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Sermon Notes

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The Infinite Worth of the Soul

Matthew 16:26-28

“How Much Land Does a Man Need?”

Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy asked that question in a short story he wrote in 1886.

The story is about a Russian man named Pahom who has ambitions to improve his lot in life. Back then, the most valuable commodity was land, real estate; the owner of a land tract of land was inevitably wealthier than one who owned less; and one who owned no land at all was a peasant, a beggar, living at the whim of his landlord.

Pahom yearns for more land and more prosperity, and at the beginning of the story boasts to his wife, “If I had plenty of land, I wouldn’t fear the Devil himself!” The Devil, sitting behind the oven hears the boast and snickers. He says to himself, “All right, fine... we’ll have a battle. I’ll give you plenty of land and by that means I will get you into my power.”

As the story unfolds, Pahom hears about a tribe of people in the rich fertile valleys of the east named the Bashkirs. Though he can hardly believe it, he hears that the Bashkir people selling their vast lands for an incredible bargain. He travels overland to the Bashkir region and meets the chieftain. After some drinking of tea and other social rituals, Pahom gets down to business. He declares his desire to buy some of their land, and the Bashkirs agree. When Pahom asks for the price, they say “One thousand rubles per day.” Pahom doesn’t understand what this means... “Per day?” “Yes,” they answer... “for one thousand rubles you can own as much land as you can walk around in a single day. But you have to begin at sunrise, and return to the same spot by sunset. Whatever you walk around will be yours.”

Pahom’s greedy heart leapt with joy... he said to himself, “I can easily walk around at least 35 miles in a day... I’ll be rich! I can have 150 acres for ploughland, and all the rest will be grazing land for my cattle.” He agreed to the price and asked if they could start tomorrow.

At sunrise, Pahom stands ready and the Bashkir chief drops his hat to start Pahom’s race for land. Pahom must return to the hat by sunset or forfeit his thousand rubles. Pahom’s greed drives him on throughout the morning to take an ever bigger and bigger circuit of rich farmland. The further he went, the better the land seemed, and he didn’t want to miss any of it. But the sun’s heat was beating down on him and he was getting tired. He finally decided to make his first turn, digging a hole as a marker. By now it was past

noon, and he realized he was behind schedule. He started picking up the pace and early in the afternoon, marked his second turn. By now the day was flying past, the sun seemed to hasten across the sky... Pahom wasn't even looking at the land anymore, just wanted to make his third turn and head for the finish line.

As he neared the little hill he could see the Bashkir people cheering him on; he was utterly exhausted, his chest heaving as he raced the sun and ran up the last hill. Just as the sun dipped below the horizon, he dove for the chief's cap and grasped it.

"Ah, what a fine fellow!" exclaimed the Chief. "He has gained much land!"

But as they came running up and tried to raise him, but he saw that blood was flowing from his mouth. Pahom was dead!

The Bashkirs clicked their tongues to show their pity.

They picked up the spade and dug a grave long enough for Pahom to lie in, and buried him in it. Six feet from his head to his heels was all he needed.

So how much is enough? And was it all worth it to Pahom?

Yes, he had achieved this incredible chunk of land... but what good did it do him?

Jesus asked two questions much more probing:

Matthew 16:26 What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul?

At the end of your life of achievement, you will stand before Christ and give him an account...

The issue hanging in the balance on judgment day is the eternal destiny of your soul

The central point of this text and of my sermon is this: your soul has infinite worth, infinite value, more than the net worth of all the material world

Your soul will be either eternally living in God's presence in heaven or eternally dying away from God in hell. The world and all of its pleasures and pains is passing away and will soon disappear... but your soul will endure forever

Thus Jesus is warning us to make certain we don't lose our souls

Context:

Last time I preached on Matthew, I preached on what I consider the greatest challenge of your life and mine... the challenge to deny ourselves, pick up our cross daily and follow Christ

A. Understanding the Context

1. Jesus' stunning prediction to His disciples

Matthew 16:21 From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.

2. Peter's shocked and shocking reaction to Jesus

Vs. 22 Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. "Never, Lord!" he said. "This shall never happen to you!"

3. Jesus' just as shocking rebuke of Peter

Vs. 23 Jesus turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men."

Jesus directly addresses SATAN working in Peter!!

Satan was laying a trap for Jesus through Peter; Jesus dealt with it vigorously!!

4. The Call to all Disciples

In that setting He gives His call... not just to Peter:

Vs. 24-25 Then Jesus said to his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. ²⁵ For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it.

