

The Important Question

by John Wesley

John Wesley explores the profound implications of gaining the world at the cost of one's soul, emphasizing the true happiness found in a life of faith and love.

Scripture: Matthew 16:26, Mark 8:36, Luke 12:15, Romans 14:17, 2 Corinthians 4:18, Philippians 3:19, 1 Timothy 6:9-10, James 4:14, 1 John 2:15-17, Revelation 20:15

Topics: "Eternal Value", "Choice of Life"

Description

John Wesley emphasizes the profound question posed by Jesus in Matthew 16:26, urging listeners to consider the futility of gaining worldly riches at the expense of their souls. He explores the implications of 'gaining the whole world'--pleasures, honors, and wealth--contrasting it with the devastating loss of one's soul, which leads to eternal separation from God. Wesley argues that true happiness is found in a life of love and faith, rather than in worldly pursuits, and he challenges his audience to make a conscious choice for eternal life over temporary gains. He concludes with a passionate call to choose life and adhere to that choice, promising a crown of righteousness for those who persevere in faith.

Transcript

"What is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?" Matthew 16:26

1. There is a celebrated remark to this effect, (I think in the works of Mr. Pascal,) that if a man of low estate would speak of high things, as of what relates to kings or kingdoms, it is not easy for him to find suitable expressions, as he is so little acquainted with things of this nature; but if one of royal parentage speaks of royal things, of what concerns his own or his father's kingdom, his language will be free and easy, as these things are familiar to his thoughts. In like manner, if a mere inhabitant of this lower world speaks concerning the great things of the kingdom of God, hardly is he able to find expressions suitable to the greatness of the subject. But when the Son of God speaks of the highest things, which concern his heavenly kingdom, all his language is easy and unlaboured, his words natural and unaffected; inasmuch as, known unto him are all these things from all eternity.

2. How strongly is this remark exemplified in the passage now before us! The Son of God, the great King of heaven and earth, here uses the plainest and easiest words: But how high and deep are the things which he expresses therein! None of the children of men can fully conceive them, till, emerging out of the darkness of the present world, he commences an inhabitant of eternity.

3. But we may conceive a little of these deep things, if we consider, First, what is implied in that expression, "A man's gaining the whole world:" Secondly, what is implied in losing his own soul: We shall then, Thirdly, see, in the strongest light, what he is profited, who gains the whole world, and loses his own soul.

I. 1. We are, First, to consider, what is implied in a man's gaining the whole world. Perhaps, at the first hearing, this may seem to some equivalent with conquering the whole world. But it has no relation thereto at all: And indeed that expression involves a plain absurdity. For it is impossible any that is born of a woman should ever conquer the whole world; were it only because the short life of man could not suffice for so wild an undertaking. Accordingly no man ever did conquer the half, no, nor the tenth part of the world. But whatever others might do, there was no danger that any of our Lord's hearers should have any thought of this. Among all the sins of the Jewish nation the desire of universal empire was not found. Even in their most flourishing times, they never sought to extend their conquests beyond the river Euphrates. And in our Lord's time, all their ambition was at an end: "The sceptre was departed from Judah;" and Judea was governed by a Roman Procurator, as a branch of the Roman Empire.

2. Leaving this, we may find a far more easy and natural sense of the expression. To gain the whole world, may properly enough imply, to gain all the pleasures which the world can give. The man we speak of may, therefore, be supposed to have gained all that will gratify his senses. In particular, all that can increase his pleasure of tasting; all the elegancies of meat and drink: Likewise, whatever can gratify his smell, or touch; all that he can enjoy in common with his fellow-brutes. He may have all the plenty and all the variety of these objects which the world can afford.

3. We may farther suppose him to have gained all that gratifies "the desire of the eyes;" whatever (by means of the eye chiefly) conveys any pleasure to the imagination. The pleasures of imagination arise from three sources: Grandeur, beauty, and novelty. Accordingly, we find by experience, our own imagination is gratified by surveying either grand, or beautiful, or uncommon objects. Let him be encompassed then with the most grand, the most beautiful, and the newest things that can anywhere be found. For all this is manifestly implied in a man's gaining the whole world.

