

“What Is It to Gain the Whole World and Yet Lose One’s Soul?”
Matthew 16:24-28
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March 10, 2025

Tonight, HBO debuts the fourth and final season of “The Righteous Gemstones”- a popular parody of those tawdry television preachers who would use their faith to celebrate and aggrandize THEMSELVES instead of exemplifying what Christians SHOULD be about- honest stewardship and humble servanthood. It satirizes a family of famous and dysfunctional televangelists in the style and tradition of Jim and Tammy Bakker, Jimmy Swaggart, Kenneth Copeland, Benny Hinn, and others of that ilk who are arrogant, entitled, and pathologically lack any degree of self-awareness. There is no end to the outlandish schemes they devise to exploit and enrich themselves at the expense of their many devoted followers.

However, this show is not as far from reality as it might seem. There’s a GROWING SEGMENT within the church which embraces this particular brand of Christianity along with its self-promoting, self-aggrandizing message, and unfortunately it demeans and cheapens what REAL faith involves and what the Church of Jesus Christ SHOULD stand for. A case in point: Several years ago, there was a major scandal involving one of America’s largest Southern churches. The minister was accused by some members of abusing them in his position as pastor. For years, people had noticed a number of troubling aspects to his ministry that could certainly CREATE CONDITIONS for abuse. For instance, when you walked through the front doors, you were immediately confronted by a 30-ft. banner of the minister draped behind the pulpit bearing the caption, “What is God up to?” Remarked Jonathan Walton, assistant professor of religion at Harvard Divinity School who had attended some of his services, “Everywhere you went in that church, his name and face was there. His image has replaced the cross.” Not long after becoming its minister, he informed everyone he had received a revelation from God that the church’s governing structure was ungodly. The board responded by relinquishing its authority over him with his congregation’s approval. He told them he was called to “minister to God” who in turn tells him what it is he is to tell his people, thereby portraying himself as “God’s anointed one.” And when outsiders questioned this, congregation members were quick to cite Psalm 105:15, “Touch not my anointed ones, and do my prophets no harm.” From the pulpit, he promoted a “prosperity gospel,” the message that God wants to bless his people with every kind of material advantage. As Professor Walton observed, “It’s hard to find any references to the cross in any of his preaching.” It doesn’t take much imagination to see how this kind of clergy abuse can be equally carried out by certain POLITICAL figures AS WELL AS religious ones!

Well this style of ministerial leadership by unscrupulous clergypersons is growing by leaps and bounds, not just in our OWN country but AROUND THE WORLD. It is ESPECIALLY found in those churches that are celebrity-driven and where the message is that God is some kind of cosmic genie or Santa Claus who wants to bless you and make you wealthy and successful now and in all your endeavors. In their sermons, these millionaire pastors will frequently brag about their jets and fancy cars, their expensive clothing and vast real estate holdings, promising their listeners that such blessings can be theirs AS WELL if only--in an act of faith--they make a major financial gift to their ministries. Prosperity in one’s life becomes proof that God is smiling down upon them although when such blessings FAIL to materialize,

these same hucksters have little to say other than “just trust God” or “you need to pray a little harder.” The most DISTURBING aspect of all is how there is no cross, no Good Friday in their preaching; there is no call to sacrifice or work on behalf of the poor or suffering in the world- it is a message that is perfectly suited for such a selfish, materialistic culture as our own.

One of the deadliest enemies of our faith is the subtle incursion of materialism into one’s spirit and the church, materialism being the theory that humanity’s chief end is not to glorify God but rather ONESELF through the acquisition of as many “things” as possible. A materialistic society is one that assesses value in terms of the ABUNDANCE of earthly goods one possesses. A person’s worth is not measured by his or her beliefs or morals or loyalties but by the car one drives, the clothes she wears, the clubs he belongs to. It is not the cross but the DOLLAR SIGN that becomes their most sacred emblem. It is deadly because it replaces our true priority with a false one, with an idol that is almost always an extension of ourselves and our own selfish desires.

And yet, if materialism is a deadly cancer within the soul, you can’t accuse Christianity of being ANTI-MATERIAL. Yes, ours is a spiritual religion in the sense that there is a spiritual dimension to God as well as to our lives, and yet, it is a MATERIALISTIC religion AS WELL. William Temple, the famous theologian and former Archbishop of Canterbury, once remarked that ours is “the most avowedly materialist of all the great religions.” What he meant by that was that we are both matter and spirit, body and soul; both are interrelated and interdependent. After God created the heavens and the earth and everything therein, God said, “It is good.” “The earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof” says the psalmist. The prophets stressed that God was not only in control of history and the affairs of human beings, but also of nature, that he was the one who sends rain on the earth and gives fertility to our flocks and fields. And then, of course, the ULTIMATE proof of God’s commitment to the material needs of creation is that he sent his only-begotten Son to us to save us from ourselves and each other. And in order for that to occur, the Word itself first had to become flesh, part of the material order! The physical world in all its beauty and complexity thus reveals the glory of God. Even our bodies are sacred- sacred vessels which are called the temple of the Holy Spirit. Nowhere in the Bible do we read that the physical must be minimized or rejected. Does not Jesus ask us to pray, “Give us this day our daily bread?”

