

“THE DIVIDENDS OF DISCIPLESHIP”

Malachi 3:13-14

In Malachi 3, the Bible says these priests of old had some harsh complaints against God. They believed the wicked were prospering while they were suffering. And if that be the case, what good was it to serve the Lord? Well, you know, that’s a question that I suppose a lot of people ask today. Why should I spend my time living for the Lord when I could spend my life enjoying the world and the pleasures of sin? Well, I believe that is a foolish way of looking at things because there’s not a greater life that can be lived than the life of a Christian. Now, it’s easy for me to say that...but what makes it true? What are the dividends earned from a life invested in Christianity? I want to talk to you about these ‘Dividends of Discipleship’.

Many times when a person refuses to obey the gospel he or she will raise the objection that living the Christian life is too difficult. They don’t believe they can hold out and be faithful and so why even try? Well, there are some things to take into account before a person commits himself to the Lord. Jesus portrayed the Christian life as being difficult enough that a person is foolish if he fails to stop and consider what it will cost him before he begins trying to live it, according to Luke 14:28-32.

An unfinished project is really more of a nuisance than anything. Sometimes, you’ll see a crew begin construction on a new building but something happens in the process and the work gets put on hold, sometimes indefinitely. Perhaps the economy goes south, as we’ve seen lately. Maybe lenders stop lending or investors get cold feet and back out. Sometimes businesses promise big things but they are poorly managed and bite off more than they can chew and they end up going under. Well, that describes many a Christian life. That is, many people embark on the Christian life with great gusto but they never really stopped to consider just how much it would require of them and when the reality of Christianity set in, they abandoned it.

A worthwhile religion doesn’t come cheap. It requires a great deal to live a genuine life of service to God. It requires discipline; it requires sacrifice; it requires fortitude and many other qualities that a lot of well-meaning folks lack in their lives. Sometimes Christianity severs near and precious relationships with friends and loved ones. Sometimes it requires that I choose a career that doesn’t offer as much money. Sometimes it means that I will have to forego some things I might like to do in order to put the Lord and His kingdom first in my life. I do know that Jesus said in Matthew 7:14 that “strait is the gate and narrow is the way which leadeth unto life and few there be that find it.” I also know that Paul promised “All who live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution” 2 Timothy 3:12 and Jesus also said that if I won’t deny myself and take up my cross and follow Him, I can’t be His disciple. I would be deceiving you if I told you that living the Christian life was easy and free of trouble or hassle. It is a difficult proposition that, quite frankly, many people aren’t willing to accept. They turn away from Christianity because of the challenge it presents. But that can’t be all there is to the Christian life. In fact, I know that it’s not! There’s something magnetic about the gospel and the call to be a Christian or it wouldn’t have attracted so many people down through the ages and retained so many in a full and joyful life of service to God. There’s something about a godly life that makes it a life worthwhile.

The Bible tells us that Moses made a great choice in his life. Now if you remember the story of Moses birth and what happened in the days following, you know that by God’s providence Moses was given an easy and prospered life. Pharaoh had decreed that every baby boy born to the Hebrews was to be killed. However the mother of the baby Moses couldn’t bring herself to do such a terrible thing. Moses was a beautiful little child and that only made it harder for Jochebed to even contemplate doing what Pharaoh had ordered. So, the Bible tells us she hid him for three months. Finally, she couldn’t hide him any longer and so she made a little boat or a little floating cradle you might say out of the bulrushes and she went down to the river bank. She bundled up her precious little baby and kissed him goodbye and laid him there at the water’s edge amidst some reeds and with an aching heart she looked one last time and turned away. It wasn’t long though, until Pharaoh’s daughter went down to the river to take a bath

and as she parted the reeds and started to wade off into the river, she saw the little ark floating there. She opened it up and saw that beautiful little baby laying there. And the Bible so tenderly says “and the baby wept.” That cry melted her heart and she took Moses up in her arms and said this is one the Hebrews’ children.