5. Peter's Immediate Motive

- a. Not so much concern for Jesus... although that was there
- b. BUT concern for his own interests... Peter's own future was wrapped up in Jesus' earthly kingdom
- c. Peter was really motivated by SELFISH INTERESTS
- d. He wanted to "save his own life" and make it as rich and pleasurable as possible

Jesus said: "***you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men.***"

B. Understanding the Call

1. Deny yourself

2. Take up your cross
3. Follow Christ
4. what these three taken together mean:
 - a. Stop “finding your life” in your earthly goals, pleasures, achievements, desires
 - b. Lose your life in Christ’s purposes, goals, commands, desires
 - c. Call given to EVERY disciple, not just the apostles
 - d. Call stands over EVERY DAY OF YOUR LIFE

Luke 9:23 Then he said to them all: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross DAILY and follow me.

This is the context of this incredible statement by Christ

Jesus turns up the intensity even further... the call on the disciples is to realize that ANYTHING that hindered them from following Christ was the ultimate threat to their eternal happiness... so He wanted to give the disciples a sense of the immense worth and value of the soul:

Matthew 16:26 "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?"

From this text, I will focus on two issues:

The world and what it means to gain it

The soul and what it means to lose it

Then I will ask Jesus’ two questions:

- 1) What would it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul?
- 2) What would a man give in exchange for his soul?

I will seek to sharpen these questions to a fine point: I will urge you to be sure that your soul’s final state is of the utmost importance to you... I will plead with you to be certain that your sins are forgiven through faith in Christ... that your soul will be welcomed into heaven and not cast into hell

To help you do this, I will focus on the final inducement Christ makes:

Matthew 16:27 For the Son of Man is going to come in his Father's glory with his angels, and then he will reward each person according to what he has done.

Judgment Day is coming... and the glory of Christ and the eternal value of your soul will push out every other issue from your mind

I. The World, and What It Means to Gain It

Matthew 16:26 "For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul?"

A. First: No One Has Ever Done This, Though Many Have Tried

1. Jesus is clearly using hyperbole... an exaggerated statement to make a point
2. the fact of the matter is, many empire builders of all ages have sought to control the world and have been unable to do so
3. the largest empire in history by sheer landmass was that of Kublai Khan and the Mongolians in 1260—12.8 million square miles
 - a. larger than the Soviet Union... five times larger than the empire of Alexander the Great
 - b. however, for all of that, it represented only 24.6% of the habitable land mass of the earth; the earth has 52 million square miles of habitable land
4. many have sought to control even just one aspect of the world and have failed
 - a. John D. Rockefeller's Standard Oil controlled 90% of the entire oil industry and in so doing became the wealthiest man in history; his adjusted net worth was 318.3 billion dollars... but all he did was control one aspect of world commerce; he couldn't control everything
 - b. During the age of the great American industrialists, the titans of industry were always seeking a monopoly in one form or another: railroads with the Vanderbilts; Andrew Carnegie with steel; J.P. Morgan with financing; but no one could control all the railroads or all the steel; and even if they had, it would just have been one aspect of the world's commerce
5. in recent year, some have tried to corner the market in one way or another—in the 1970s, Nelson Bunker Hunt and his brother Herbert came very close to cornering the market in silver; they had accumulated huge amounts of silver and by September of 1979, the price had risen from \$11 an ounce to over \$50 an ounce; at that point, the Hunts controlled more than half the world's deliverable silver; but they didn't have quite enough money and the whole thing collapsed... in the end, Hunt had to declare bankruptcy
6. these are just some of the ways individual human beings have sought to control just small portions of the world... no one has ever been able to do it

7. Jesus is saying, however, even if you COULD gain the whole world, if it cost you your soul, it wouldn't be worth it

B. The World IS Attractive—Admit It!

1. Certainly Psalm 73 speaks a theological truth

Psalm 73:25 Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you.

2. however... everyone admits that the world DOES hold attractions for us
 - a. the beauty of the earth
 - b. the pleasures of food, travel, entertainment, hobbies, a good novel, an absorbing board game
 - c. the value of the esteem of other people
 - d. the joy of earthly successes in business, academics, athletics
3. all should be received as good gifts of God
 - a. we would lie if we said these things meant nothing to us whatsoever
 - b. God created all of these things richly for our enjoyment
4. but any and all of them can become idols

C. The Attractive Pulls of the World... All Empty

1. Power

The most powerful military conqueror in history, Alexander the Great, never lost a single battle; but at the end of all of his conquests, he sat down and wept because there were no more regions to conquer, no more battles to fight

See him weeping there, and ask him if all his conquests had brought him lasting joy?

