

Sermon: What do you benefit if you gain the whole world but lose your soul?

19 September 2021

Trinity live and virtual.

Sermon: ***"What do you benefit if you gain the whole world but lose your soul?"***

Readings: [Isaiah 55:8-9 and Mark 8:27-38](#)

Songs: Oh the love of God [Oh The Love of God - Featuring Cameron Walker - YouTube](#)

Amazing Grace (My chains are gone) [Amazing Grace \(My Chains are Gone\) - Chris Tomlin \(with lyrics\) - YouTube](#)

Have you ever tried wind surfing? Sue and I decided to try on holiday at the sea. We got some basic lessons.

We saw men and women sailing back and forth, scudding along and having fun. They made it look easy.

Lessons started on the beach. How to stand on the board. How to raise the mast and sail as there is no fixed mast on a wind surfer.

I thought I could manage this. And then into the sea. The wind was off shore but not too strong. It wasn't as easy to get on the board in the sea. But I made it. And I even got the mast and sail raised but found I couldn't get to go where I knew I needed to go.

I tried and tried but found myself getting further and further from the shore. Falling in a few times didn't help. Luckily we were at a resort and after a while a boat put out and came to pick me up to take me back to safe ground. Knowing smiles from those who could sail didn't help much.

What did help was a fellow holiday maker, a Lufthansa pilot, who could sail and who had watched me. He sat us down and explained that without guidance I would be carried wherever the wind would take me. The critical point was what was at the centre of what I was trying to do.

What was critical was the centreboard which, acts like a keel on a yacht. There are two pressure points he said drawing a diagram. The wind in the sail is one. The pressure of the sea under the centreboard was the second. By tilting the mast forward or backward the pressure points could be moved. Move the sail forward and the board

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would move to the right. If the sail was moved backward the board would move to the left.

So, with the centreboard in place, you have a pressure point that will allow you, even in stormy conditions, to steer the path that you know you need to follow.<sup>1</sup> Without the centreboard you will always be at the mercy of the wind.

With his help we got sailing. Sue much better than me but that was an ego thing for me but not life threatening!

Life can be like windsurfing. You can find yourself driven by powerful forces that you can't even see. These can be life threatening unless your centreboard is in place.

We are all bombarded by media and marketing information. Social media advertising is a massive addition to all the other existing marketing media. There is a new occupation being that of an "influencer." A person who is a:

*" ... new type of independent third-party endorser, who can shape audience attitudes through blogs, tweets, and the use of other social media."*

A report last year estimated more than half the world's population, some 3.9 billion people use social media. This means that companies like Instagram can target over 1 billion people with a single advert. As a result, we, the users, are up for sale whether we know it or not.<sup>2</sup>

Much of the influencing that is done is aimed at moving us to make decisions: either a buying decision of the product or service being promoted, or a decision to follow a projected lifestyle.

All aimed at telling us that to succeed we need these clothes, those appliances, these experiences, those looks. How to improve your social image. We compete with others

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<sup>1</sup>A centreboard (often called a lifting foil in a modern racing dinghy) is used to provide lift to counter the lateral force from the sails. This is required for sailboats to move in directions other than downwind, since the force of the sail is never closer than 45 degrees to the apparent wind.

<sup>2</sup> From this article: [The good, bad, and ugly: The age of social media influencer \(yourstory.com\)](#) A commentator says this means that:

"Every micro-second we spend on our devices — our "likes" and "dislikes;" our swipes and clicks; who we follow, subscribe to, and befriend; what we comment on or post; how much time we take to dwell on or move away from something; even where we go when we're offline — all of that is served up as data to assess our behaviour."

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on Facebook, Instagram and other platforms showing a positive and successful image of ourselves that may not be real.

Marketing media may promote good behaviour or bad.

Why do I raise this? I raise it because whether we are aware of it or not, we are pressured to conform to the patterns of the world. We are squeezed into the mould of the world and can become so well adjusted to the culture around us that we fit in without even thinking.<sup>3</sup>

In sailing terms we can be blown off course without realising it.

Stephen Covey writes<sup>4</sup> that he undertook a study of all the success literature published in the United States since 1776. He found that for the first 150 years all of the literature that helped to build America was based on the character ethic. This "*helped Americans cultivate integrity, humility, fidelity, temperance, courage, justice, patience, industry, and the Golden Rule (treating others as you would have them treat you).*"

But from approximately 1925 on he found the writings to be superficial, filled with social image consciousness, techniques and quick fixes. This was the personality ethic. Success coming from a promoted public image, power dressing, possessions, and projected attitude and behaviours. Image and projection replaced character. This trend has intensified into the "fake news" era in which we currently find ourselves.

