

FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

“THE HIGH COST OF GAINING THE WORLD”

Scripture Lesson: Mark 8: 34-38

*This sermon was preached by Dr. L. Holton Siegling, Jr. on Sunday, July 27, 2025
at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina.*

Mark 8: 34-38

34 He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. 35 For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. 36 For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? 37 Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? 38 Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.”

The High Cost of Gaining the World

Leader: The word of the Lord.

People: Thanks be to God.

In 1904, William Whiting Borden graduated from high school. He was the heir to the Borden family fortune, which meant that he stood to receive a sizeable inheritance. For his graduation present, his parents gave him something extravagant—they gave him a trip around the world.

Now, many young men in his position might have used that opportunity to indulge their wealth or climb the social ladder. As it were, William Borden saw his opportunity as something else... and what he saw, specifically, was a spiritual need. As he traveled through Asia, the Middle East, and Europe, God inspired in his heart not ambition, but compassion. It is said that he wrote home, “I’m going to give my life to prepare for the mission field.”

It seems Borden had started asking himself a more important question than “How am I going to advance myself?” No! Borden’s own question must have sounded a lot like the question Jesus posed in this morning’s New Testament Lesson: “For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?”

Now, lest that question be obscured in the balance of our time together, I can answer it with one word: “Nothing.” And that’s not my answer—that’s Jesus’ answer. Here in Mark’s Gospel, Jesus tells us that we will have gained nothing—even if we had gained the whole world, even if such a thing were possible—if in our abundance we lost our soul. Gaining the world just wouldn’t matter!

Some people presume that what Jesus refers to as “our soul” or “our life,” as it has also been translated, is our saving faith. But we need to take to heart the broader biblical and confessional witness to better understand what Jesus means here. The Westminster Confession of Faith has this to say on the matter: “Nevertheless, they may, through temptations of Satan and of the world, the prevalency of corruption remaining in them... fall into grievous sins... yet they shall renew their repentance and be preserved through faith in Christ Jesus to the end.”

Those words help us to understand that here in Mark chapter 8, Jesus is addressing the deep—and what should be—the abiding nature of discipleship. And so, to lose one’s life need not be taken to mean that we would lose our salvation, but rather that those who seem to follow Jesus, in the end—their lack of faith, the losing of their life—it would serve as a testimony to the dreadful finality of the truth: that the treasure of God was never really in them.

Jesus’ question proves even more far-reaching when we consider how it also functions as a diagnostic—a biblical self-examination, not to cause us despair, but to awaken us from our spiritual slumber and put our feet back on solid ground; to, in fact, send us running back into the loving arms of God.

I’ve shared this story with some of you before. It is about the man named Horatio Spafford... and he had it all. He was a prominent Christian lawyer in Chicago, a successful businessman with significant real estate investments. He was a leader in his church, a close friend to the evangelist Dwight L. Moody. Spafford and his wife had five beautiful children.

By every earthly standard, Horatio Spafford had gained the world, but in 1871, everything changed. First, his four-year-old son died of scarlet fever, and then came the Great Chicago Fire, which destroyed much of his real estate holdings. Spafford arranged for his family to travel to Europe for some rest and renewal, and he sent his wife and four daughters ahead while he stayed behind to finish some business.

A few days later, Spafford received that now-infamous telegram. It arrived from his wife and had on it two simple words: “Saved. Alone.” The ship carrying his wife and four daughters had sunk, and all four girls had drowned.

After receiving the telegram, Horatio Spafford boarded a ship to join his wife in Europe. It has been said that as his vessel crossed the Atlantic, the captain told him when they reached the approximate location where the other ship had gone down. And the story goes that it was there that Spafford did something remarkable—he wrote a hymn.

We’ll sing his hymn a little later in this morning’s service. The first verse goes like this:

“When peace like a river attendeth my way,
when sorrows like sea billows roll,

whatever my lot, thou hast taught me to say,
it is well, it is well with my soul.”