As providence would have it, Moses’ sister Miriam was standing off in shadows watching all of this and she asked Pharaoh’s daughter if she would like her to find a Hebrew woman to come and nurse the baby. And so, she went and got Moses’ mother. It may have been a difficult circumstance, but it was a happy reunion that day when Jochebed was called there to the river bank to once again swaddle her little infant boy and the Bible tells us that Pharaoh’s daughter hired Jochebed to be Moses’ nursemaid. Well, time rolled on and the Bible says Moses grew. You can be assured that as she held Moses close to her breast, she whispered into his ear, you’re not an Egyptian. You’re a Hebrew. You’re one of God’s people. He became the son of Pharaoh’s daughter.

Jochebed finally had to give him up but that truth stayed with Moses thru the years of his childhood. He grew into a man but he never forgot where he came from. He was raised as the son of Egyptian royalty but he knew he wasn’t the son of Pharaoh’s daughter; he was a Hebrew. And the scripture tells us that after he grew, one day he began to take notice of how his people were being treated. He came up on an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, “one of his brethren”, the Bible says. And so, Moses rose up in righteous indignation and he killed that Egyptian right there on the spot. He buried His body in the sand and thought no one would know. But the next day he saw two Hebrews fighting and he broke up their fight and one of them said “are you gonna kill me like you killed that Egyptian yesterday? Well, Moses knew his secret was out. Everyone would know that he was a Hebrew and Moses was faced with a great choice that day. He either had to stand with or against the people of God. His real moment of truth had come. In that wonderful chapter we sometimes call “faith’s hall of fame”, Hebrews chapter 11, the Bible says in verse 24 “By faith Moses, when he was come to years, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter; Choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God, than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season; Esteeming the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures in Egypt: for he had respect unto the recompence of the reward.”

Moses had a bright and promising future ahead of him in the courts of Pharaoh had he been content to live as an Egyptian but He chose to suffer affliction, the Bible says! Why? Because he determined the greater reward was not one that money could buy or that fame, power or prestige could offer...but the one that was unseen and eternal. The scripture says “he had respect unto the recompense of the reward.” In other words, he weighed this thing out and he could see that the riches that came from serving the Lord far outweighed anything Pharaoh could give him. Well, I believe that’s still true today. Paul said in Ephesians 1:3, “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ.” In other words, there are riches that are found only in Christ. Paul once called them “the unsearchable riches of Christ.” Well what are they? What makes the Christian life a life worth giving up the pleasures of the world for? I want to briefly mention five of them.

1) SERVING GOD AVOIDS THE HARD LIFE OF THE TRANSGRESSOR

Now, notice the Bible says that Moses chose the Lord’s people over the pleasures of sin that last only for a season. Nothing truer could be said about sin. Sin is deceptive and one of the ways it deceives us is by telling us that sin’s pleasures will last as long as we want them to. Sin promises big things but it delivers the opposite. Now, I would be lying if I were to suggest that sin isn’t fun. After all, what would be the appeal if it didn’t offer some sort of pleasure or some kind of reward? The problem is, the party doesn’t last very long. Some people live hard lives simply because they wasted their youth in sin. Now, it seemed fun back there when they were running with their college buddies. Drinking, drug use, fornication and promiscuity were just a part of running with the crowd; a part of growing up; nothing more than sowing a few wild oats. The problem ended up being what those wild oats ultimately produced. Paul said in Galatians 6:7-8 “Be not deceived; God is not mocked; for whatsoever a man soweth that shall he also reap. For he that soweth to the flesh shall of the flesh reap corruption; but he that soweth to the Spirit shall of the Spirit reap life everlasting. Now, here’s an immutable law of nature that we harvest according to what we plant.

