.

The key to life is union with Christ even in his death. And the temptation is to think that there can be life without death, that there can be resurrection power without the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, that you can gain the whole world and still belong to Christ at the same time, that you can reap the investment of eternal life by investing in the earthly funds of this world. Now let's stand back for a moment, however, from this text and let's be honest with ourselves.

We really don't believe this. We really don't believe what Jesus is saying. Not really.

Or if we do believe it, we certainly don't practice it. It's not at the very core and center of our lives. It's not part of the fabric of our being because we spend our lives doing precisely what Jesus warns us against.

We spend our lives trying to gain the world. We spend our lives laying up treasures on earth. But this text, my friends, doesn't just warn us against this temptation.

It rips the lid right off it. For it uncovers the reason why we do this. The reason why we're obsessed with this is because we're trying to save ourselves.

We do it because we're trying to justify ourselves. We do it because we're trying to make meaning out of our lives. We do it because we're trying to make sense and find direction.

We do it because we're lost and we think we can find our way home by ourselves. And you don't have to look very far across this city or across this province or across this nation to see that we've created a whole culture based upon this approach to life. We believe that with just the right education and that with just the right job and just the right house and just the right relationships and just the right investments, we will find ourselves and we will save ourselves and everything and everyone becomes a means to this self-absorbed end.

We are voracious consumers of life, using things and people, taking in what we can, spitting out what we don't like or no longer need and all in a vain attempt to gain the world and save our souls to live forever because we think we can do it ourselves. And we live in a culture that is out of control on this point and that's the crisis. We think we're saving ourselves but it's an illusion because by following this path we are bankrupting our very souls and it all comes crashing down at some point.

A few years ago the Eagles recorded a song, I'm dating myself now, I'm definitely a boomer from the boomer generation, the Eagles recorded a song called New York Minute which contained these opening lines, sobering words. Harry got up, dressed all in black, went down to the station and he never came back. They found his clothes scattered somewhere down the track and he won't be down on Wall Street in the morning.

He had a home, love of a girl, but men get lost sometimes as years unfurl. One day he crossed some line and he was too much in this world but I guess it doesn't matter anymore. We get lost sometimes and we cross some line and we find ourselves too much in the world and we can't get back and that's the great temptation.

If you try to save your life by gaining the world, Jesus says you will lose it. But secondly notice that there's also a paradox in these words. These words describe a paradox and the paradox is really a promise.

We've seen the first part of the paradox. If you try to save your life you will lose it. You can gain the whole world yet forfeit your soul but notice the other side of the paradox.

Those who lose their life for Jesus' sake will find it. Those who lose their life for Jesus' sake will find it. Jesus says if you deny yourself you'll find yourself.

If you take up my cross and if you identify with me in death you will find life. If you follow me as a bond servant you will become the most free of all people. A paradox.

The upside and the downside of upside down values of the kingdom of God, the upside down call to discipleship. The disciple who follows Jesus, Jesus knows may well lose his life for the sake of the kingdom but Jesus says what have you lost? You've lost what you couldn't keep anyway, your earthly existence in order to gain eternal life and the disciple who loses his life will find it, will find life, will find the very thing in the midst of the loss for which we all yearn and long in the midst of life. For that life will be restored at the resurrection and the judgment.

And that my friends is a paradox. Gain in this age may result in loss in the age to come or poverty in this age and riches in the age to come. Capital gains in this world, eternal losses in the age to come or capital losses in this world and eternal gains in God's kingdom.

These are difficult words because they challenge us at the very core of our being. It's a hard saying but Jesus is calling us to his lordship. This is the heart of the gospel.

From the perspective of the world, death and suffering and loss are to be avoided at all costs and millions of dollars are being spent every day by people who want to avoid them. But according to the Bible, life is to be found in the very midst of death, comfort in the midst of suffering, fullness of life in the midst of loss. There is gain in loss, there is victory in defeat, there is power in weakness, there is life in death, there is wisdom in foolishness.

This is how Eugene Peterson puts it in the message when he translates these verses. He says, anyone who intends to come with me has to let me lead. You're not in the driver's seat.

I am. Don't run from suffering. Embrace it.

Follow me and I'll show you how. Self-help is no help at all. Self-sacrifice is the way, my way to finding yourself your true self.