Friends, the only way Spafford could have ever said that was if his life was truly rooted and grounded in something that this life cannot offer. Oh, heaven forbid we learn too late in life the exceedingly high cost of gaining the world—that we learn too late that it is not well with our souls.

In our Old Testament Lesson this morning—which also happens to be one of the stories our children will be hearing about this week in Vacation Bible School—it talks about the faithfulness of Abraham and Sarah, and how they gained their life; how they took up their cross and followed God; and how it was reckoned unto them as righteousness.

Now, I would add that going where God tells us to go may not mean for us what it meant for Abraham and Sarah—though at its deepest level, it does. Nor does it mean that we should not engage life and living, and actually make a living. In today’s lesson, Jesus is by no means condemning making a profit. As a matter of fact, Jesus condemns the opposite. Jesus knows that life is about increase—it’s about sowing and reaping.

In fact, one of Jesus’ highest praises went to the man who took what he had in life and invested it. Conversely, one of Jesus’ most scathing judgments was given to the man who took what he had been given and made no profit.

God is no fan of sloth. Indeed, we have a concept known as the Protestant Work Ethic because we understand and believe that God values good, hard work. God modeled it Himself, working as He did to create the world—and then resting from the work that He had done.

But God also knows this: that some people will do almost anything to gain material wealth. And while we may or may not give in to that temptation to a great extent, to say that it is no temptation at all, and to shove it down into the cellar of our unconscious minds is a mistake—because it won’t stay there. It never does. Eventually, it creeps out, if in no other expression than in our envy toward those who have more.

And lest we think that Jesus is overstating the case, let us keep in mind how many of us have advanced ourselves or those we love for little more than life’s petty priorities. Or think about that business owner who cuts corners and exploits their workers; or that celebrity who compromises their values to remain atop the social media search engines; or that politician who promises one thing but, once elected, does something entirely different; or that parent who climbs the corporate ladder, knows the world’s top executives—but doesn’t know their own children.

Ah, when gain and profit outweigh principle, we have a problem. But, alas, it is a problem that can be fixed. If, for example, we have to stoop to some unethical practice just to make a profit, then we shouldn’t be making a profit. And if we have to sell our souls to keep up with our competitors, then

maybe we shouldn't be keeping up with them. Or if we have to harm others in order to help ourselves—then I dare say, we are dangerously close to losing our life.

So, what does a person look like who has lost their life? That person whose insatiable appetite for more has clogged their spiritual arteries to the point that they are a heart attack waiting to happen? Oh, they are the ones who may be able to build the finest house, but their house is built upon a bad foundation. What I'm trying to say is that if we haven't built our life upon the bedrock of Christ, then we might as well have built our spiritual homes upon the sand.

William Borden, that young man who dedicated his life to preparing for the mission field, went on to Yale and became a spiritual leader on campus. He founded Bible studies and mentored younger students. After graduating, he turned down high-salary job offers and gave hundreds of thousands of dollars away to mission work. He wrote in his Bible three simple phrases that became the summary of his life: “No reserves. No retreats. No regrets.”

He left for Egypt to study Arabic, hoping to prepare to serve among Muslims in China, but within a few weeks of arriving, he contracted spinal meningitis, and at the age of 25, William Borden died. For those who knew him, and for the thousands of people who were inspired by his example, they came to know that though Borden lost his life, he actually gained it—for in giving up the world, he gained his soul.

Jesus' question is not hypothetical. It is not rhetorical. “What good is it to gain the whole world and forfeit our life?” Maybe we've been chasing a job, a status, a lifestyle, and it's slowly eating away at our soul. Our faith has begun to drift as other things have become more urgent, more appealing—but are they lasting? Clinging to treasures rather than Christ... that will get us nowhere that ultimately matters.

Friends, Jesus is not trying to take life from us; He is offering to give life to us. To give us a life that no paycheck, no trophy, no amount of followers on Facebook could ever provide. A life which, when lived with “No reserves. No retreats. No regrets,” a life lived to the glory of God—ah, for having lived that life, we receive life.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.