The current pandemic has forced us to slow down, has restrained us from frenetic activity and has restricted us from living the way we were. But amongst the many challenges and tragedies it has been an opportunity to pause.

This morning's passage calls on us to review where we are on our journey in life, and on our faith journey, as we consider the question:

*"What do you benefit if you gain the whole world but lose your soul?"*

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<sup>3</sup> Romans 12:1-2 in the NIV, JB Phillips and The Message

<sup>4</sup> In his book *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* published in 1989.

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Three events are recorded in our passage from Mark 8 this morning:

1. Peter declares that Jesus is the Messiah;
2. Jesus foretells of his death; and
3. Jesus teaches on the way of the cross.

We read that Jesus and his disciples were in the villages around Caesarea Philippi when he asked them: *"Who do people say I am?"*

They answered that some said that he was John the Baptist, others said Elijah, and still others said one of the prophets. And then Jesus turns the question directly to the disciples: *"Who do you say that I am?"*

Mark's Gospel opens with the words *"The beginning of the good news about Jesus Christ the Messiah, the Son of God."*

He is mid-way through his Gospel before the name "Christ" is mentioned again when Peter answers: *"You are the Christ"*.

Jesus does not deny this but asks the disciples not to tell anyone.

Jesus then foretells that he will suffer many things, be rejected by the elders, priests and teachers of the law, be killed and then rise again. This must have been startling news for the disciples. Jesus has just acknowledged that he is Christ, the Messiah. The expectation was that when the Messiah came he would free all from the oppression of Rome. Jesus had performed many miracles and surely he had the power to do this!<sup>5</sup>

But now the disciples hear that Jesus is to be rejected, to suffer and to be put to death.

Suffering and rejection had no place in Peter's idea of the Messiah and what he hears seems completely wrong.

Peter, always impetuous and the first to speak, takes Jesus aside and rebukes him.

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<sup>5</sup> "We are so accustomed to the message of Jesus' crucifixion that it is easy to overlook how jarring that prospect would have been for the disciples. The great hope of the Israelite people at that time was freedom from the Roman overlords. Having seen Jesus' miracles, experienced his magnetic personality as they followed him, and watched him draw enthusiastic crowds, it would have been totally natural for them to assume that Jesus would somehow challenge the servility they lived under with the Romans." See: [Commentary on Mark 8:31-38 - Working Preacher from Luther Seminary](#)

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He just cannot accept this.

Now it is Peter's turn to be rebuked in harsh terms: "*Get behind me Satan, you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men*". The words echo those of Jesus in answering the third temptation in the desert where he is offered a way of avoiding what he is to face and says: "*Away from me Satan*".<sup>6</sup>

Jesus knew that the disciples were struggling to understand and accept what he had told them. In two further passages he repeats what is to happen to him.

In chapter 9 we read: "*The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of men. They will kill him, and after three days he will rise*". *But they did not understand what he meant and were afraid to ask him about it.*"<sup>7</sup>

And further in chapter 10 he tells them again.<sup>8</sup>

So Peter declares that Jesus is the Messiah, Jesus foretells of his death and now Jesus teaches on the way of the cross.

Jesus called the crowd and the disciples together and then taught what must have been difficult for his listeners to understand.<sup>9</sup>

The response of Peter shows that he did not understand and accept what Jesus had foretold would happen to him. The crowd, including the disciples, needed to understand what following Jesus required

What did Jesus say?

He starts by saying that anyone who wants to follow me, come after me, must deny himself or herself. They must cease to make themselves the object of their lives and actions. They must cease to follow their own agendas. Cease to live with themselves at the centre of all they own or achieve.

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<sup>6</sup> Matthew 4:8-10. "8 Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. 9 "All this I will give you," he said, "if you will bow down and worship me." 10 Jesus said to him, "Away from me, Satan! For it is written: 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.'"

<sup>7</sup> Mark 9:31

<sup>8</sup> Mark 10:33-34. "33 "We are going up to Jerusalem," he said, "and the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and the teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death and will hand him over to the Gentiles, 34 who will mock him and spit on him, flog him and kill him. Three days later he will rise.""<sup>9</sup> See Mark 7:14-15 where Jesus also "called the crowd together". That time to teach on purity.

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Self-denial was described by Calvin as constituting the essential requirement of Christian life.<sup>10</sup> We need someone to tell us: "It is not all about you!"