4. But there is also another thing implied herein, which men of the most elevated spirits have preferred before all the pleasures of sense and of imagination put together; that is, honour, glory, renown:

Virum volitare per ora.

[The following is Dryden's translation of this quotation from Virgil, and of the words connected with it: --

"New ways I must attempt, my grovelling name

To raise aloft, and wing my flight to fame." -- EDIT.]

It seems, that hardly any principle in the human mind is of greater force than this. It triumphs over the strongest propensities of nature, over all our appetites and affections. If Brutus sheds the blood of his own children; if we see another Brutus, in spite of every possible obligation, in defiance of all justice and gratitude,

Cringing while he stabs his friend;

if a far greater man than either of these, Paschal Paoli, gave up ease, pleasure, everything, for a life of constant toil, pain, and alarms; what principle could support them? They might talk of _amor patriae,_ the love of their country; but this would never have carried them through, had there not been also the

Laudum immensa cupido;

"the immense thirst of praise." Now, the man we speak of has gained abundance of this: He is praised, if not admired, by all that are round about him. Nay, his name is gone forth into distant lands, as it were, to the ends of the earth.

5. Add to this, that he has gained abundance of wealth; that there is no end of his treasures; that he has laid up silver as the dust, and gold as the sand of the sea. Now, when a man has obtained all these pleasures, all that will gratify either the senses or the imagination; when he has gained an honourable name, and also laid up much treasure for many years; then he may be said, in an easy, natural sense of the word, to have "gained the whole world."

II. 1. The next point we have to consider is what is implied in a man's losing his own soul. But here we draw a deeper scene, and have need of a more steady attention. For it is easy to sum up all that is implied in a man's "gaining the whole world." but it is not easy to understand all that is implied in his "losing his own soul." Indeed none can fully conceive this, until he has passed through time into eternity.

2. The first thing which it undeniably implies is, the losing all the present pleasures of religion; all those which it affords to truly religious men, even in the present life. "If there be any consolation Christ; if any comfort of love," -- in the love of God, and of all mankind; if any "joy in the Holy Ghost;" if there be a peace of God, -- a peace that passeth all understanding; if there be any rejoicing in the testimony of a good conscience toward God; it is manifest, all this is totally lost by the man that loses his own soul.

3. But the present life will soon be at an end: We know it passes away like a shadow. The hour is at hand, when the spirit will be summoned to return to God that gave it. In that awful moment,

Leaving the old, both worlds at once they view,

Who stand upon the threshold of the new.

And whether he looks backward or forward, how pleasing is the prospect to him that saves his soul! If he looks back, he has "the calm remembrance of the life well spent." If he looks forward, there is an inheritance incorruptible, undefiled, and that fadeth not away; and he sees the convoy of angels ready to carry him into Abraham's bosom. But how is it in that solemn hour, with the man that loses his soul? Does he look back? What comfort is there in this? He sees nothing but scenes of horror, matter of shame, remorse, and self-condemnation; a foretaste of "the worm that never dieth." If he looks forward, what does he see? No joy, no peace! No gleam of hope from any point of heaven! Some years since, one who turned back as a dog to his vomit was struck in his mid-career of sin. A friend visiting him, prayed, "Lord, have mercy upon those who are just stepping out of the body, and know not which shall meet them at their entrance into the other world, an angel or a fiend!" The sick man shrieked out with a piercing cry, "A fiend! a fiend!" and died. Just such an end, unless he die like an ox, may any man expect who loses his own soul.

4. But in what situation is the spirit of a good man, at his entrance into eternity? See,

The convoy attends,

The ministering host of invisible friends.

They receive the new-born spirit, and conduct him safe into Abraham's bosom, into the delights of Paradise; the garden of God, where the light of his countenance perpetually shines. It is but one of a thousand commendations of this antechamber of heaven that "there the wicked cease from troubling, there the weary are at rest." For there they have numberless sources of happiness which they could not have upon earth. There they meet with "the glorious dead of ancient days." They converse with Adam, first of men; with Noah, first of the new world; with Abraham, the friend of God; with Moses and the Prophets; with the Apostles of the Lamb; with the saints of all ages; and, above all, they are with Christ.