2. Wealth

The wealthiest man from the ancient world was the legendary Croesus, King of Lydia in modern Turkey; he ruled from 560 to 545 B.C., and gold from the mines and from the sands of the River Pactolus filled his coffers to overflowing. But Cyrus the Great of Persia conquered Croesus' kingdom, and he sentenced Croesus to be burned to death. As the flames drew near, the wealth of Croesus brought him no joy at all... he would gladly have traded it all for more time to live

3. Wisdom

Solomon was the wisest man that ever lived; but his wisdom brought him little more than grief:

Ecclesiastes 1:18 For with much wisdom comes much sorrow; the more knowledge, the more grief.

Some of the most intelligent people in history have struggled intensely with depression and mental illness

4. Fame

Modern athletes and movie stars are constantly focused on by the relentless media machine; only in modern times can someone's face be so widely disseminated to the billions who inhabit this planet

During the 1992 Olympics, Michael Jordan was walking down a street for a videographer, and he pointed up to a Nike ad that was a monstrously huge picture of himself dunking a basketball... it covered the entire side of a six-story building

Jordan's face recognition is at the point where he can't go anywhere in public without being mobbed by huge throngs of people

5. Pleasure

In a world craving pleasure, some people it seems have cornered the market on pure hedonism... the movie stars and the glitterati who move from one resort to another seeking pleasure are the focus of the world's envy

Like venture capitalist Tom Perkins, who sank \$150 million dollars into designing and building the largest privately owned sailboat in the world, the Maltese Falcon

But the pleasure of that distinction lasted less than a year before another larger sailboat was built and passed it by

All earthly pleasure is fleeting! Again, it was Solomon who proved this:

Ecclesiastes 2:10-11 I denied myself nothing my eyes desired; I refused my heart no pleasure. My heart took delight in all my work, and this was the reward for all my labor. ¹¹ Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done and what I had toiled to achieve, everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind; nothing was gained under the sun.

6. Beauty

Hollywood movie starlets are willing to trade their health for constant cosmetic surgery to fight the inevitable onslaught of aging... I often wonder what a torment it must be for an actress whose youthful beauty made her the talk of the nation and whose services in movies were the subject of intense battles between the studios... but as aging set in, no one calls any more, and other youthful starlets now take her place

She sits at home with her Academy Award and with poster pictures of what she looked like when she was 22... and what she will never look like again

All of these allurements are part of God's physical world... none of them evil in themselves; but all of them have led countless souls astray in their quest...

Power... wealth... wisdom... fame... pleasure... beauty

Death stands over every one of these and turns them all to dust in the wind

How much more agony will come to the damned when they consider for what paltry things they exchanged their immortal souls!!

D. Satan's Consistent Offer of a Trade

1. Satan is willing to make some kind of trade for any of these

Luke 4:5-8 The devil led him up to a high place and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. ⁶ And he said to him, "I will give you all their authority and splendor, for it has been given to me, and I can give it to anyone I want to. ⁷ So if you worship me, it will all be yours." ⁸ Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Worship the Lord your God and serve him only.'"

2. he will offer the world's bounties if you will trade your soul
3. famous story: Dr. Faustus selling his soul to the devil

In the fictional tale of Dr. Faustus, a man makes a deal with the devil: in exchange for his body and soul, the man is to receive supernatural power and pleasures for twenty-four years. The devil agrees to the trade, and Dr. Faustus enjoys the pleasures of sin for a season, but his doom is sealed. At the end of twenty-four years, Faustus attempts to thwart the devil's plans, but he meets a frightful demise, nonetheless.

In common speech, we think of someone doing incredibly well in financially or in sports or business or something, and people wonder if he sold his soul to the devil to achieve it

4. now Satan has no such authority to make deals... however, he is the very one who orchestrates the world system to lure people away from the gospel of Christ

II. The Soul, and What It Means to Lose It

A. What Is Your Soul?

1. More than Merely Your Inner Self

- a. Some translations of the Greek imply it means your "very self"

- b. The idea then is that, by pursuing worldly things—money, fame, power, pleasure, etc.—you will no longer be true to yourself; you will lose your way, stop being the person you really want to be
- c. That’s true, but that’s not what Jesus is talking about... for He goes on to discuss the terrors of the Second Coming and Judgment Day

2. More than Merely Your Physical Life

ESV Matthew 16:26 For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his life? Or what shall a man give in return for his life?