Well, there are some other natural laws attached to that one. One is that we not only will reap what we sowed but we will typically reap a lot more than what we sowed. One seed can produce a lot more than one piece of fruit. Secondly, sowing and reaping can be deceiving because sometimes it takes a long time for some seeds to germinate and yield fruit. Some plants spring up over night while others take months or years to mature and bear fruit. Well, sin is that exact same way!

People think they're getting away with sin because it hasn't caught up to them yet. They're still enjoying the "pleasures of sin". But friend you need to know that there's a payday coming! Solomon said in Proverbs 13:15 "Good understanding giveth favor but the way of transgressors is hard." Sin ultimately produces a hard life. It will finally tell in your health, your own conscience, your relationships. It WILL catch up with you! Sin uses people and it makes a fool out of the person who flirts with it. The devil and the world don't care what happens to you! They just use you up and throw you by the wayside. That's the tragic story of many a life wasted on youthful and foolish sins. Listen to me friend. When preachers and parents and loved ones tell you that you shouldn't drink and carouse or do drugs or live an immoral life they're not trying to keep you from having a good time, they're trying to point you to the best life you can possibly have. I want you to listen to this; if a person never takes a drink of alcohol, he'll never become an alcoholic. If a person never smokes a joint or snorts a line of cocaine, he'll never end up in rehab, fired from his job, divorced, in jail because of drugs and their evil effects. If a person remains abstinate until he or she enters into a monogamous marriage, they'll never have an illegitimate child or come down with some terrible sexually transmitted disease. A godly life will spare you the heartache and destruction that sin brings into so many lives and homes today. The prodigal son of Luke 15 learned that lesson the hard way. He had to go try it for himself and the Bible teaches that he went off to that far country of sin and blew his father's inheritance on a wanton and reckless lifestyle. But sin used him. His friends left him behind and he came home ashamed and disgraced and ruined by sinful living. Sin will do the same thing to you! Why not choose while you're young to have high morals and live a happy and wholesome life. It's one of the joys and rewards of living for the Lord.

2) SERVING THE LORD BRINGS GENUINE JOY.

People's idea of happiness today is strange to me. The world says to be happy you have to be free to do whatever you want to do. You have to be married at least three times, go out drinking on Friday night, live a life of debauchery and immorality and if a person confines himself to the morals and principles of the Bible, well, that person has missed the boat and is throwing their life away. Some people propose that happiness comes from money and material success. Now, be honest! Haven't you ever thought to yourself, if I just had a million dollars I could be happy? I could pay off all of my bills, live in a nice house, travel wherever I want to go and I would have it made! Did you know the most successful people in life are some of the most miserable? Look at the way Michael Jackson's life recently ended. Look at the long list of celebrities who've committed suicide or who have died in the depth of depression. That's the story the devil and the media somehow just glosses over. Solomon said in Ecclesiastes 1:13-14; "I gave my heart to seek out and to search out by wisdom concerning all things that are done under heaven...I have seen all of the works done under the sun..." Now, here, Solomon is simply saying he had tried everything that could possibly be tried in his quest for fulfillment and happiness. And he had! Think about the life Solomon lived. He was the wisest man who ever lived; he was the richest man in history; he was the ruler of the most powerful and prosperous nation on the earth, he was married and brother was he married! He had 700 wives and 300 concubines! 1,000 women! But yet he concluded, "and behold, all is vanity and vexation of spirit." In other words, if you're looking for happiness in all of those kinds of things, you're chasing the wind.

Now, let me tell you what real joy is all about and why it's only found in the Christian life. Jesus Christ gives hope that outlasts and outshines anything the world can give. A child of God has the hope of not only present help from heaven, but ultimately, that of eternal life in heaven and nothing, I repeat, nothing can take that away! The joy of the world fades. It's based on circumstances. The joy of living for Jesus abides in the heart and doesn't leave. That's why a Christian can face tragedy and trial with joy. He can say goodbye to a saved loved one because he believes

he'll see them again. That's how the Christian can face his own mortality without fear or regret because he believes there's something on the other side that's better than this. Friends, the world can't give you anything like that. When hope runs out, it's gone and there's nothing left. But the child of God has a song in the night and it's one of the great rewards of living for Jesus.