5. How different, alas! is the case with him who loses his own soul! The moment he steps into eternity, he meets with the devil and his angels. Sad convoy into the world of spirits! Sad earnest of what is to come! And either he is bound with chains of darkness, and reserved unto the judgment of the great day; or, at best, he wanders up and down, seeking rest, but finding none. Perhaps he may seek it (like the unclean spirit cast out of the man) in dry, dreary, desolate places; perhaps

Where nature all in ruins lies,

And owns her sovereign, death!

And little comfort can he find here, seeing everything contributes to increase, not remove, the fearful expectation of fiery indignation, which will devour the ungodly.

6. For even this is to him but the beginning of sorrows. Yet a little while, and he will see "the great white throne coming down from heaven, and him that sitteth thereon, from whose face the heavens and the earth flee away, and there is found no place for them." And "the dead, small and great, stand before God, and are judged, every one according to his works." "Then shall the King say to them on his right hand," (God grant he may say so to YOU!) "Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world." And the angels shall tune their harps and sing, "Lift up your heads, O ye gates, and be ye lift up, ye everlasting doors, that the heirs of glory may come in." And then shall they 'shine as the brightness of the firmament, and as the stars forever and ever.'

7. How different will be the lot of him that loses his own soul! No joyful sentence will be pronounced on him, but one that will pierce him through with unutterable horror: (God forbid that ever it should be pronounced on any of you that are here before God!) "Depart, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels!" And who can doubt, but those infernal spirits will immediately execute the sentence; will instantly drag those forsaken of God into their own place of torment! Into those

Regions of sorrow, doleful shades, where peace

And rest can never dwell! Hope never comes,

That comes to all, --

all the children of men who are on this side eternity. But not to them: The gulf is now fixed, over which they cannot pass. From the moment wherein they are once plunged into the lake of fire, burning with brimstone, their torments are not only without intermission, but likewise without end. For "they have no

rest, day or night; but the smoke of their torment ascendeth up forever and ever!"

III. Upon ever so cursory a view of these things, would not anyone be astonished, that a man, that a creature endued with reason, should voluntarily choose, I say choose; for God forces no man into inevitable damnation; he never yet

Consign'd one unborn soul to hell,

Or damn'd him from his mother's womb, --

should choose thus to lose his own soul, though it were to gain the whole world! For what shall a man be profited thereby upon the whole of the account?

But a little to abate our astonishment at this, let us observe the suppositions which a man generally makes before he can reconcile himself to this fatal choice.

1. He supposes, First, that "a life of religion is a life of misery." That religion is misery! How is it possible that anyone should entertain so strange a thought? Do any of you imagine this? If you do, the reason is plain; you know not what religion is. "No! but I do, as well as you." -- What is it then? "Why, the doing no harm." Not so; many birds and beasts do no harm, yet they are not capable of religion. "Then it is going to church and sacrament." Indeed it is not. This may be an excellent help to religion; and everyone who desires to save his soul should attend them at all opportunities; yet it is possible you may attend them all your days, and still have no religion at all. Religion is an higher and deeper thing than any outward ordinance whatever.

2. What is religion then? It is easy to answer, if we consult the oracles of God. According to these it lies in one single point; it is neither more nor less than love; it is love which "is the fulfilling of the law, the end of the commandment." Religion is the love of God and our neighbour; that is, every man under heaven. This love ruling the whole life, animating all our tempers and passions, directing all our thoughts, words, and actions, is "pure religion and undefiled."

3. Now, will anyone be so hardy as to say, that love is misery? Is it misery to love God? to give Him my heart who alone is worthy of it? Nay, it is the truest happiness; indeed, the only true happiness which is to be found under the sun. So does all experience prove the justness of that reflection which was made long ago, "Thou hast made us for thyself; and our heart cannot rest, until it resteth in thee." Or does anyone imagine, the love of our neighbour is misery; even the loving every man as our own soul? So far from it that, next to the love of God, this affords the greatest happiness of which we are capable. Therefore,

Let not the Stoic boast his mind unmoved,

The brute-philosopher, who never has proved

The joy of loving, or of being loved.

