

PROFIT OR LOSS?

JANUARY 12, 1958

What an arresting question to be asked amidst all the feverish rush of civilization, "What has a man profited if he gains the whole world and loses his own soul?" This was the question of Jesus to people who, through a headlong dash for material gain, overlooked the fundamentals of life. It had an untimely ring then, as it does now, because some were bent on gaining the whole world, if perchance, such were possible. The simple fact is that one cannot gain the world without losing his own soul, and no person is wealthy to whom the grave brings bankruptcy.

Profit Making Is Not Condemned

Let us understand this sword-like truth of Jesus. He was not condemning profits any more than he was discouraging thrift. As a matter of fact, He condemns the very opposite. A sloven, unthrifty, calloused personality came under the severest indictment of Jesus. He made it clear that life is increase, growth, and investment. No one came under such indignant wrath as the one talent man who refused to take a chance with what he had been given. The parables of sowing and reaping point up the truth of working, investing, and improving one's lot not only as being right but imperative.

But the truth in the warning is aimed not at the slovenly but at the industrious . . . those who are constantly at the job of investing, working, and earning. They are the ones who are apt to lose their perspective. Life to them gets out of focus, and the blur of reality obscures the purpose of life and its ultimate end. Quite well did Jesus know that some folks would do anything to make more money. No trick, deception, or vice is too low for their profit-making. Proofs are everywhere in abundance: merchandise misrepresented by the few large strawberries placed on the top of the basket while concealing the harder, smaller, half-ripe berries below them; stocks rated by glowing adjectives which have a way of never

"tricks of the trade" among those to declaring dividends . . . these are the whom profits are the final measure of worth.

Yes, some would stoop to any depth to acquire a few more dollars. Like the family who recently declared their aged father as incompetent and had him committed to an asylum for the insane so the greedy sons and daughters could divide up the real estate and other assets. Others foreclose on mortgages, and do so gleefully, so that their real estate domain grows all the while—the misery and grief of the tenant notwithstanding. Little wonder the Son of God asked in searching forthrightness, "What has a man profited if he gains the whole world and loses his own soul?"

Gain That Loses the Soul

What kind of gain is it by which one's soul is lost? If this Galilean is not discouraging gain in general, then what specific type of gain is it by which the soul ebbs away? Well, for one thing, profits without principles constitutes a gain that is no profit at all. And though one may seem to emass much in the short run, still the final balance sheet will show a loss. This norm of profit without principle is the unwritten technique for many a person in business today. The slogan, "Unless it pays, it does not stay," has become a sort of fifth gospel to the business world. The fact that an employee is weakened by arthritis (and therefore can hardly turn out the work that he did for twenty years in the business) is of little consequence . . . the arthritic patient must be fired and replaced by a younger and more "profitable" employee. Such is the reasoning when principles give way to profits.

There comes a time when a Christian businessman simply must say, "Before I will resort to the crooked techniques of misrepresenting merchandise, or under-

cutting my neighbor who is my competitor, or stocking things for sale that tear down life and morals . . . before I will do these, I will padlock the front door of the business." And mean it! In effect, "If I must sell my soul in order to make a profit, then there will be no profit."

In the recent presentment of a grand jury was the following item: One jewelry store was cited for selling costume jewelry for \$40 which was valued at about \$8. To compound the miserable condition, the so-called jewelry had been repossessed after the customer had paid for it several times . . . at least its worth . . . to say nothing of exorbitant carrying-charges and all the additional figures that are too easily added on before the final price is established. Of one thing I am quite confident: that in the judgment day many a finance company will give account thrice-told for its ethics and its gluttonous profits. These are the kind by which the soul dies within.

End Justifies Means?

Moreover, the soul can be lost by the kind of gain which comes when one reasons that the end justifies the means. The conscience is soothed for the moment by reasoning that in the end all will be helped by the shady deals. That if I go ahead and make these big profits—though admittedly not too honestly—then look at the money I will have to give to charity. Think of how much I could give to the church, for instance. Maybe a rose window in the new cathedral . . . from the profits of black market operation. The very acme of this absurd rationalization was heard recently when an official of a certain church accepted a hundred dollars contribution from a bootlegger. Said the church official, "The devil has had that money long enough . . . now we will let the Lord put it to good use." No doubt the bootlegger felt a little semi-respectable glow within him as he handed the ill gotten gain to the hand of the church. But the church of Jesus Christ is not that hard up—it must cry out in the fact of such doings that the means by which things are done determine the worthwhileness of the ends.

