

Jesus Saving Question:
***“What Will It Profit Them to Gain the Whole World
and Forfeit Their Life?”***

“There are no ethics in business,” someone once said, *“the only thing that matters is ‘Keep it in the black.’”* That may be a rather crass overstatement, but . . . When you read about corporate bribery and other shenanigans at home and abroad; when companies seem to flout environmental concerns; when reports come that employers utilize illegal aliens and then refuse to pay them because they know that, being illegal, they cannot complain; when you read of disasters that come on people because of shoddy workmanship and inferior materials used to shave costs— such a statement gains some credence.

It may be too much to expect that a corporate executive will consider much else beyond the profit-margin for his or her company. Indeed, one part of that vocation would be to maximize profits (within certain bounds). Yet it is overstating the case that there are no ethics involved.

The issue before us this evening is not whether or not are there ethics at work in Corporate America, Rather, we are concerned this evening to ask *“Is there an ethos that governs our actions?”*

The Saving Question Jesus asks this evening comes from today’s Gospel: ***“What will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?”*** With that question our Lord hits three areas of our living and thinking: 1) What do we value in life? 2) What would we do to acquire what we value? 3) What is really at the core of who and what we are? These are questions that lead to understanding our ethos — i.e. that is, what prompts and motivates our behaviors and attitudes about ourselves, our world, other people, and God.

What do we value in life?

All too often, what we value is that which will raise our status and esteem among others. So we invest in the latest style of clothing, if we are

concerned to be considered smart. We get caught in whatever is the fad of the day, whether that means: Sushi bars and BMW's, or Perrier and white wine, or shabby jeans and razor-blade earrings (and I know I just dated myself with those options). We live in a poll-oriented society — what becomes popular soon becomes mandatory.

I really doubt that most people value things for the things themselves; but we do value things because we see them as elevating our status among peers — or especially if it elevates us above peers! “One-upmanship,” “Keeping up with the Joneses,” — call it what we may — it is an attempt to find personal value in the appreciative (and at times envious) estimation of others. What will gain us acceptance? That's the value of things.

Jesus warns us: *“Watch out! You could gain the whole world and forfeit your life!”*

What would you do to acquire what you value?

The story is told of a man who encountered a rather attractive woman at a dinner party. In the course of their conversation, he asked her if, for one million dollars, she would become his mistress. After a brief consideration, she replied that she would. He then asked her if she would become his mistress for ten dollars. She protested: *“What kind of woman do you think I am?”* He replied: *“Madame, we have established what kind of woman you are; we are now simply negotiating the price.”*

There are many subtle ways by which we prostitute ourselves. We sell ourselves piecemeal to get what we value. We yield to pressure to do what we know is “not quite right” and justify it by calling it “not grossly wrong.” We get caught between the Scylla and Charybdis (go read your ancient Greek myths) of maintaining status at the risk of forfeiting principle.

On the one hand, we find ourselves forced into a decision that may threaten our lifestyles if we decide “wrongly” — that is, do that which may lower our status. On the other hand, we run the risk of going against

what we know to be right — and thus lower our self-esteem.

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What is at the core of what you are? Those who find self-value in the estimation of others have no core, except whatever others’ whimsy might dictate. This is really the focal-point of our Lord’s Saving Question: ***“What does it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?”*** That word “profit” has particular meaning — it does not mean adding something, but rather bringing a benefit. And that word the NRSV translates as “life” is the Greek word ψυχη (psychay); the KJV usually translated that with “soul.” The word is applied to that which makes you what you are. So, if you have everything that the world holds of value: Power, Position, Wealth, Prestige, Esteem, Beauty — Where is your self?

When personal value is defined by externals . . . when life is measured by standards set by others (*“Will they embrace me?” “Will they like me?” “Will they reject me?”*) — there is no self! Only the image of selfhood.

For Christ’s people there can be only one thing at the core — Christ and His Cross! What benefit is there to gain the whole world and lose who you are? There is none! But pay close attention: there IS benefit in giving up your self.

When Christ is the core, our values change — they have to! When Christ is in the center, we value what Christ values: The joy of proclaiming the Kingdom of God. The desire to share what have and what we are with others. Compassion toward those in need. What we will do to attain those values likewise changes: We can take up the cross and follow Christ. We will deny our selves — because in so doing we confess that Christ has given us our true self. We rejoice to do whatever Christ calls us to do.

In that process, the self that we are changes: ***“It is no longer I who lives,”*** notes St. Paul, ***“but Christ who lives in me.”*** ***“He will transform the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to***

himself.”

“What does it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?” It does not profit anything; but, to deny the world, to submit and yield ones self, to take on Christ — in that is a profit inestimable:

“If they take our house,

Goods, fame, child or spouse,

Wrench our life away,

They cannot win the day.

The Kingdom’s ours forever.” [LBW Hymn 228]

Amen.