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The Value of the Soul

The first valuable commodity that we will consider in our study is the soul. People often fail to properly consider the value of their soul because their estimation is distorted by either self-deprecation (failing to see how valuable they are personally) or short-sightedness (failing to see past the things of this life). So let us see what the Scriptures teach us about the value of the soul.

“Then Jesus said to His disciples, ‘If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it; but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it. For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?’ (Matthew 16:24-26).

Natural Desire for Self-Preservation

It is natural that man would rather save his life than lose it. This natural inclination toward caring for one’s physical life is used by Paul to emphasize the need for husbands to demonstrate a sacrificial love for their wives: *“So husbands ought also to love their own wives as their own bodies. He who loves his own wife loves himself; for no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as*

Christ also does the church” (Ephesians 5:28-29).

Although the desire for self-preservation is natural, Jesus says that one must learn to “*deny himself*” and be willing to “*lose...his life*” (Matthew 16:24-25). But why would anyone do this? It is not because Jesus is demanding the neglect or destruction of oneself. As we will notice in a later point, we are much too valuable in the Lord’s eyes to adopt that mentality and behavior. Instead, Jesus says we must deny self and be willing to lose our lives in order to gain long-term security. Our desire for self-preservation should be more for our soul – our entire existence that extends past our time on earth – than our temporary physical lives.

Dangers of an Overly Ambitious Attitude

In this passage, Jesus warned against having an overly ambitious attitude. Though one may gain “*the whole world,*” it is meaningless if he “*forfeits his soul*” in the process (Matthew 16:26). Of course, we are not to completely shun ambition to the point of laziness (cf. 2 Thessalonians 3:10). In the parable of the talents, Jesus condemned the servant who so severely lacked ambition that he would not even put his master’s money in the bank to earn interest on it (Matthew 25:24-28). At the same time, He praised those who went out and doubled their master’s money that had been entrusted to them (Matthew 25:14-17, 19-23).

Rather than condemning ambition, Jesus condemned the attitude in which one is *never satisfied*. He asked the question: “*For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul?*” (Matthew 16:26). However, no one will ever be able to gain the whole world. Yet this is the pursuit in which many are engaged. They may not say that

their goal is to obtain the world. But there is a never-ending list of wants and desires that they have. Whenever they gain anything, that fulfilled desire is simply replaced in their minds with an unfulfilled desire. Regardless of their circumstances, they are never satisfied and always wanting *more*.

While a degree of ambition is good (cf. Ecclesiastes 9:10; Colossians 3:23), it must be tempered by *contentment*. Paul said, “*I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I am*” (Philippians 4:11). This included both prosperity and poverty (Philippians 4:12). Paul was certainly a hard worker – even to the point of “*working night and day*” (2 Thessalonians 3:8) – but he understood the need to be content with just the basic necessities of life (1 Timothy 6:7-8).

In the parable of the rich land owner, Jesus described one who had an overly ambitious attitude. When he had a harvest greater than he expected, this man said, “*I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, ‘Soul, you have many goods laid up for many years to come; take your ease, eat, drink and be merry’*” (Luke 12:18-19). The productivity of his land did not make him a sinner. His plan to build larger barns was not inherently wrong. His sin was that he sought to gain more material goods by neglecting the well-being of his soul. He was called a *fool* because he forfeited his soul to gain the things of the world. He did not appreciate the value of his soul.

The Value of One's Soul

So that we do not make the same costly mistake as the rich man, we need to be sure we understand how valuable our souls are. First of all, our souls are valuable because they were *created by God*. In the beginning, God “*formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being [soul, KJV]*” (Genesis 2:7). Though the word in this verse simply denotes *breath* – the physical life that man and animals have in common – man is unique, having been made in the image of God (Genesis 1:27). God is the “*Father of spirits*” (Hebrews 12:9) and one day, every “*spirit will return to God who gave it*” (Ecclesiastes 12:7).

Second, our souls are valuable because they are the only thing we have that no one can take away from us. The things we possess in this life can be taken if “*thieves break in and steal*” (Matthew 6:19). Our souls, in contrast, cannot be taken from us. They were given to us by God and will be returned to Him in the end (Ecclesiastes 12:7). Paul told Timothy, “*For we have brought nothing into the world, so we cannot take anything out of it either*” (1 Timothy 6:7). Though everything in this life is only temporary (2 Peter 3:10; 1 John 2:17), our souls – which will live on after this life – are eternal (Matthew 25:46).

The words of Peter remind us just how valuable our souls are when he explained what it cost in order to secure our redemption: “*Knowing that you were not redeemed with perishable things like silver or gold from your futile way of life inherited from your forefathers, but with precious blood, as of a lamb unblemished and spotless, the blood of Christ*” (1 Peter 1:18-19). Jesus was God’s “*only begotten Son*” (John 3:16).