The same can be said of money. Money PER SE is not bad or evil. 1 Timothy 6.10 says, “For the LOVE of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains,” and Hebrews 13.5: tells us, “Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be content with what you have; for God has said, ‘I will never leave you or forsake you.’” Church leaders are instructed again and again not to be lovers of money for it can become an idol that controls their lives. The point these verses make is that the INORDINATE desire for money as the ultimate source of one’s security can corrode and even kill the heart and destroy our relationships with God and with one another. However, when kept in proper perspective, that all things ultimately belong to GOD for the purpose of serving HIM and advancing HIS kingdom and that we are merely stewards entrusted for THEIR care, we can then stay focused on him as the TRUE source of our blessings and security and NOT our jobs or bank accounts.

Our scripture text this morning also serves that purpose by helping us to maintain the proper relationship of material things in our lives. In v.25, Jesus says, “For what will it profit

them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life?” What he is telling his disciples is that you may have graduated Phi Beta Kappa from Harvard and went on to make millions of dollars from the stock market and other various investments; you may be in a position of authority in which the fate of hundreds or perhaps even thousands of lives are subject to your word; you may have the respect and esteem of people everywhere who know of your tremendous accomplishments; you may even have been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, and yet within the economy of God’s kingdom, they count for NOTHING. As impressive as these may be from a human standpoint, it can’t begin to compare to the knowledge of God as our Father and Christ as our brother, and to know that nothing will ever separate us from either their presence or their love. As St. Paul wrote to the church at Philippi:

If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ.(3:3-8)

But this particular text assumes so much MORE meaning once we take note of the context in which Jesus offers these words. They are spoken in the midst of comments he is making regarding his impending death and future glory. He informs them that the time will soon come when he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priest and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. He makes very clear to them the terms of discipleship, that if they would be his followers, they must take up their OWN cross and follow him, for whosoever would save his life shall lose it; and whosoever will lose his life for his sake shall find it. In other words, there could be no Easter in their lives without them having previously experienced their OWN Good Friday; there could be no resurrection in their lives without first having been crucified THEMSELVES. It is THEN that he asks the rhetorical question which is the title of this morning’s sermon, “What is it to gain the whole world and yet lose one’s soul in the process?”

Following Christ is the GREATEST adventure any one can ever undertake but it is not without its dangers and risks. But Jesus says that the reward that awaits us for our faithfulness FAR exceeds the glory and benefits that we can ever hope to experience on THIS side of death. The central point here, one in addressed in my sermon last week, is that unless there is a cross upon our shoulders, we’re not only NOT following Christ, we’re not even on the same ROAD as him! The way to life MUST go through death. This goes much deeper than merely dying to oneself and ego and pride- something IN US must die; our faith in OURSELVES has to die; our attempts to hold on to everything we are and possess has to die. God cannot use us, in fact, we cannot HEAR God if we continue to love ourselves and love the world with all its contents. The result will be that whosoever tries to save him or herself will die. On the OTHER hand, if we realize that values like love and joy and humility are to be far preferred than those of pride and greed, if we understand that human relationships are much more lasting and permanent and ennobling than hoarding money and accruing possessions, if we discover how the secret of the Christian life is to begin living for others instead of solely for ourselves, then we will surely SAVE our lives according to Jesus.

Over the years, I have developed some deep and lasting friendships which have helped shape my LIFE as well as my ministry. Dr. Forrest Eggleston and his wife Barbara, retired Presbyterian Medical Missionaries for more than 33 years in Punjab, India, were just TWO of these. They've both passed on now but I have no doubt their reward will be great in heaven! Dr. Eggleston was the son of a very prominent physician. A graduate of Princeton University and Cornell Medical School, Forrest could easily have become a prominent physician and medical professor here in the U.S. with a lucrative practice had he wanted to. However, a call came to him, not from the Presbyterian Church, but from his Lord Jesus Christ who commissioned him to labor in one of the poorest areas on the face of the earth. God said, as he had in the presence of his prophet Isaiah, "Who shall I send and who will go for me?" and Forrest and Barbara Eggleston stood up and said, "Here we are, send US!"

They went to India in 1953 for what was to be only a three-year residency at the Christian Medical College in Ludhiana, but they stayed there another 30 years where he was appointed Professor and Head of the Department of Surgery, a position he held for the next 28 years. For the last five years, he served as director of the institution. It has since become the largest Christian medical college and hospital in all South-East Asia, comprised of a medical college and nursing school with over 600 students in 26 courses of study, as well as a hospital with over 700 beds; all but five of the staff are Indian. To date, hundreds of surgeons have been trained or in training, of which 90% are in the developing world, many of whom themselves are in charge of mission hospitals. Barbara Eggleston worked as a nursing superintendent of the tuberculosis sanatorium for various departments in the medical college and for ten years was manager of the St. Thomas School, an English language school under the auspices of the Church of North India. During that time, the school, which has students ranging from nursery through high school, grew from 300 to over 1000 students.