It was just such reasoning that sent every dictator on his infamous way during his reign of terror. "Since the ends are truly worthy," they reasoned, "then resort to any means in order to accomplish them." In the framework of such thinking fitted gas chambers, inquisitions, Siberian slave camps, genocide, and the modern debacle of Communist terror the world around.

I know of no type of gain by which one's soul is lost more than that which places the world first and God second, if at all. A life that makes fame, success, sensual satisfactions, material gain ends in themselves will come to the finality of life without a soul still left.

As an eminent historian lay dying, a friend came by in solicitous pity and insisted on conversation. Said the sick man, "Why do you bother me? Can't you see I am busy dying?" In less honest fashion there are throngs of people today saying the same thing, "Why bother me with all these warnings of religion? Can't you see I am busy making a living?" But the question needs to be rebuffed by another one, "Are you making a life along with a living?" Yes, many are busy dying, and they don't even know it!

A Life Without a Soul

Turn now to look at a picture of a person when the soul is gone . . . when life is denuded of its real spiritual content . . . when profits took over as the supreme issue of life. What does he look like? Namely this: he may buy the box seats nearest to the stage performance, wear the best of silks and satins, be entertained royally, but for a soulless person the musical instruments in the orchestra may as well all be cowbells since there is no real concept of aesthetic value. His only music is the ring of the cash register. Possessing the rare old masters, he merely regards them as something to hang on the wall. The best of books are but paper and print since there telling truth never got through to him. He was too busy making money. When human kindness is allowed to dry up in the rentless pace of acquiring more, when every plea for help

is rebuffed by a "I can't afford it," when the appeals for selfless service are countermanded by a selfish ego . . . then the soul has withered into nothingness. This is the kind of profit that knows no lasting gain.

On the islands of the seas there are many places where coconuts are the source of barter. There natives gather them in great numbers. Now and then when the crop is scarce, natives resort to selling a type of intelligent monkey that grows in great profusion. To catch the monkeys, the natives have devised a clever scheme of boring a small hole in a coco-

nut, putting in a bit of honey and baiting the monkeys. The monkey slips his hand into the coconut hole and gets a fist full of the white meat and honey. But the doubled fistful is too big to pull out of the hole. It doesn't have sense enough to turn lose in order to save his life. The analogy to man is ugly but honest: some don't have soul left enough to turn loose their fistful of this world in order to save their own souls. It is one thing to be listed in Dun & Bradstreet; it is something else altogether to be listed in the Lamb's Book of Life! "For what has a man profited if he gains the whole world and loses his own soul?"

THREE CHEERS!

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(Scripture: John 16:29-33)

The Bible is replete with the notes of optimism: notes of cheer, encouragement, and triumph. Its abiding truth sounds much like a cheering section as though life were a contest on an athletic field. Three of these cheers rise to defend us in the game of life, three cheers which you and I should hear this day.

"Fear Not"

The first of the three, "Be of good cheer, fear not," is as timely and essential as the morning sunshine. To be imprisoned in the Chilon of fear is an unbecoming state for human life. Strangely enough, old age has no monopoly on this vice. Fear maintains its grip on those of all ages—even the young children. I doubt if many of the more open sins like profligacy, inordinate drinking, etc. take the toll in our lives as fear does.

It works like a malignancy: it takes good cells and runs in riotous, mob-like action. Fear enters an otherwise good life and eats away at its vitals until life is hampered, restricted, and sometimes lost. Fear is that faithless, trembling attitude that

comes up to the bat of life with an unsteady grip, an uncertain attitude, and an indecisive conviction about hitting the ball. Most time the fear-ridden person fans out because of his consuming fear.

When Fort Alcan was torn down some years ago, the natives rushed in to get all the used boards, electrical supplies, and any odds and ends that they could find for their own homes. When they came to the prison, they noticed it had huge doors, two-inch steel rods over the windows, and heavy padlocks. But to their dismay, the walls were made of thin plywood and cardboard . . . but were painted the color of pig iron. The prisoners constantly hacked at the steel rods, the huge doors, and heavy locks; but it never occurred to them that the walls were so flimsy.

Cardboard Barriers

Quite often the prisons of fear look as formidable as the locks and bars over the doors: yet, the walls may be nothing more than the cardboard through which one could go with determination.

When the Apostle Peter gave full vent