4. So much every reasonable man must allow. But he may object: "There is more than this implied in religion. It implies not only the love of God and man; (against which I have no objection;) but also a great deal of doing and suffering. And how can this be consistent with happiness?"

There is certainly some truth in this objection. Religion does imply both doing and suffering. Let us then calmly consider, whether this impairs or heightens our happiness.

Religion implies, First, the doing many things. For the love of God will naturally lead us, at all opportunities, to converse with Him we love; to speak to him in public or private prayer; and to hear the words of his mouth, which "are dearer to us than thousands of gold and silver." It will incline us to lose no opportunity of receiving

The dear memorials of our dying Lord;

to continue instant in thanksgiving; at morning, evening, and noon-day to praise him. But suppose we do all this, will it lessen our happiness? Just the reverse. It is plain, all these fruits of love are means of increasing the love from which they spring; and of consequence they increase our happiness in the same proportion. Who then would not join in that wish?

Rising to sing my Saviour's praise,

Thee may I publish all day long,

And let thy precious word of grace

Flow from my heart, and fill my tongue;

Fill all my life with purest love,

And join me to thy church above!

5. It must also be allowed, that as the love of God naturally leads to works of piety, so the love of our neighbour naturally leads all that feel it to works of mercy. It inclines us to feed the hungry; to clothe the naked; to visit them that are sick or in prison; to be as eyes to the blind, and feet to the lame; an husband to the widow, a father to the fatherless. But can you suppose, that the doing this will prevent or lessen your happiness? yea, though you did so much, as to be like a guardian angel to all that are round about you? On the contrary, it is an infallible truth, that

All worldly joys are less

Than that one joy of doing kindnesses.

A man of pleasure was asked some years ago, "Captain, what was the greatest pleasure you ever had?" After a little pause, he replied, "When we were upon our march in Ireland, in a very hot day, I called at a cabin on the road, and desired a little water. The woman brought me a cup of milk. I gave her a piece of silver; and the joy that poor creature expressed gave me the greatest pleasure I ever had in my life." Now, if the doing good gave so much pleasure to one who acted merely from natural generosity, how much more must it give to one who does it on a nobler principle, -- the joint love of God and his neighbour! It remains, that the doing all which religion requires will not lessen, but immensely increase, our happiness.

6. "Perhaps this also may be allowed. But religion implies, according to the Christian account, not only doing, but suffering. And how can suffering be consistent with happiness?" Perfectly well. Many centuries ago, it was remarked by St. Chrysostom, "The Christian has his sorrows as well as his joys: But his sorrow is sweeter than joy." He may accidentally suffer loss, poverty, pain: But in all these things he is more than conqueror. He can testify,

Labour is rest, and pain is sweet,

While thou, my God, art here.

He can say, "The Lord gave; the Lord taketh away: Blessed be the name of the Lord!" He must suffer, more or less, reproach: For "the servant is not above his Master:" But so much the more does "the Spirit of glory and of God rest upon him." Yea, love itself will, on several occasions, be the source of suffering: The love of God will frequently produce

The pleasing smart,

The meltings of a broken heart.

And the love of our neighbour will give rise to sympathizing sorrow: It will lead us to visit the fatherless and widow in their affliction; to be tenderly concerned for the distressed, and to "mix our pitying tear with those that weep." But may we not well say, These are "tears that delight, and sighs that waft to heaven?" So far then are all these sufferings from either preventing or lessening our happiness, that they greatly contribute thereto, and, indeed, constitute no inconsiderable part of it. So that, upon the whole, there cannot be a more false supposition, than that a life of religion is a life of misery; seeing true religion, whether considered in its nature or its fruits, is true and solid happiness.

7. The man who chooses to gain the world by the loss of his soul, supposes, Secondly, that "a life of wickedness is a life of happiness!" That wickedness is happiness! Even an old heathen poet could have taught him better. Even Juvenal discovered, *"Nemo malus felix"*: "no wicked man is happy." And how expressly does God himself declare, "There is no peace to the wicked!" No peace of mind: And without this, there can be no happiness.