- a. In Tolstoy’s story, “How Much Land is Enough,” Pahom gains all that land and forfeits his life... he literally dies
- b. So also many people work themselves to death trying to achieve some worldly, selfish goal
- c. But again this is not what Jesus is referring to... actually He is challenging His disciples to be willing to take up their cross and follow Him, even if it means martyrdom.... Thus He is not speaking of gaining the world world and losing your physical life

Matthew 16:25 For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it.

No... the “soul” of verse 26 is more than these

3. Soul: That Which is Able to Relate to God Now and Eternally

- a. The soul is that immaterial part of you, housed in your physical body, that makes you a person, a human being, unique in the sight of your Creator
- b. The soul is that inside you which is able to relate to God... to speak to God, to love God, to obey God, to cherish God
- c. And that both now, in space and time... and then—in eternity
- d. That is your soul

B. A Lost Soul: Eternal Damnation in Hell

- 1. and the soul itself is in peril... in grave danger
- 2. for Jesus speaks of the possibility that a soul could be LOST
- 3. what does this mean... to lose your soul?

4. O how terrifying a prospect!! For Jesus is speaking of a soul being lost for eternity after Judgment Day

Matthew 25:41 "Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.

Revelation 14:10-11 he, too, will drink of the wine of God's fury, which has been poured full strength into the cup of his wrath. He will be tormented with burning sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and of the Lamb. ¹¹ And the smoke of their torment rises for ever and ever. There is no rest day or night

Luke 16, the Rich Man was in agony in hell... he was in torment, yearning for Lazarus to come and cool his tongue with some water

This is the picture of a soul eternally lost

5. how is a soul thus lost??
- a. Jesus seems to pit the pursuit of the world against the welfare of the soul
 - b. The seeking of the whole world is here an enemy of the soul
 - c. But deeper, the Bible's answer to this vital question is simple... by SIN is a soul lost
 - d. As Jesus will make plain, souls are lost by Judgment Day's assessment of their life, of their behavior

^{NAU} ***Matthew 16:27 "For the Son of Man is going to come in the glory of His Father with His angels, and WILL THEN REPAY EVERY MAN ACCORDING TO HIS DEEDS.***

6. so the great issue of your life is simply this: will I lose my soul?
7. to make this clear, He asks two piercing questions

III. Jesus' Two Piercing Questions

Both focus on the horror of Judgment Day

A. A Question of Profit

[NASB] *Matthew 16:26 "For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul?*

1. "Gain" and "loss" in the Greek are business terms... like profit and loss in an accountant's ledger book

2. it has to do with relative value and worth... and the clear implication is that the eternal soul is worth more than any physical thing in the universe
3. an astonishing thought... all of the gold, the silver, the diamonds, the real estate, the kingdoms, the splendor and glory of the eye and of the body... if you added all of it together, it comes short of the value of a single human soul
4. there is not a single human being on the face of the earth that would be wise to trade his soul for the world... this is the worth of every single human being
 - a. a forsaken orphan picking for food among the refuse heap in Rio de Janeiro would be utterly foolish to trade his soul even for the whole world
 - b. an addict, strung out on heroin in Amsterdam would be the greatest fool in the world to gain the whole world at the cost of his soul
 - c. there are no worthless human beings... for no matter what their outward conditions, no matter how low or high they've attained in the achievements of the world—no matter whether highly educated or illiterate, no matter whether the CEO of a Fortune 500 company or the hourly laborer in a sweat shop in Bangkok... it doesn't matter who it is, they have a possession of infinite value, worth more than all the material of the world—an eternal soul
5. AND to forfeit, to lose that soul is the most terrifyingly foolish thing any human being can do

B. A Question of Exchange

Vs. 26 Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?

1. again, the language of commerce... of making an equitable trade
2. imagine yourself having heard the dreadful sentence: **Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels**
 - a. a holy angel is dispatched to cast you out into the eternal fire
 - b. the horror of it comes crashing down... you can scarcely believe that it refers to you... you always thought of yourself as basically a good person
 - c. you cherished the memories of your good deeds, or of your religious moments in life... and you cherished a notion that any God who really condemned regular people like you to hell, you wanted nothing to do with a God like that anyway
 - d. but at that terrifying moment, such reasonings will vanish like a mist... they will be as vapid as a wispy cobweb... they are nothing but lies... for now

the eternal sentence has been read and an angel has you by the arm to cast you in

- e. imagine then nearing the searing heat, you can hear the screams of those already cast in... what would you give at that dreadful moment in exchange for your soul?

