

What Good Is It?

Mark 8:27-38

Introduction

The Bible is full of great questions. I've often thought that a pastor could build a terrific sermon series around the questions that God asks people and another series around the questions that people ask God. For example:

- When the blind man called out to Jesus for mercy, Jesus asked simply "What do you want me to do for you?" (Mark 10:51)
- When the waves were sweeping over the side of their boat, the disciples turned to Jesus and asked "Do you even care that we are about to drown?"

Today's Gospel reading has two great questions:

But what about you?" (Jesus) asked. "Who do you say I am?" (Mark 8:29)

And the one that I want to focus on in this message:

What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul? (Mark 8:36-37)

What good is it? That's a question that gets asked a lot in the course of every life. Usually it is a question of desperation:

- A wife might ask: *What good is it to try to talk to my husband? He never listens to me anyway.*
- A student might ask: *What good is it to study for this test? I don't understand this stuff, so I won't pass it.*
- It took me almost five months to ask Karen out on a date because: *What good is it? She will just say "no."*

When that question gets asked in desperation, there is usually still a glimmer of hope. Karen did say "yes." You might just get a passing grade. Or you might find out your kids want to talk to you too. There is some hope.

But here as the question is used in this text, there is no glimmer of hope. None.

What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul? (Mark 8:36-37)

Here it is not a question of desperation. Here it is a rhetorical question. The answer is clear. To use the words of Edwin Starr's 1970 anti-Vietnam War protest song:

What is it good for? Huh! Absolutely nothing!

In the drama of Mark's Gospel, this text is the pivot point. Jesus has just told His followers what being the Christ means for Him:

He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again. (Mark 8:31)

Jesus now calls the crowd around Him to a point of accountability as well. Peter has just confessed on behalf of them all:

Peter answered, "You are the Messiah." (Mark 8:29)

And Jesus responds by saying "This is the difference that awareness will make in your life." If you really believe that I am the One sent by God, it will seriously impact:

#1: Your View of Self

Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. (Mark 8:34)

For the follower of Jesus, the motives change. It is no longer a quest to gratify ourselves – to please ourselves. The motive now becomes "deny myself." My wants, my desires, my dreams become secondary to God's desire for my life. I pick His cross and follow Him.

- Moses never envisioned himself standing before the Pharaoh of Egypt demanding him to "let my people go." But that is what God had in mind.
- The Apostle Paul never desired to be persecuted because of his faith in Jesus. No! He was the persecutor, not the persecuted.
- Janet Rice told those attending the spiritual gifts class on Wednesday "I have never seen myself as a teacher." But those of us in the class saw her do it.
- I'm quite certain Lori Fain would agree that speaking to all of you was not an item on her bucket list. And yet she did it.

That doesn't mean that following Jesus requires you to only do stuff you hate, but it does mean that there will be times when He will ask you to do something you never in a million years would have come up with on your own. What **you** want is not nearly as important as what **God** wants.

What good is it ... to do everything you want to do ... and not do the things God wants you to do? *Huh! Absolutely no good at all.*

If you really believe that I am the One sent by God, it will seriously impact:

#2: Your Sense of Security

For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it. (Mark 8:36)

The life referred to in this passage is not your physical life. It is how you live your life. Jesus isn't telling you to stand in the line of fire when a gunman bursts into the bank and opens fire. I think Jesus would encourage to run and hide.

What He is challenging though is where you draw the line in order to protect your reputation, your image, or your pride.

- When I was doing the chaplaincy training for my master's degree, I had to deliver the news to a husband and daughter that the wife/mother had just died. The two of them fell to the floor in the middle of the waiting room and sobbed loudly. My accountability group asked me why I did not get on the floor with them. Their question has always haunted.

The examples are many:

- What if a homeless man wanted to give you hug?
- What if you have to take a stand that causes someone to get mad at you?
- What if someone in the community decides to spread lies about you because of your faith?

I had the opportunity to sit in the congregation with my son as we heard a sermon on Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead. If you know that story, when Jesus resurrected him, He told the crowds to remove the grave clothes from Lazarus. My son leaned over to me and asked "Dad, what did he have on underneath the grave clothes?" When I told him "probably nothing," he responded "I'd rather be dead."

Sometimes being dead would be easier. But that isn't the kind of life-losing Jesus describes.

What good is it if you salvage your pride only to lose your witness? *Huh! Absolutely no good at all.*

If you really believe that I am the One sent by God, it will seriously impact:

#3: Your Definition of Success

What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul? (Mark 8:36-37)

Values change for the follower of Jesus. Economic success begins to lose its luster when compared to the value of a soul.

Mark and Charlene were both in our wedding. He was a highly successful lawyer in a major firm in Indianapolis. They owned a large, beautiful home in one of the wealthier areas of the city. Shortly before their first grandchild was born, they sold everything and

moved to a tiny apartment in the Ukraine in order to be missionaries. That was a job that required them to raise their own support. They never needed money before. They had everything. But their values changed.

I know a number of people – and you may well know them too – who have made significant life choices – from the kind of cars they drive to the job offers they turn down to the location of their homes – in order to serve God in more of a self-sacrificing way. Their decisions reflect their values, so when you question them they will say things like this:

- The money I save on a car payment can feed dozens of hungry people
- If I took that promotion, I would lose the flexibility in my schedule and I wouldn't be able to lead that life-to-life group any more
- By living here among the drug dealers and prostitutes, I am in the middle of a mission field.

What good is it to drive a fancy car if the children in our community go to be hungry? Huh! Absolutely no good at all.

If you really believe that I am the One sent by God, it will seriously impact:

#4: Your Understanding of Status

If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of them when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels. (Mark 8:38)

The Bible tells us the story of two brothers, James and John, who sent their Mom to have a private conversation with Jesus. "Hey, Jesus," she said, "when you start ruling the world I want you to give my boys preferential treatment in your kingdom...because they are your favorites.

In response Jesus told her, "The way you get priority treatment is to serve in the lowest positions in the organization." The way up is down.

"What?" they said. "We want people bow before us, not beckon us like dogs."

Status mattered to them.

In the text Jesus puts it in the negative. If you are unwilling to broadcast your faith for fear of what people might think about you, expect the same the treatment from Jesus when you come face to face with Him. *(I don't think I know any Brodbecks ...)*

What good is it to spend all that time protecting your image if in the end God Himself doesn't recognize you? *Huh! Absolutely no good at all.*

APPLICATION

To put all of this into economic terms, we each have been given one life. And in this passage Jesus asks those who would follow Him a simple question – a great question – *How are you going to invest the life you have been given?*

We are a people who have, in various ways, been gifted by God with time, talent and treasure. How will you use it?

I challenge you to hear again the question from Jesus, and to consider your response to it:

What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul? (Mark 8:36-37)

Amen.