The Father had to “see” His Son suffer a cruel and torturous death on the cross in order to make atonement for our sins (Isaiah 53:4-11). As Peter pointed out, the blood Jesus shed in His death was worth more than silver and gold. God would not have allowed His Son to endure what He did on the cross if our souls were of little value.

For these reasons, our souls are more valuable than anything and everything that exists in the world. This is why Jesus presented the question: “*For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul?*” (Matthew 16:26). The answer is implied in the question: There is no profit for trading our souls for the things of this world. Our souls – not just our temporal physical lives, but our entire existence – must be valued above all the riches of this life.

What Happens if We Forfeit Our Soul?

Jesus made it clear that if we forfeit our souls for anything in this life, we have made a terrible decision. He showed us what the better choice is – diligently working to preserve our souls rather than neglecting our spiritual well-being in order to try and preserve, for a limited period of time, the things of this life.

If we make this failed investment – sacrificing our souls for the things of the world – we will not be able to give anything to buy it back. This is Jesus’ point in His second question: “*Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?*” (Matthew 16:26). One day, all of those who are lost will realize their error when they face the punishment for their sins – “*eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power*” (2 Thessalonians 1:9).

They will stand before the One who is “*able to destroy both soul and body in hell*” (Matthew 10:28), and will be told, “*Depart from Me, accursed ones, into the eternal fire which has been prepared for the devil and his angels*” (Matthew 25:41). At this point, there will be no hope. Even if one “*gains the whole world*” (Matthew 16:26), because his soul is more valuable than all of it, he will have nothing to offer to save himself in the end.

Conclusion

One day the Lord will return in judgment (2 Corinthians 5:10). At that time, He will “*repay every man according to his deeds*” (Matthew 16:27). Because our souls are so much more valuable than anything in this life, we must not risk losing our souls by not being in a state of readiness. Therefore, let us remember what Paul told the brethren in Thessalonica: “*The day of the Lord will come just like a thief in the night*” (1 Thessalonians 5:2). “*So then let us not sleep as others do, but let us be alert and sober*” (1 Thessalonians 5:6).

If we are to make wise investments to secure our future, we must start by recognizing the need to take care of our souls.

Questions for Discussion & Reflection

1. What often causes people to improperly consider the value of their soul?
2. Explain the desire for self-preservation and how it can be properly used by Christians.
3. By what must ambition be tempered? Why?
4. In Jesus' parable of the rich land owner (Luke 12:16-21), explain how this man sinned and why he was called a fool.
5. Why are our souls valuable?
6. Why is it a poor investment for one to trade his soul for the world?

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Buy the Truth

Our first lesson dealt with the value of the soul. Without understanding this, the other points in our study are useless. But now that we understand the value of the soul, how should we care for our soul? In this lesson, we will consider the importance of possessing the truth.

“Buy truth, and do not sell it, get wisdom and instruction and understanding” (Proverbs 23:23).

What Is Truth?

The above question was what Pilate asked Jesus. When Jesus told the governor that He came *“to testify to the truth”* (John 18:37), Pilate responded with the question, *“What is truth?”* (John 18:38). The irony in his question was that he asked the One who was the embodiment of truth, as Jesus told His disciples earlier, *“I am...the truth”* (John 14:6).

Since Jesus is *“the truth”* (John 14:6) and He was the Word of God in the flesh (John 1:14), then we should also understand that the word of God written down in the Scriptures is the truth. When Jesus prayed to the Father before His death, He said, *“Your word is truth”* (John 17:17). The words of the psalmist remind us that *“the sum of [God’s]*

word is truth" (Psalm 119:160).

So what is truth? It is the message that has been delivered to us by God. In Christ – and therefore, in His word (cf. John 1:14) – “*are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge*” (Colossians 2:3). David wrote that the words of God are “*more desirable than gold, yes, than much fine gold*” (Psalm 19:10).

What the Truth Gives Us

Why is the truth of God’s word “*more desirable than gold*” (Psalm 19:10)? Why are we told to “*buy truth*” and “*not sell it*” (Proverbs 23:23)? Truth is so valuable because of what we get from it – “*wisdom and instruction and understanding*” (Proverbs 23:23). Let us briefly consider each one of these.

Understanding – Through God’s word we are able to have *understanding*. David wrote, “*I understand more than the aged, because I have observed Your precepts*” (Psalm 119:100). The truth of God’s word is simple enough that all can understand. When Jesus taught, “*the common people heard him gladly*” (Mark 12:37, KJV). Those who possess worldly wisdom to the point of arrogance see the simple message of the gospel as “*foolishness*” (1 Corinthians 1:23). But God purposely made His word simple so that it could be understood by all (Ephesians 3:4). By looking to His word, we can “*understand what the will of the Lord is*” (Ephesians 5:17) and know the difference between right and wrong (Psalm 119:104).