But not to avail ourselves of authority, let us weigh the thing in the balance of reason. I ask, What can make a wicked man happy? You answer, "He has gained the whole world." We allow it; and what does this imply? He has gained all that gratifies the senses: In particular, all that can please the taste; all the delicacies of meat and drink. True; but can eating and drinking make a man happy? They never did yet: And certain it is, they never will. This is too coarse food for an immortal spirit. But suppose it did give him a poor kind of happiness, during those moments wherein he was swallowing; what will he do with the residue of his time? Will it not hang heavy upon his hands? Will he not groan under many a tedious hour, and think swift-winged time flies too slow? If he is not fully employed, will he not frequently complain of lowness of spirits? an unmeaning expression; which the miserable physician usually no more understands than his miserable patient. We know there are such things as nervous disorders. But we know likewise, that what is commonly called nervous lowness is a secret reproof from God; a kind of consciousness that we are not in our place; that we are not as God would have us to be: We are unhinged from our proper centre.

8. To remove, or at least soothe, this strange uneasiness, let him add the pleasures of imagination. Let him bedaub himself with silver and gold, and adorn himself with all the colours of the rainbow. Let him build splendid palaces, and furnish them in the most elegant as well as costly manner. Let him lay out walks and gardens, beautified with all that nature and art can afford. And how long will these give him pleasure? Only as long as they are new. As soon as ever the novelty is gone, the pleasure is gone also. After he has surveyed them a few months, or years, they give him no more satisfaction. The man who is saving his soul, has the advantage of him in this very respect. For he can say,

In the pleasures the rich man's possessions display,

Unenvied I challenge my part;

While every fair object my eye can survey

Contributes to gladden my heart.

9. "However, he has yet another resource: Applause, glory. And will not this make him happy?" It will not: For he cannot be applauded by all men: No man ever was. Some will praise; perhaps many; but not all. It is certain some will blame: And he that is fond of applause, will feel more pain from the censure of one, than pleasure from the praise of many. So that whoever seeks happiness in applause will infallibly be disappointed, and will find, upon the whole of the account, abundantly more pain than pleasure.

10. But to bring the matter to a short issue. Let us take an instance of one who had gained more of this world than probably any man now alive, unless he be a sovereign prince. But did all he had gained make him happy? Answer for thyself! Then said Haman, Yet "all this profiteth me nothing, while I see Mordecai sitting in the gate." Poor Human! One unholy temper, whether pride, envy, jealousy, or revenge, gave him more pain, more vexation of spirit, than all the world could give pleasure. And so it must be in the nature of things; for all unholy tempers are unhappy tempers. Ambition, covetousness, vanity, inordinate affection, malice, revengefulness, carry their own punishment with them, and avenge themselves on the soul wherein they dwell. Indeed what are these, more especially when they are combined with an awakened conscience, but the dogs of hell, already gnawing the soul, forbidding happiness to approach? Did not even the Heathens see this? What else means their fable of Tityus, chained to a rock, with a vulture continually tearing up his breast, and feeding upon his liver? _Quid rides_? "Why do you smile?" says the poet:

_Mutato nomine, de te

Fabula narratur._

"It is another name; but thou art the man!" Lust, foolish desire, envy, malice, or anger, is now tearing thy breast: Love of money, or of praise, hatred or revenge, is now feeding on thy poor spirit. Such happiness is in vice! So vain is the supposition that a life of wickedness is a life of happiness!

11. But he makes a Third supposition, -- That he shall certainly live forty, or fifty, or threescore years. Do you depend upon this? On living threescore years? Who told you that you should? It is no other than the enemy of God and man: It is the murderer of souls. Believe him not; he was a liar from the beginning; from the beginning of his rebellion against God. He is eminently a liar in this: For he would not give you life, if he could. Would God permit, he would make sure work, and just now hurry you to his own place. And he cannot give you life, if he would: The breath of man is not in his hands. He is not the disposer of life and death: That power belongs to the Most High. It is possible indeed, God may, on some occasions, permit him to inflict death. I do not know but it was an evil angel who smote an hundred fourscore and five thousand Assyrians in one night: And the fine lines of our poet are as applicable to an evil as to a good spirit: --

So when an angel, by divine command,

Hurls death and terror over a guilty land;

He, pleased the Almighty's order to perform,

Rides in the whirlwind, and directs the storm.

