

What Do You Really Want? Matthew 16:13-28

Jesus was going to Jerusalem to be killed? That didn't make any sense to Peter. After all, he had finally come to the correct conclusion that Jesus was the Messiah. And that in turn meant that Peter expected Jesus to be a military leader like David, a conquering King at the head of a powerful army, someone who would expel the Romans from the Promised Land and restore Israelite independence. In fact, that's what all the disciples were expecting.

But Jesus couldn't do any of those things if he were dead. To paraphrase George Patton, no one ever won a war by going out and dying for his country. He won it by making some other guy die for his country. That's just common sense. So, what Jesus was saying just didn't make sense to Peter, or to any of the other disciples for that matter.

But here's the problem. Yes, Peter finally understood that Jesus was the Messiah. But at the same time, he failed to understand what kind of Messiah Jesus was going to be. And this is largely because Peter didn't grasp the full implications of the very last words of verse 21 – that after Jesus had been killed He would rise from the dead on the third day. After all, no mere military ruler had ever been able to defeat death – not even David.

And how would Jesus accomplish this miracle? Well, we know, don't we? Because we've read the end of the Gospel of Matthew, indeed the end of the Bible. We know what all the saints are saying who are gathered around the throne of God in Heaven right now. We know that Jesus was able to defeat death by defeating sin, which was the initial cause of death. And to do this, Jesus not only lived a perfectly sinless life. He also became the perfect sacrifice for sin, purchasing His people out of bondage to sin and death with the price of His own blood, and rising from the dead so that we might have new life with Him forever.

Yes, everything Jesus was saying in today's passage makes perfect sense to us, standing as we do on this side of the cross and the empty tomb. So perhaps we shouldn't be surprised that Peter couldn't understand what Jesus was talking about in this passage – for none of these mindblowing events had yet taken place.

And remember, Peter wasn't completely wrong. For a day is coming when Jesus will appear as pretty much the sort of Messiah Peter was expecting. In verse 27 Jesus tells us that one day the Son of Man, the risen Lord will in fact come in the glory of the Father, leading the mightiest army the world has ever seen, an army of holy angels. On that great day, Jesus will in fact bring to all His people the perfect justice, the perfect peace, and the perfect prosperity that Peter and so many of his contemporaries were longing for.

And we know all that. We know that Peter had gotten his timeline mixed up, confusing Jesus' second coming with Jesus' first coming. But was that the only reason Peter didn't understand what Jesus was saying? Did he just need to get his facts straight? Or did Peter and the rest of the disciples simply refuse to hear Jesus' words about His death and resurrection because they didn't want to believe it? Could it be that they engaged in such "selective hearing" because they preferred the worldly power, prestige, and wealth that always go along with being the close friends of a worldly ruler?

Jesus seemed to think so, for how did He respond to their disbelief? “For what will a man be profited if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul?” It’s a good question, and a stinging rebuke to the materialistic focus, not only of the disciples, but of all too many modern people as well.

For does it really make sense to focus all our time and attention on the things of this world, when you can’t take any of them with you when you die? And no matter how much money you put in the plate, there’s no way to purchase salvation for yourself, is there? No, Jesus is clearly encouraging His disciples, and all of us as well, to prefer the spiritual over the material, not least because of the coming Day of Judgment that Jesus mentions in verse 27. For on that day, the amount of stuff we have won’t make any difference – the only thing that will matter is whose side we’re on.

So much is clear, and I doubt any of us would disagree with Jesus’ critique of materialism, at least not in principle. Oh, maybe we could stand to be a bit more consistent in our practice. Maybe we need to focus a little less on the things of this world, to focus a little more on the things of God. But I think we all know that. We’re all willing to admit that.

But Jesus’ criticism of Peter seems to go much deeper, much further than merely requiring us to reorder our priorities. For look again at verse 23 – He says Peter is savouring, is setting his heart and mind on the things of men rather than the things of God. In other words, Peter’s problem wasn’t just that he had the events of history in the wrong order, or even that he thought the things of this world were more important than the things of the next. No, Peter’s biggest problem was that, in spite of his intellectual knowledge that Jesus was the Messiah, Peter was actually headed in the wrong direction. That’s why Jesus went so far as to call him “Satan.”

And so we see that, throughout this passage, Jesus is questioning not just Peter’s priorities, but the very purpose of his life. For you see, Peter wasn’t just more concerned with material things than with spiritual things. No, he was leading a self-centered life rather than a God-centered life. In other words, Peter was a whole lot more concerned about Peter than he was concerned about God, where it comes to either material or spiritual things.

Now, our English translations obscure this point quite neatly, by using the word “life” in verse 25 and the word “soul” in verse 26. We thus tend to read verse 25 as a simple critique of materialism: of course we shouldn’t be so concerned with clinging to our bodily life – after all, since Jesus rose from the dead, we too can be assured of our own resurrection. And we tend to read verse 26 in the same way – after all, how can any material thing in this world compare to the value of someone’s immortal soul? In short, we tend to limit these verses to a challenge to our priorities.

But if we take a closer look at the original Greek, the word translated “life” in verse 25 and the word translated “soul” in verse 26 is the same word – the word related to our English word “psyche.” It is thus very likely that Jesus intended one meaning to apply to both verses. So, is He just talking about our how we view our bodily life? Or is He talking about the value of our immortal souls?