Then Jesus keeps on.

Those who follow him are to *"take up their cross."* The image is of a person already sentenced to death carrying the cross to the site where the crucifixion will take place.<sup>11</sup>

How startlingly different to the idea that Jesus as Messiah would overthrow the ruling powers and that his followers would be the preferred insiders with the conqueror.

But Jesus has more to tell the crowd. He says that whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but that whoever loses their life for him and the gospel will save it.

What would the listeners have understood?

They were hoping to be released from the oppression they were suffering. To live freely not to lose their lives. Jesus doesn't stop there.

*"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?"*

The minds of the listeners must have been reeling. How were they to respond to this?

We will consider these two short verses in more detail against the background of this teaching. Before doing this listen to how Jesus concludes this teaching.

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<sup>10</sup> Institutes of the Christian Religion, Book 3, Chapter 7. 2. Hence follows the other principle, that we are not to seek our own, but the Lord's will, and act with a view to promote his glory. Great is our proficiency, when, almost forgetting ourselves, certainly postponing our own reason, we faithfully make it our study to obey God and his commandments. For when Scripture enjoins us to lay aside private regard to ourselves, it not only divests our minds of an excessive longing for wealth, or power, or human favour, but eradicates all ambition and thirst for worldly glory, and other more secret pests. The Christian ought, indeed, to be so trained and disposed as to consider, that during his whole life he has to do with God. For this reason, as he will bring all things to the disposal and estimate of God, so he will religiously direct his whole mind to him. For he who has learned to look to God in everything he does, is at the same time diverted from all vain thoughts. This is that self-denial which Christ so strongly enforces on his disciples from the very outset (Mt. 16:24), which, as soon as it takes hold of the mind, leaves no place either, first, for pride, show, and ostentation; or, secondly, for avarice, lust, luxury, effeminacy, or other vices which are engendered by self love.

<sup>11</sup> Mark 8:34 and the footnote on page 1508 of the NIV Study Bible.

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He says: *"If anyone is ashamed of me and my words ... the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his father's glory with the holy angels."*

Jesus says that any person who is more concerned about fitting into, and pleasing their own *"adulterous and sinful generation"* than about pleasing him, Christ, will have no part in God's kingdom. Jesus says that the role in which he was rejected, humiliated and put to death will be reversed when he returns in glory as the judge of all people.<sup>12</sup>

Would the listeners have understood this? Paul certainly did as he wrote:

*"<sup>16</sup> For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes."<sup>13</sup>*

I said that the pandemic has caused us, and the whole world, to pause and consider priorities in this life. This morning's passage is hard-hitting and calls on us to consider the question:

*"What do you benefit if you gain the whole world but lose your soul?"*

This question goes to the heart of the Gospel, to the heart of Jesus as servant leader and to the heart of how we are to respond.

I believe that this is a time when we are not only to consider how we will work from home, stay in touch with family and our fellow believers on Zoom, and try on line shopping. It is a time to review what is at the centre of our lives. Is the centre board in place? If you are seeking more than acquisitions, power and position and haven't considered the gospel message, start now. If you are a Christ follower, it is time to review where you are on your faith journey. Paul instructed the believers in Corinth to do this:<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Footnote on page 1508 in the NIV Study Bible. See also 2 Thessalonians 1:6-10. <sup>6</sup> God is just: He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you <sup>7</sup> and give relief to you who are troubled, and to us as well. This will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels. <sup>8</sup> He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. <sup>9</sup> They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might <sup>10</sup> on the day he comes to be glorified in his holy people and to be marveled at among all those who have believed. This includes you, because you believed our testimony to you."

<sup>13</sup> [Romans 1:16](#)

<sup>14</sup> 2 Corinthians 13:5-9 in The Message

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*"5-9 Test yourselves to make sure you are solid in the faith. Don't drift along taking everything for granted. Give yourselves regular checkups. You need firsthand evidence, not mere hearsay, that Jesus Christ is in you. Test it out. If you fail the test, do something about it."*

It is time to ask yourself: "What gives me my identity?"