Instruction – The word of God is also valuable because it provides *instructions* regarding how we must live our lives.

This is important because of what we studied in our previous lesson about the value of the soul. After teaching that one's soul is more valuable than anything in this world, Jesus said that one day He will "*repay every man according to his deeds*" (Matthew 16:27). How can we make sure our deeds are right so that we might be prepared for this judgment? We must look to the *instructions* of God's word. The word of God shows what is required of us (Colossians 3:18-4-6; *et al.*). It also contains instruction warning us of what we should *not* do (Colossians 3:5-9; *et al.*).

Wisdom – In addition to the *understanding* and *instruction* found in the word of God, the truth is also able to provide *wisdom*. The psalmist said, "*Your commandments make me wiser than my enemies*" (Psalm 119:98). The simplest definition for wisdom is the ability to properly *apply* knowledge. Once we understand the instructions that God has given us in His word, we must practice them. James said we must be "*doers of the word, and not merely hearers*" (James 1:22). Our experience in practicing the things taught in the word of God causes us to grow in wisdom (Hebrews 5:14). Knowledge alone is not enough; belief is not enough; we must live according to the precepts that have been revealed to us from God.

The Cost of Truth

To *buy* the truth implies that there is a price we must pay. Acquiring truth is not just about what we *get* (wisdom, instruction, and understanding), it is also about what we must *give up*. But even with this, it is still a wise investment to give up whatever is necessary in order to obtain the truth. But what sort of things must we be willing to give up?

Pride – To buy the truth often means admitting that we were wrong. Therefore, we need humility when we engage in a study of the Scriptures. James said that “*in humility*” we are to “*receive the word*” (James 1:21). But not only must we not take pride in our own limited understanding, we are not to take pride in traditions, preachers, churches, etc. It could be that the traditions in which we take pride are contrary to God’s word and render our worship vain (Matthew 15:6-9). It might be that the preachers in which we place our trust are in error and need to be corrected (Acts 18:24-26; Galatians 2:11-14). Or perhaps the church with which we worship has “*a name that [it is] alive, but [it is] dead*” (Revelation 3:1). In every way, we must humbly submit to the will of God and conform our beliefs, teachings, and practices to the truth that we find in the Scriptures.

Time and effort – While God’s word is understandable (Ephesians 3:4), we are not born with an understanding of it. We must *study* in order to learn how to “*accurately [handle] the word of truth*” (2 Timothy 2:15). This must be a continual process in which we grow and mature in our understanding of the will of God. We must “*give attention to reading*” (1 Timothy 4:13, NKJV) so that we might “*grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ*” (2 Peter 3:18). As the noble-minded Bereans, we should study the Scriptures daily so that we might develop an understanding of God’s word (Acts 17:11). We must be willing to devote the time and effort necessary to learn the truth.

Friends and family – Sadly, buying the truth often puts one at odds with others who refuse to accept the truth themselves. Jesus warned His apostles that the world would

hate them (John 15:18-19). Peter warned Christians to “*not be surprised at the fiery ordeal*” which was going to come upon them (1 Peter 4:12). This trouble to which he referred was not the general hardships of life that all men must endure. Instead, they were going to suffer “*as a Christian*” (1 Peter 4:16). Jesus even warned that the opposition we face for following Him will sometimes come from those who are the closest to us. “*A man’s enemies will be the members of his household*” (Matthew 10:36). We may have to sacrifice certain relationships in this life for the sake of the truth.

Why Some Sell the Truth

To sell the truth is to compromise it or even abandon it altogether. Why do some choose to do this? Jesus gives us an answer in the following passage:

“Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and there are many who enter through it. For the gate is small and the way is narrow that leads to life, and there are few who find it” (Matthew 7:13-14).

Jesus said that the way of error is *easier* and *more popular* than the way of truth. Sadly, many are short-sighted and choose the ease and popularity of the broad way. Peter said that those who do not continue to grow as they should are “*short-sighted, having forgotten [their] purification from [their] former sins*” (2 Peter 1:9). We must not sell the truth – either through compromise or outright abandonment of it – for the truth is “*a lamp to [our] feet*” (Psalm 119:105) that shows us the safe way down the narrow path that leads to life.

Conclusion

We must buy the truth and never sell it. We must allow it to guide us in all that we do. We must teach it to those who will listen and defend it against error. Why is it so important that we do these things? It is because the truth contained in God's word is "*more desirable than gold, yes, than much fine gold*" (Psalm 19:10).

Only the truth found in Scripture is able to provide us with "*wisdom and instruction and understanding*" (Proverbs 23:23) in things pertaining to God. Let us always remember the value of truth and be committed to doing what is necessary in order to obtain it.

Questions for Discussion & Reflection

1. Explain the answer to Pilate's question: "What is truth?"

2. What does the truth contained in God's word help us to understand?

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