But though Satan may sometimes inflict death, I know not that he could ever give life. It was one of his most faithful servants that shrieked out some years ago, "A week's life! A week's life! Thirty thousand pounds for a week's life!" But he could not purchase a day's life. That night God required his soul of him! And how soon may he require it of you? Are you sure of living threescore years? Are you sure of living one year, one month, one week, one day? O make haste to live! Surely the man that may die tonight should live today.

12. So absurd are all the suppositions made by him who gains the world and loses his soul. But let us for a moment imagine, that wickedness is happiness; and that he shall certainly live threescore years; and still I would ask, What is he profited, if he gain the whole world for threescore years, and then lose his soul eternally?

Can such a choice be made by any that considers what eternity is? Philip Melancthon, the most learned of all the German Reformers, gives the following relation: (I pass no judgment upon it, but set it down nearly in his own words:) "When I was at Wirtemberg, as I was walking out one summer evening with several of my fellow-students, we heard an uncommon singing, and following the sound, saw a bird of an uncommon figure. One stepping up asked, "In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, what art thou?" It answered, "I am a damned spirit;" and, in vanishing away, pronounced these words: "O Eternity, Eternity! who can tell the length of Eternity?" And how soon will this be the language of him who sold his soul for threescore years' pleasure! How soon would he cry out, "O Eternity, Eternity! who can tell the length of Eternity?"

13. In how striking a manner is this illustrated by one of the ancient Fathers! "Supposing there were a ball of sand as big as the whole earth. Suppose a grain of this to be annihilated in a thousand years: Which would be more eligible, -- to be happy while this ball was wasting away at the rate of one grain in a thousand years, and miserable ever after? -- or to be miserable, while it was wasting away at that proportion, and happy ever after?" A wise man, it is certain, could not pause one moment upon the choice; seeing all the time wherein this ball would be wasting away, bears infinitely less proportion to eternity, than a drop of water to the whole ocean, or a grain of sand to the whole mass. Allowing then that a life of religion were a life of misery; that a life of wickedness were a life of happiness; and, that a man were assured of enjoying that happiness for the term of threescore years; yet what would he be profited if he were then to be miserable to all eternity?

14. But it has been proved, that the case is quite otherwise, that religion is happiness, that wickedness is misery; and that no man is assured of living threescore days: And if so, is there any fool, any madman under heaven, who can be compared to him that casts away his own soul, though it were to gain the whole world? For what is the real state of the case? What is the choice which God proposes to his creatures? It is not, "Will you be happy threescore years, and then miserable forever, or, will you be miserable threescore years, and then happy forever?" It is not, "Will you have first a temporary heaven, and then hell eternal; or, will you have first a temporary hell, and then heaven eternal?" But it is simply this: "Will you be miserable threescore years, and miserable ever after; or, will you be happy threescore years, and happy ever after? Will you have a foretaste of heaven now, and then heaven forever; or will you have a foretaste of hell now and then hell forever? Will you have two hells, or two heavens?"

15. One would think, there needed no great sagacity to answer this question. And this is the very question which I now propose to you in the name of God. Will you be happy here and hereafter; in the world that now is, and in that which is to come? Or will you be miserable here and hereafter, in time and in eternity? What is your choice? Let there be no delay: Now take one or the other! I take heaven and earth to record this day, that I set before you life and death, blessing and cursing. O choose life! The life of peace and love now; the life of glory forever! By the grace of God, now choose that better part, which shall never be taken from you! And having once fixed your choice, never draw back; adhere to it at all events. Go on in the name of the Lord, whom ye have chosen, and in the power of his might! In spite of all opposition, from nature, from the world, from all the powers of darkness, still fight the good fight of faith, and lay hold on eternal life! And then there is laid up for you a crown, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give you at that day!

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