

'What shall it profit a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul?'
Bethesda Coffee Morning. 23 September 2009.

As you know, we are considering some of the questions which are found in the Gospel of Matthew. And we owe the question for today to our Lord Jesus Himself, 'What shall it profit a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul?'¹

I am sure we all miss Irene terribly. Many of you will know that her late husband Gordon was – and her stepson Anthony still is – a qualified accountant. And had Gordon and Andrew been alive in the days of the Lord Jesus, they would both have readily understood the meaning of His words. For, with their accounting background, they would have been familiar with what Accountants call a 'Profit and Loss Statement' – which, put at its simplest, sets a company's income over against its expenses for a given period and shows the profit made.²

And in today's text the Saviour draws our attention to His own great 'Profit and Loss' account: 'What shall it profit a man', he asked, 'if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul?'

Not that He was expecting anyone to answer. The answer was self-evident. Such a person would profit nothing. Rather he would lose everything.

Nor when our Lord asked, 'What shall it profit a man if he gains the whole world', did our Lord envisage that anyone could ever do that. For the most successful of men can only hope to secure for themselves some tiny fraction of the world's wealth and possessions. I understand that last year Bill Gates – the Chairman of the computer software giant Microsoft – regained his title as the world's richest man ... being worth an estimated \$40 billion – that's more than Mrs Mullins' pension. But even all Mr Gates wealth is only a drop of a bucket compared to 'the whole world'.

And I am sure you are aware of many immensely rich and thriving people who, in spite of all the great wealth which they 'gained', failed to find either satisfaction or happiness in life. I guess that few men have been more successful than Alexander the Great, who in the fourth century BC conquered most of the then-known world – and yet who died at the age of just 33 from a fever he developed when in a weakened physical state due to heavy drinking.

More recently we might think of Howard Hughes – in his day the richest man in America – who spent the last 15 years of his life a drug addict ... the owner of a whole chain of huge casinos, who, when he died in 1976, was described by Time magazine as 'the biggest loser in the end'.³

More recently again, I read earlier this month of Callie Rogers a young woman of 22 from Cumbria who, five years ago, won close to £2 million on the Lottery, but who, having attempted suicide within two years of her win, now faces total bankruptcy. She was reported in the Press as having said that the money 'brought me nothing but unhappiness ... my life is a shambles'.⁴

No ... to 'gain' significant amounts of this world's goods certainly carries no guarantee of happiness. Nor, as I say, is it possible for any one person to gain 'the whole world'. But, 'Just suppose', Jesus was saying, 'that someone could do that, of what benefit would that be to him, if, while gaining it, he lost his own soul' – if he forfeited his inner being and self. My 'soul' is the real 'me' ... the 'me' which will never die and which can no more cease to exist than God Himself can.

Remember the earlier words of Jesus, when He warned, 'do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell',⁵ and when He spoke of a rich but godless farmer to whom God announced, 'This night your soul will be required of you'.⁶

And it would certainly be no great bargain – no 'profit', as Jesus expressed it – to gain even the whole world (which whole world will one day perish), and yet to lose my soul (which is imperishable and eternal)⁷ ... it would be anything but a bargain to gain this present world and lose the next.⁸

'What shall it profit a man if he gains the whole world', Jesus asked, 'and loses his own soul?' What a tremendously high value Jesus set on the human soul. And, make no mistake, this He did, not only in word, but in deed ... in action. For, immediately preceding our text for today, He had begun, the gospel says, 'to show to His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed'.⁹ And at the cross He proved that in His estimation the human soul was worth suffering and dying for.

Many centuries before, one of Israel's psalms had made it clear, and I quote, that 'none ... can by any means redeem his brother, nor give to God a ransom for him—for the redemption of the soul is costly'.¹⁰ But that high cost the Lord Jesus was willing to pay that each of us might have the opportunity – through trusting alone in Him – to avoid 'losing' our souls. And so it is that the New Testament speaks, not only of 'the man Christ Jesus, who gave Himself a ransom for all', but of 'those *who believe* to the saving of the soul'.¹¹

Note those words, 'who believe to the saving of the soul'. And I'm thrilled to note that in several places my Bible links 'believing' with the great old word 'whosoever'. I think, for example, of the apostle Peter's expression concerning our Lord Jesus : '*whosoever believes in Him* will receive forgiveness of sins'.¹² And the even better-known words of John 3 : 'For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that *whosoever believes in Him* should not perish but have everlasting life'.

And, frankly, I feel far safer resting on that word 'whosoever' than I would even if I saw my own name written there. Because, even if I read my name there, I couldn't be absolutely certain that God meant me. What if there was someone else of the same name and that God's promise was meant for him and not me?

Indeed, only last week, a friend of mine forwarded me an advertisement for a restaurant in Southbourne in Hampshire – the proprietor of which restaurant is graced with the name 'Malcolm Horlock'.¹³ So by label at least then I am not unique.

So you can understand why I'm thankful to know this morning that God's offer of salvation is open to '*whosoever believes*'. That's good enough for me. For, by trusting alone in the Lord Jesus, I can take my place among 'those who *believe to the saving of the soul*'.

Many years ago I came across a simple four-line poem which has stuck with me through the years ...

To lose your wealth is much.
To lose your health is more.
But to lose your soul is such a loss
As no man can restore.

Remember then that solemn question posed by the Saviour, 'What shall it profit a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul?'

Footnotes

¹ Matt. 16. 26. The parallel account is at Luke 9. 25.

² The main purpose of the Profit and Loss Statement is to show managers and investors whether the company made or lost money during the period being reported.

³ http://www.facebook.com/note.php?note_id=97213458094.

⁴ <http://www.christian.org.uk/news/lottery-winner-says-it-didn%E2%80%99t-make-me-happy/>.

⁵ Matt. 10. 28.

⁶ Luke 12. 20.

⁷ 'What does man profit by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?' Eccles. 1. 3.

⁸ Contrast another 'accounting' passage, where the Lord Jesus is the true gain! 'What things were gain to me, these I have counted loss for Christ. Yet indeed I also count all things loss ... that I may gain Christ and be found in Him, not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith'; Phil. 3. 7-9. Paul's conversion is good news because it means that even religious people can be converted. We might suppose that Paul would speak of a sinful man he was before. To the contrary, he describes how good he was, how decent and devout – and then writes off all those assets as worthless. He zeroes them out when he reflects on what Jesus Christ has placed on his balance sheet.

⁹ Matt. 16. 21.

¹⁰ Psalm 49. 7-8.

¹¹ Heb. 10. 39.

¹² Acts 10. 43. In context, Gentiles as well!

¹³ The advertisement reads :

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