Well, if in both verses Jesus is just talking about our bodily, earthly life, then the impact of verse 26 is dramatically reduced, isn’t it? “What shall it profit a man if he gains the whole world but loses his life?” The answer is obvious – I mean, we all know that no one can take any of their possessions with them when their earthly life is over.

Moreover, the second question of verse 26 doesn't really make sense. "What will a man give in exchange for his life?" Quite a lot, actually. We all spend lots of money on fitness and healthcare, and many wealthy people have in fact paid exorbitant ransoms to kidnapers in order to be safely released.

Ah, but what if in both of these verses Jesus is talking about our immortal souls? Verse 26 then retains a much deeper meaning, a much greater significance, doesn't it? It becomes an urgent plea for us all to turn our focus away from the material to the spiritual, to prefer eternal blessings to temporal ones, to value our immortal souls over anything in this world.

But then what are we to make of verse 25? For it would read something like this: "For whoever will save his soul shall lose it; but whoever loses his soul for My sake shall find it."

It doesn't seem to make sense. I mean, it's easy to see how someone could lose his earthly life for the sake of Christ and the gospel – who knows how many Afghan Christians will die for precisely these reasons at the hands of the Taliban today? But how could anyone lose his soul for Jesus' sake? Isn't the whole point of the gospel to save our souls? What is Jesus saying here?

To figure it out, let's turn our attention to that little word translated in the King James as "will" – "Whosoever will save his life." The Greek actually means "to wish for or desire." In other words, if the word "psyche" in both of these verses actually refers to our immortal souls, Jesus is probing our deepest longings. He's asking us a very hard question, a much harder question than whether we value the spiritual over the material. He's challenging the the core motivation of our Christian faith: "Whoever desires to save his soul shall lose it: and whoever loses his soul for my sake shall find it."

So, what is the basic reason for our trust in Jesus? Are we following Him just because we want something for ourselves, just because we desire our souls to be saved? And if that's the case, isn't our focus really on ourselves rather than on Christ? If so, can we really say that we are better than Peter and those other selfish disciples? Oh, our priorities might be superior to theirs, our selfishness might thus be better informed, but can we really say that we love Jesus any more than they did? Is the purpose of our lives to glorify and worship Jesus? Or are we just using Jesus to get the spiritual goods that we want? Do we thus imagine that Christianity is just some sort of heavenly fire insurance?

Here's a good test of our most basic motivations: what do we think Heaven will be like? How do we envision the end result of the salvation of our eternal souls? The Muslims imagine it to be a garden full of pleasures. Miss Watson told Huck Finn that "all a body would have to do there was to go around all day long with a harp and sing, forever and ever." Country singer Craig Morgan has a dying vagrant saying that he is "Almost Home," visualizing Heaven as an eternal childhood, climbing out of cottonwood trees, jumping into creeks, smelling his mama's fresh cobbler cooking and getting ready to go fishing with his dad. And I suppose most of us imagine Heaven in these or similar ways.

But where's the focus in all of these visions of Heaven? Isn't it on us being happy and safe and loved? Isn't it all about getting what we want, albeit in the spiritual realm?

Okay, let's put it another way – what's missing from all these visions of Heaven? Jesus. And according to our responsive reading from the Revelation, that's really what Heaven is all about – the whole focus is on Jesus, on praising Jesus, on worshipping Jesus on glorifying Jesus. And whatever blessings we might receive in Heaven end up being for Jesus, just as the elders surrounding the throne

cast their crowns down at His feet. Heaven is all Jesus, all the time. So, if our ideas of Heaven would still be Heaven without Jesus, we probably won't like the real thing very much.

So, what does it really mean to follow Jesus? Let's take another look at verse 25, reading it the hard way: "For whoever wishes to save his soul shall lose it; but whoever loses his soul for My sake shall find it." In other words, if all we want is blessings, whether material or spiritual, whether in this world or the next, then we are really nothing more than sophisticated pagans, trying to manipulate our God to wheedle what we want out of Him. But if we are willing to give everything we have to Jesus, even trusting our immortal souls to Him, then we will receive the biggest blessing of all – the chance to be with Jesus forever.

And that's why Jesus talks in verse 24 about self-denial, not just as something He will do for us, but something we need to do for Him. It's an essential part of the Christian life precisely because it reveals our truest intentions – our Christ-centeredness rather than our self-centeredness. That's why Jesus says that if we want to follow Him we must take up our cross.

For make no mistake: the cross is not an image of suffering – it's an image of death. Jesus is thus calling all who want to follow Him not just to accept whatever worldly opposition and persecution may come our way for siding with Jesus, but to die to sin, to die to self, to give all that we are – even our eternal souls – to Him.

So, I guess it boils down to a simple question – what do you really want? What is your deepest desire? Are you still focused on yourself? Do you just want to save your life, or even to save your soul? Or do you want to follow Jesus, giving not just all you have to Him, but all you are, your very life, your very soul?

Does that sort of desire sound a little extreme? Does that sound perhaps even a bit fanatical? Maybe so. But given Who Jesus is, and given what Jesus has done for us, does He really deserve anything less?