3) SERVING THE LORD GIVES PURPOSE.

How many people are living out their lives one day at a time and when it's all said and done it really didn't mean much? Sometimes an irresponsible teenager or college student will drop out of school or refuse to get a job and they'll say "I need to find myself." Well, I suppose we all go through some phase in our lives when we "find ourselves" so to speak. We try to unravel the mystery of life and plot our course in life. That's OK but the sad thing is some people spend their entire lives trying to "find themselves".

It is a pitiful scene conveyed to us in Mark 6:34 when Jesus fed the hungry multitude. At least it was pitiful looking through the eyes of Jesus. He could see into those people's souls and he saw something missing. Their life didn't have much meaning. The scripture tells us there that "Jesus, when he came out, saw much people and was moved with compassion toward them, because they were as a sheep not having a shepherd." That's really a disturbing image. In fact, I heard a preacher say one time that if we really knew how helpless and virtually stupid a sheep is, we would be offended that the Lord called us sheep. But He used that tender figure to point out what our lives amount to without Him! People go through life and live for money. They live for a big house. They live in hopes of getting a big name for themselves. Maybe they just exist from day to day and when they die no one notices and they just fade away. That's what a life lived for the world will give you. Christianity provides a purpose that transcends all time. I heard of two young men who graduated from high school and were walking down the street together. One asked the other, "What are you going to do with your life?" The other said, "Well I'm going to college." His friend asked "what then?" He said, "Well I want to get a good job and eventually start my own business." He said "and what then?" The friend said, "Well I want to get married and have kids". "Yes, and what then?" "Well, I want to make a lot of money while I'm young and maybe retire early and travel the world" "OK", he asked, "what then?" He finally blurted out "Well, I guess I'll finally get around to dying!!!" His friend then asked "and what then?" And friend, whatever road you're on, that's the question I ask you today; what then? You need to really stop and think about what life's all about. What do you have that makes your life meaningful and worthwhile? Is it something shallow and temporary or is it something eternal?

4) SERVING THE LORD BRINGS THE JOY OF SERVING OTHERS.

I really can't think of a greater purpose in this earthly life than the cause of being a blessing to others. And did you know that that's what true and genuine Christianity is all about? It's about the denial of self and a life devoted to God above and our neighbors around us. That's what Jesus told the young scribe who asked him what the greatest commandment was. Someone says, "What's the attraction to a life that ignores self and gives to someone else?" Well, that kind of thing is called altruism and did you know that psychologists have long proven that people who live benevolent and altruistic lives are by far, happier, more fulfilled people. I believe that's one reason Christian people tend to be happier folks. Proverbs 19:17 says, "He that hath pity upon the poor lendeth unto the Lord; and that which he hath given will he pay him again." And in Proverbs 14:21 the wise man said, "He that despiseth his neighbour sinneth: but he that hath mercy on the poor, happy is he."

5) SERVING THE LORD LEADS TO HOPE DESPITE DEATH.

The Christian can truly sing the Shepherd's Psalm "Yea though I walk through the valley of death I will fear no evil for thou art with me, thy rod and thy staff they do comfort me." You know, it has been my experience to be with several people as they lay within hours or minutes of death. I've counseled a lot of people who knew they were

about to die. I've had some very concerned about their souls because they hadn't prepared. But I've never had one single person tell me they regretted being a Christian; that they regretted all of those Sundays wasted in church or all of those hours of reading the bible or that they begrudged all of those things they had to give up to be a Christian. No! Because when you get to that point, life comes into focus and we see what really matters. And the one thing that matters in that hour is what's next and am I ready to meet it? Are you, my friend? Are you living for Jesus? Have you obeyed the gospel? It's the greatest life you could possibly live.