

Gain the World, Lose your Soul

“For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?” Such are the probing questions asked by our Lord this morning; questions, which certainly demand an answer. But how are we to answer them? The 19th century German playwright and author Johann Goethe took a stab at it in his now famous play, *Faust*. For those not familiar with the play, it is essentially a Job-like tale where a brilliant young scholar named Dr. Faust enters into a sordid agreement with the demon, Mephistopheles. The demonic bargain was a simple exchange: Dr. Faust would give his soul in exchange for worldly knowledge, power and pleasure. As the play unfolds, Dr. Faust gets everything he wants, but way more than he bargains for. Gratification of lust, political influence, power over natural forces, but all these so-called wonderful things turn to ashes in his mouth. Nothing satisfies. Nothing lasts. Nothing slakes his insatiable ambition. And with each godlike power he achieves, pain and destruction are quick to follow.

One of the most intriguing parts of the play is the dialogue between Mephistopheles and God. In this dialogue much is learned about the sinister nature of the devil and temptation, as well as God’s somber observations concerning the human condition. Mephistopheles, like all hellish spirits, is a spirit of negation. He negates God’s goodness with his enticements to wickedness. He thrives on sowing the seeds of skepticism and nihilism, preying on mankind’s baser instincts. To Mephistopheles, it’s a game of cat-and-mouse. He enjoys the hunt, the pursuit, the chase. He enjoys manipulating humans out of their souls. He boasts to God how humans are easy targets, easily duped and deceived. But can we deny this? It might sound offensive to our ears, but are we not easy prey? We fall more often than we stand. We give-in more often than we resist. Yes, we hide our sins behind noble sounding pursuits, behind lofty ideals and goals. We say things like we want goodness, but what we really mean is we want what is good for us. We say we want knowledge, but what we really mean is we want power—the power to coerce others and bend

them to our will. We say we want freedom, but what we really mean is we want to be free no matter how much our freedom infringes on the freedom of others. We say we want health, but what we really mean is vanity, and the ability to make others envious when they look upon us. We are Faust, pure and simple. Given the opportunity, we too would sell our souls for basement bargains; our birthrights, for the trappings of worldly prestige. We provide the likes of Mephistopheles a continual source of entertainment as we become ensnared in his obvious traps. The demonic realm only has power over us because we grant it such power. But we are usually quick to make the transfer to achieve the path of least resistance, the easy road; easy gains, easy success.

Easy come, easy go, though. The Lord tells Mephistopheles that, “Man errs, till he has ceased to strive”. The Lord calls us busybodies. We busy ourselves because we can find no rest. But what does all our restless busyness lead to? Where does it get us? The Lord answers: “Man is too apt to sink into mere satisfaction, a total standstill is his constant wish.” I think this has to be one of the most insightful lines of Goethe’s play, and it squares perfectly with our text this morning. Where does our restless busyness lead us? Absolutely nowhere. We sink into satisfaction because we are busy without purpose. We are moving without going anywhere. This also has to be one of the best definitions of sin. Sin is negation. No matter its aim, sin always cancels itself out. It folds back in on itself. We strive, but make no progress, we gain without achieving. And every sin has this effect: we give, but get nothing in return.

But the soul is meant for more than negation. The human soul is meant for transcendence and communion. And Christ restores the soul’s original purpose. He gives us back what we are so willing to give away. For we err, till we have ceased to strive. And so Christ’s abiding lesson is a lesson about striving not to strive! For the world holds out many things, which entice us, but they all have one thing in common: the inability to satisfy. Sure, they satisfy us for a little while. But then we get bored and go out in search of new things to satisfy. The world moves according to this circular pattern. We are all on

this hamster wheel of wanting, getting, having, using, buying, protecting, defending, discarding, and then wanting something else. Only God can break the monotonous pattern. Only God can satisfy our souls on the deepest level. Only He can calm the storms which rage inside of us. But His version of satisfaction is not giving us what we want. Just the opposite. He doesn't repair the lack in us, He doesn't make up the difference. Such would be a patch job doomed for failure. No, He begins anew; He recreates us. Striving not to strive might sound a lot like sin and its effects where we move without going anywhere, but I assure it is not the same thing. We stand still in order to be moved by God. God, then, is restored to His proper role as the primary Mover, and we move according to His impulses. Led by His spirit, we stop, we turn around. We go back to where we started, back to the beginning, back God. We start all over again, but this time, we move through this life with our eyes on the cross. We thread the needle of this sinful generation. We train ourselves not to want what others want, not to need what others need, not to desire what others desire. We walk the narrow path, retracing the path of Christ. We follow the narrow way, tracing our lives in the shape of the cross. In a world of death, this is the only way to really live, "For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for the sake of Christ will save it".

Amen.

In Christ,

Pastor Jeremy H. Mills