Following their retirement from the mission field, they were on the road constantly, speaking to churches both large and small. They received no salary for this with their only compensation being for the gas they used in their car. They lived in a small house in Mechanicsburg, Pa. on a meager Presbyterian pension that was subsidized by their Social Security. Several years ago, Princeton--his alma mater--recognized his accomplishments by conferring upon him its Woodrow Wilson Award, one of Princeton's most prestigious honors conferred annually upon an alumnus for extraordinary public service, and even endowed a chair in his name. I marvel at people like the Egglestons because their faith was not something merely spoken about but testified to through their lives and actions. They could have retired years ago with a fat bank account, owned a large, beautiful home with lots of acreage, been a board member of a local country club, but instead they passed the remainder of their days speaking to whoever would listen, testifying to how much God loves them and wants to help them in the midst of their problems and needs.

Another one of my dear friends--a man greatly responsible for my becoming a Presbyterian minister in the first place--was ANOTHER medical missionary. His name was Dr. Ralph Lewis and, like the Egglestons, once he retired from the Presbyterian mission field, he was never REALLY retired. A graduate of Occidental College and Stanford Medical School, in the early 1930's, he and his young wife Roberta never even gave a thought to opening up a medical practice on the fanciest avenues of Los Angeles or San Francisco, but immediately left for the hinterlands of China where he served as a doctor to poor Chinese in the name of Jesus Christ. During World War II, he was captured and placed in Shantung Compound, a Chinese prisoner-

of-war camp for three years while his wife and young children wondered about his safety. After the war, he and Roberta continued their service there until the Communists took over and they were forced to flee to Thailand where they labored another twenty years.

Like the Egglestons, they returned to the states to retire on their small Presbyterian pension subsidized by Social Security. They bought their first home in a beautiful Christian conference ground called Mt. Hermon and spent their last days as active as ever. Both were heavily involved in the life of the Felton Presbyterian Church, my home church, and during the week, Ralph worked at a blood clinic in the slums of San Jose, sharing the love of God to the addicts and alcoholics who come in to sell their blood. Like Forrest and Barbara, Ralph and Roberta were two of God's wonderful saints who had never stopped believing in the mission of Jesus Christ and his church.

The question I wish to leave you with this morning is "why?" Why do persons like the Egglestons and the Lewises refuse to take an easier road, choosing instead a path in life that is harder, much more dangerous, and filled with far lesser material rewards? Well such people are more common than we realize. They're not unique human beings made from special materials and endowed with a greater abundance of love and faith, but persons no different than you or me. I once remarked to Forrest how much I admired him for all the sacrifices he and Barbara had to make in life to serve on the mission field and he said, "David, that is such nonsense. I don't consider it a sacrifice AT ALL. I don't even try to think about what might have been had I stayed here in the states to practice medicine. God called me to serve him with all the gifts that he had entrusted me with. He then put me to work in a place in his world to use those gifts among people who desperately needed them. They're HIS gifts and talents, HIS people, HIS ministry, not my own. If you remember that, then you recognize that it has not been a great sacrifice but rather a great PRIVILEGE to serve God and had I the chance to do it all over again I would gladly return to India TOMORROW."

For people living in such a risk-averse and selfishly materialistic culture as our own, this kind of devotion and sacrifice might be a real puzzlement. But for persons such as US who have come to know God as our Father and Christ as our brother, who have experienced their love and grace on a daily basis, it is no riddle. We give, not so we can get MORE but because it has already been GIVEN and that cross serves as proof of it. As a result, we understand what a gift each day is, what a gift our families and friendships are, what a gift our homes and jobs are. We know how we are merely STEWARDS over those things God has entrusted us with and so we're no longer motivated by pride or greed or the desire for power but by virtues such as honesty and compassion, humility and gratitude. We don't need to exalt ourselves at other people's expense or to pretend we're something we're not because we know that if GOD can love and accept us--warts and all--then WE can learn to accept OURSELVES and EACH OTHER for that matter. And when we can do THIS, then not only does it become easier for US to make sacrifices, but in time we no longer come to view them as sacrifices AT ALL but rather our OWN gift, the least that we OURSELVES can possibly give back to God. Let us pray...

Heavenly Father, deliver us from those who would take the truth of your love and mercy and turn it into a message to celebrate and enrich themselves. You do not call us to lord it over others but to live as your HUMBLE servants, showing deference to even the lowliest of your children; to be HONEST in our dealings with everyone and not defrauders and deceivers who would seek our own advantage at every instant; to live SIMPLY AND GRATEFULLY for all we've received from

your hand and not pretentiously or ostentatiously, always competing to outdo our neighbors. For when we DO live honestly, humbly, and simply, we then discover a peace and contentment deep down in our soul which the world cannot give nor ever take away. In Jesus's name we pray, amen.