What does this mean for you and me? It means that we need to consider whether we are allowing the world to squeeze us into its own mould, or whether we are allowing God to re-mould and renew our minds.<sup>15</sup>

A few weeks ago we considered the Book of Ecclesiastes where Solomon, after trying all that this world had to offer under the sun, concluded that all was meaningless without God at the centre of our lives. He had truly *"gained the whole world"*: he had power, riches, fame and wisdom beyond any other man or woman and could do, or acquire anything. But none of this could bring rest to his longing for true meaning. None of this could still the eternity that God had placed in his heart. None of this can still the eternity placed in your heart and in mine.<sup>16</sup>

In looking at what this passage means for us we must also look at what it does not mean for us. The *"theology of the cross"* and the call to *"deny oneself"* does not mean that we are to demean ourselves, to have no ambition or to live as a doormat in contrived humility.<sup>17</sup>

Solomon did not say that working hard, striving intellectually, undertaking projects or earning a living were not good pursuits. He said without God at the centre of what you undertake these are meaningless. You are to do the very best you can using the talents and abilities God has given you. Life, creation, the seasons and the ability to think, work, eat and drink are gifts from God to be enjoyed giving thanks and glory to God.

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<sup>15</sup> Romans 12:1-2 J B Phillips: 12 1-2 With eyes wide open to the mercies of God, I beg you, my brothers, as an act of intelligent worship, to give him your bodies, as a living sacrifice, consecrated to him and acceptable by him. Don't let the world around you squeeze you into its own mould, but let God re-mould your minds from within, so that you may prove in practice that the plan of God for you is good, meets all his demands and moves towards the goal of true maturity.

<sup>16</sup> Ecclesiastes 3:11. 11 He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the human heart; yet[a] no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end.

<sup>17</sup> See this article: [Commentary on Mark 8:31-38 - Working Preacher from Luther Seminary](#)



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*"So I commend the enjoyment of life, because there is nothing better for a person under the sun than to eat and drink and be glad. Then joy will accompany them in their toil all the days of the life God has given them under the sun."<sup>18</sup>*

God at the centre. Drawing your identity from the fact that you are a daughter of God. That you are a son of God. Pause and consider this. To deny yourself is not primarily about squashing your desires or delaying gratification, it is about keeping your priorities in harmony with what Jesus taught us in the "great commandments"- *"Love God and love your neighbour"*.<sup>19</sup>

Jesus said that he came that we, you and I, may have *"real and eternal life, more and better life than you ever imagined."*<sup>20</sup>

This is the heart of the gospel. "Better" meaning a better life here, and "more" meaning eternal life. Listen to how Eugene Peterson paraphrases John 3:

*"God didn't go to all the trouble of sending his Son merely to point an accusing finger, telling the world how bad it was. He came to help, to put the world right again. Anyone who trusts in him is acquitted; anyone who refuses to trust him has long since been under the death sentence without knowing it. And why? Because of that person's failure to believe in the one-of-a-kind Son of God when introduced to him."*

To trust in Jesus comes at a cost. We are to deny ourselves and have Christ at our centre. We need to have Jesus as our centreboard allowing us to follow him, and not just to be blown off course by the winds of the world.

The message from our passage is hard hitting and needs to be considered. Christ concluded by saying *"What can anyone give in exchange for their soul?"*

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<sup>18</sup> [Ecclesiastes 8:15](#)

<sup>19</sup> See article at footnote 12 and Matthew 22:37-39: "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself."

<sup>20</sup> John 10:10 from the Message: "I am the Gate. Anyone who goes through me will be cared for—will freely go in and out, and find pasture. A thief is only there to steal and kill and destroy. I came so they can have real and eternal life, more and better life than they ever dreamed of."

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And the answer to this is nothing. We can give nothing.

Jesus was sent to fetch us when we drift helplessly through life being driven further and further from safe ground. Jesus came to provide us with instructions on how we are to have him at the very centre of our lives and how we are to follow him.

Ponder again that God sent Jesus to die for you and for me, so that we could be saved from eternal separation from God. Paul wrote:

*"9 that if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved."<sup>21</sup>*

A gift of salvation from eternal death by faith through grace alone. Own that! All the wealth in the whole world cannot buy that gift.

This is not just about being good or bad: it is a matter of life or death. You

and I need to pause and to take a rain check:

■ To test ourselves;

■ To be aware of the patterns of the world.

■ To consider again how we are responding to the fact that accepting Jesus as our Lord and Saviour means eternal life and breaks forever our separation from God. To take

■ our identity from Christ and not from anything you or I may own or control; To have

■ Christ at the very centre of all we do so that we can steer our way to follow him.

"What do you benefit if you gain the whole world but lose your soul?"

Gordon Hay

Trinity Presbyterian Church, Lynnwood Pretoria [www.trinity.org.za](http://www.trinity.org.za)

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<sup>21</sup> Romans 10:9