3. Of Course: It'll be too late then

- a. Death has already stripped you of all ownership
- b. Even if you had gained the whole world, you will have nothing in your hand with which to barter... none of it was really yours to begin with

4. the time is NOW to face this question

2 Corinthians 6:2 I tell you, now is the time of God's favor, now is the day of salvation.

- a. So the question goes back to your present life... the moment is NOW... when you can decide what you will pursue... what exchanges you can make
- b. What will you give NOW that your soul might be saved?
- c. Is there anything you now possess that you fear you will lose if you turn to Christ? Are you afraid of losing the esteem of your unsaved friends? Are you afraid of losing a lucrative career? Are you afraid of losing the fun of life... pleasures and joys and possessions and FREEDOM?
- d. Which of those things can you rightly say, "That is simply too big a cost to pay for my eternal soul! God, you can have anything else, but NOT THAT!!"

IV. Jesus' Two Compelling Reasons

The coming judgment... and the coming glory

A. The Coming Judgment

Matthew 16:27 For the Son of Man is going to come in his Father's glory with his angels, and then he will reward each person according to what he has done.

1. this is nothing less than the dreaded "Day of the Lord"
2. Christ will return in glory with the armies of heaven

Jude 1:14-15 "See, the Lord is coming with thousands upon thousands of his holy ones ¹⁵ to judge everyone, and to convict all the ungodly of all the ungodly acts

they have done in the ungodly way, and of all the harsh words ungodly sinners have spoken against him."

- a. The second coming of Christ is an invasion... the power of God coming down to bring justice to an ungodly world
 - b. The Antichrist will be ruling the whole world at that point... and what good would it be for him?
 - c. For Christ will return with an invincible army and with slaughter all His enemies with great wrath
3. the judgment is upon all sinners who have not been forgiven
- a. those who have lived for this present world... who like Pahom in Tolstoy's story ran the race of greed and selfishness
 - b. those who have lived for the lusts of the eyes and of the flesh and the boastful pride of life
4. giving an account
- a. Jesus will reward everyone according to what he has done
 - b. The court will be seated and everyone's life will be read like an open book

Revelation 20:12 And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the book of life. The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books.

- c. Your life choices will be made manifest on that terrifying day

B. The Coming Glory

Matthew 16:27 For the Son of Man is going to come in his Father's glory with his angels

Matthew 16:28 I tell you the truth, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom."

1. Jesus mentions the glory of His second coming...
2. he also refers to another glory... the glory Him coming in His Kingdom which even some of His apostles would be able to see
3. this mysterious reference has stymied many commentators, and I am not certain of it's proper interpretation myself

4. however, in Matthew, Mark, and Luke... in all three of those gospels, this amazing statement is followed by the awesome display of Christ's glory on the Mount of Transfiguration:

Matthew 17:1-2 After six days Jesus took with him Peter, James and John the brother of James, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. ² There he was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light.

[see also how this same statement immediately precedes the Transfiguration in Mark 9:1-2 and Luke 9:27-28]

Also Peter refers to the mount of transfiguration as a coming of Christ:

2 Peter 1:16-18 We did not follow cleverly invented stories when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. ¹⁷ For he received honor and glory from God the Father when the voice came to him from the Majestic Glory, saying, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased." ¹⁸ We ourselves heard this voice that came from heaven when we were with him on the sacred mountain.

5. this was a foretaste of the eternal glory that would far outweigh any earthly sacrifice we could make to obtain it
6. so Jesus' two great arguments for wisdom about gaining the whole world are clear:
- a. Judgment Day is coming with all the terror of giving a full account to Christ; hell threatens any who have lost their souls to sin
 - b. Eternal glory is coming with all the brilliance and radiance of the person of Christ

What is gaining the whole world compared to this?

V. Application

A. Repent and Come to Christ

1. Christ came specifically to FIND what was LOST

Luke 19:10 the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost."

2. the issue here is the losing of a soul... this is precisely what Christ came to do
3. there is no pact with the devil over a human soul... we cannot "sell our souls to the devil" for some earthly gain... Christ has the authority to break such pacts and covenants and agreements!

4. Come to Christ with your sin-sick soul and let Him do His saving work in you

B. Examine Yourself

1. be certain that you are in Christ... that pursuit of the world is not killing your soul
2. examine the way you spend your time and your money... see if some love for the world is not polluting your soul
3. sin wages war against your soul... though you may not be “lost” yet you might be waging war against your soul daily by worldly choices

1 Peter 2:11 Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul.

C. Meditate on the Infinite Worth of Human Souls... Yours and Others'

D. Meditate on the Correspondingly Small Value of the Whole World

E. Be Active in Seeking and Saving the Lost