Now we live today in what people like to call a post-modern culture. And the post-modern culture is marked by a number of things, but one of the things that it's marked by is an obsession with the self and with the veneration of the self. In the pre-modern world, as one of my friends says, in the pre-modern world people believed there was a God.

Kind of everyone agreed on that. In the modern world, sort of the consensus was atheism, there was no God. And now in the post-modern world what has happened is that people now believe that they are God.

We've gone from believing in God to believing in no God now to believing that we ourselves are God. Listen to the high priestess of the new age, Shirley MacLaine. The most pleasurable journey you take is through yourself.

The only sustaining love involvement is with yourself. When you look back on your life and try to figure out where you've been and where you are going, when you look at your work, your love affairs, your marriages, your children, your pain, your happiness, when you examine all that closely, what you really find out is that the only person you really go to bed with is yourself. The only person you really dress is yourself.

The only thing you have is working to the consummation of your own identity. And that's, she says, what I've been trying to do all my life. Now whatever you may think of Shirley MacLaine and whatever you may think about new age spirituality and whatever you may think about this particular statement, let's be clear about one thing.

This is not the gospel. This is the anti-gospel. This is, if I may put it this way, anti-Christ.

Because the gospel declares the very opposite. The gospel declares the paradox that by making yourself God you lose the very self-fulfillment and self-knowledge for which you long. And this will be no surprise to you, but I'll take Calvin over Shirley MacLaine any day.

Calvin says all the wisdom, all the wisdom in the world that we could possibly possess consists of two parts. The knowledge of God and of ourselves. You see Calvin had it right.

He knew the paradox that we only know ourselves and we only love ourselves when we know and love God. You see the gospel is not against self-knowledge. The gospel is not against coming to terms with your true self.

But what the gospel is saying that your true self is truly found in Jesus Christ. And if you lose your life in Christ, the glory of the gospel is that you will find your life in Christ. For we truly become ourselves as we know and as we love and as we serve God.

One of the church fathers puts it in a marvelous way when he says, the glory of God, the glory of God is men and women fully alive. Fully alive, mirroring back, reflecting back and their lives, God's glory to their creator. Fully alive to who they are and what God has made them to be.

The fullness of life overflowing day by day. Reflecting back God's glory at work within us. God is not against us.

These are not words that are difficult because they are against us. They are difficult because they are a paradox and point out the fact that God is for us. That God is on our side.

And that leaves us really with only one thing in this text for us to consider as we conclude. And that is the question which Jesus asks. What will you give in return for your life? At first glance this appears to be a proverb in the form of a rhetorical question.

Jesus is reinforcing what he's already said and he appeals to our calculating nature. On the one hand, nothing is more valuable to me than my life. It is therefore worth my while to lose anything if by this means I gain my life.

But here's the point. What if the very thing that I am giving you is my life? What if the very thing that I am being asked to give up is my life in order to gain my life? Am I prepared to exchange my life, my own autonomous independent life, which ultimately will lead to naught and to destruction for my true life in Jesus Christ? Are you prepared to exchange capital gains for eternal gains? Are you prepared to exchange the old self for the new self? Time for eternity. Be clear about what Jesus is saying here.

Jesus knows us too well for he knows, he assumes that we're all prepared to sell our souls. That's not the issue. The only question is what's the price? What are you willing to exchange for your soul? Are you willing to let your soul go as a lost leader in the marketplace of life or are you willing to hold out for the kingdom of God and exchange your life for life itself? These words describe a temptation.

These words describe a paradox. These words offer us a question. Are you willing this morning, my sisters and brothers, to take that step of faith and find out who you really are? Not who you think you might be, but who you really are and who you can really become by following Jesus Christ? When all is said and done, when all is said and done, what have you really got to lose anyway? Because Jim Elliott was right.

You are no fool to give up what you cannot keep to gain. You are no fool to give up what you cannot keep to gain. Let us pray.

Father, your word to us, your call to us, sometimes seems difficult to understand and hard to practice. And yet we have been reminded this morning that you are for us and not against us. If you want us to be all that you have created us to be in union with our Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.

And so by faith help us this morning, perhaps for the first time, perhaps through a renewal of our commitment to reach out to you with empty hands of faith and cling to Christ and there find our life. By your Spirit, guide us, strengthen us, enable us to be your disciples, to take up the cross, to the nymself, and follow you. Amen.

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