

A Matter of Life and Death

a sermon by Rev. Michael Gladish
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In the Gospel of Matthew we find the Lord summarizing many of His teachings in these words:

“If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it. For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?” (Matthew 16:24-26).

It is probably fair to say that nobody here really wants to “gain the whole world,” at least not consciously. Still, these verses are challenging, and if we don’t appreciate the challenge we’re probably not really letting the message sink in.

No matter how stretched we are financially, we are all living in almost incredible wealth. In fact, it is so much with us that it’s kind of like the atmosphere we breathe: we don’t know anything else, and can’t imagine living without it. Only when some great tragedy hits – like the recent tsunami in Indonesia – do we stop to consider the luxury of plentiful, fresh drinking water gushing from any one of 7 taps in our homes, or the ability to have instant light or heat by simply flipping a switch or poking a thermostat. Never mind the multiple TV’s in our homes, or the powerful computers we carry in our pockets or – these days – wear on our wrists.

That said, the verses in Matthew were not written to frighten us, only to make clear what really is at stake. So let’s BE clear: - if we can believe it, *everything is at stake*.

But perhaps you’ve noticed – as I have – that laying down your life for *anybody* is really hard, even for your spouse or children. Sure, you want them to be happy and fulfilled, but at what cost to YOU? And how do you weigh your priorities in regard to them and any other responsibilities you may have? How important is your JOB? – your physical health? – your recreation? – your other friendships, and so on? How do you decide what you need in relation to what others around you need – and what you yourself don’t really need?

These are all important questions about how we manage our natural lives, but now, what about our relationship with the Lord? Is this a real thing that involves real sacrifice, or is He rather an abstraction in our lives, something we can refer to impersonally as “the Word,” or “Providence” and discuss in theoretical terms? Many of us have grown up with this rather abstract concept of God, and as a result –

- a We don’t have a very clear sense of exactly what natural sacrifices He requires of us;
- b We’re inclined to think of our priorities in terms of what serves our own welfare; and
- c We find it awkward to talk about the Lord in terms of a personal relationship.

In regard to the second point, we’re talking about our regeneration, and we know this is what the Lord wants for us, but sometimes we forget that real gains in this process involve real losses, as He said: “whoever loses his life for My sake will find it.” Or we conceptualize these losses as purely spiritual, such as letting go of pride, arrogance, coveting, poor opinions of others, and so on. Of course these are critical disciplines, but, you know, they don’t really impact our lifestyle

choices. One can be a perfectly sincere and loving person on this basis without suffering the slightest natural hardship. Indeed, life IS essentially spiritual, so what's the problem?

Well, the Lord had some other things to say on this topic that add clarity. In Matthew 6, for example, in the Sermon on the Mount, He emphatically tells us NOT to lay up for ourselves treasures on earth, but rather treasures in heaven. And He tells us not to worry about what we will eat or drink or wear for clothing, but rather to "seek first the kingdom of God." In Luke 12 He even uses a parable to mock the rich man who wanted to build bigger barns to store all of his crops and goods, saying, "You fool! This night your soul will be required of you; then whose will those things be which you have provided?" (v. 20).

Of course these teachings all have spiritual meanings, but when you reflect on them and when you consider in addition what the heavenly doctrine teaches about prioritizing spiritual life over natural life, it's pretty hard to miss the fact that they are warnings against ANY sort of focus on worldly things. To give just one more example, when the Lord in John 12 spoke of His own death and resurrection being like a grain of wheat falling into the ground and dying before it is raised up He followed immediately by saying, "He who loves his life will lose it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life" (v. 25). Notice it doesn't say "hates his life," but "hates his life in this world." It's hyperbole, of course: we don't have to hate this life absolutely, but we DO *relatively, compared with spiritual life*. So we have the teaching of our third lesson today (HD #97-98) about how we can *and should* provide for ourselves, *but only for the sake of our usefulness to others*.

Does this mean we can't enjoy worldly wealth? No! In fact being in poverty can drive us to focus as much or more on worldly matters as being rich, since daily living is reduced to a struggle just to survive. This is one of many reasons why we should think carefully about how we spend our money: if we can help ANY others rise above their concerns for survival and focus on their spiritual life we will have served a tremendous use.

In this context it's worth noting that the word for "soul" in the Gospels is the same as the word for "life." So when the Lord said "He who loves his life will lose it" He wasn't only talking about the natural life, He was also talking about the life of the soul – our own soul in preference to the souls of others. This is critical. On one hand the whole broad scope and tenor of the Word, including that of the Writings, urges us to be mindful of our own business, our own internal states of good or evil, and to work hard on our own spiritual reformation, rather than trying to judge others. *On the other hand*, unless we are doing this for the sake of others, and especially for the Lord, it's actually self-centered *and can be self-destructive!* No matter how you interpret the words of His saying, if you love your own life more than others you're on your way to hell.

In a way this also applies to loving our families, since they are to some degree extensions of ourselves. So the Lord quoted the prophet, Micah, saying "A man's foes will be those of his own household," and He said, "He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me" (Matt. 10:36-37). To be clear, it's really, really important that we do love our family members, especially that we love them with appropriate concern for their eternal lives! But this just illustrates how much *more important* it is to love the Lord and do what HE says – no matter what the cost to ourselves.

This is a hard teaching and it requires a lot of self-examination. None of us is going to live in

this world forever. Some of us may have 60 years to go, some 40, some 10, and some... you never know! Does the Lord care about our lives in this world? Of course He does! But there's a simple qualifier: as we read, "The Divine Providence regards eternal things, and not temporal things *except so far as they accord with eternal things*" (DP #214 ff). What does *that* mean?

Basically what it means is that the Lord Himself loves temporal (worldly) things, *as long as they serve eternal purposes*, which is to say, heavenly love, heavenly wisdom and usefulness.

That said, how much do we need in this world compared to what others need? You know, in this country, among many there's a deep seated fear of socialism as a form of government that lends itself to all sorts of abuses, both by those who give the benefits and by those who receive them. And to be sure, many of those fears are justified. But what about providing for those in need? What about sharing the cost of care for those who are unable to bear it by themselves? In a way the government of heaven is *the ultimate form of socialism*; but of course in that case it's all voluntary, and no one need have any fear of selfish people taking unfair advantage....

So in this world we have the doctrine about benefactions of charity. There are, we read, benefactions and obligations of charity (TCR #425 & 429). The difference between them is that benefactions are done from free will, according to a person's best judgment of what is needed and what he or she wants to support, whereas obligations are things like paying taxes, providing for one's family and honoring contracts or commitments. In reading about benefactions we might get the impression that there's no requirement to do them, but that's not what the doctrine says. Rather the teaching is that we have perfect freedom to decide WHICH benefactions are most meaningful to us, not *whether* we should do them. This way they can be true expressions of the charity we have in our hearts. But if we don't do what we can when we have the opportunity it's a pretty clear indication that we really don't care. And THAT'S the life and death issue.

Again, it's fair to say that we ALL have way more than we need. We may not see the truth of this, given family commitments, a tight budget, health concerns, loans or mortgages to pay, and so on, but when we compare ourselves to people living in Syria, Venezuela, Indonesia, or even certain places in DC, we are incredibly blessed. But do we have any obligations to these people? Maybe not! Maybe there are other groups and causes that call out to us instead. But a question we are asking today is what we are willing to sacrifice to make the lives of *some* other people better; what part of our worldly life we are willing to give up for the sake of *someone* else.

Naturally, we need to provide for our future in this world, whether we do so through savings or insurance plans, investments in real estate or education, even suitable recreations to stay sane and healthy, *but how much is enough?* The truth is, no matter how prudent your plan is, *you'll never know*. The stock market could crash tomorrow. A tornado could blow your house down next week. You could become a victim of some random crime or accident. Nothing worldly is guaranteed. But what IS guaranteed is your ability to choose how you will think about and treat other people compared with yourself. What IS guaranteed is your freedom to prioritize in favor of yourself or in favor of others. But you – we – have to understand that prioritizing in favor of others literally means putting ourselves in second place, which means giving up something we might otherwise have.

For example, assuming you had the means, you could purchase a \$50,000 car, a \$30,000 car or maybe a \$10,000 used car. Assuming you have a legitimate need for the \$30,000 option but not

for the \$50,000 one, what are you going to do? Same question if the \$10,000 car will do. \$20 grand is a lot to spend on something you don't *really* need, but it would make the world of difference to an individual struggling to make ends meet. For that matter it could feed or provide medical treatment for literally thousands of people in third world countries who are desperate. Do these people deserve your generosity? Who knows! But it's something you can find out, and if one cause is *not* worthy, then you can find another that is.

The fact is, as we all know, it's very easy to justify all sorts of luxuries, and even to think of them as necessities if we are drawn to them, or if advertising or the culture around us cultivates that expectation, but at some point we have to say, "Enough is enough" and learn to let go.

This happens a lot when people are facing life-threatening conditions. You see it on the news all the time: a forest fire, a hurricane or a devastating explosion destroys everything and people face the camera and say, "We're just glad to be alive." Families need expensive medical care not covered by insurance and they say, "We'll just do whatever it takes." And often, if the story tugs at viewer's hearts, they will respond generously to special funds for the victims' support. The question we are asking today is why it takes such a tragedy to open our wallets when the Lord tells us again and again that we should be doing this every day for His sake and for the sake of our own souls. It's the fundamental condition of life in heaven. In fact it's why everything in heaven is provided *gratis* by the Lord: ***people put other people first and share.***

Two more illustrations may help bring the point home. First, this willingness to sacrifice or suffer losses on the material plane is really no different from the willingness to do so on the spiritual plane. For example, we know we don't have enough love (we always need more), but we also know that the only way to get more is to give of what we have. We also know that our understanding is always incomplete, yet we get great pleasure out of sharing what we have, and we also learn more in the process, even as we help others with it. Why can't we believe and trust that the Lord will also provide for us on the material level in exactly the same way?

Second, let's take a minute to reflect on how hard it is to trust others with our generosity. What if they don't deserve it? What if they waste or abuse it on foolish things? What if... you get the picture. We are always more comfortable if we can maintain control of our assets, or give them with particular strings attached. But remember, we are all born into tendencies to evils of every kind! None of us deserves *anything* the Lord gives us, and yet He gives us ***everything*** every day of our lives, ***including*** the freedom to decide how we will use it. What, then, does it mean to be created in His image and likeness? Remember, He said, "It is enough for a disciple that he be like his teacher, and a servant like His master" (Matt. 10:25) and "I have given you an example, that you should do as I have done to you" (John 13:15). So when we give to support others – naturally or spiritually – having done due diligence about the use, let's notice how hard it is to let go. That's laying down our lives for others. That's losing our lives for His sake. That's taking up ***our*** cross and following Him. And that's how we gain eternal life.

Amen.

Lessons: *Exodus* 7-10: selections
 Children's talk about Obedience and the 10 Plagues
Matthew 10:34-39 & 16:24-28
The New Jerusalem & its Heavenly Doctrine #97-98