

What comes between us and God? M8:27-38;
Gen 17:1-7, 15-16; Ps 22:23-31; Ro 4:13-25

What is your most precious possession? For instance, how about a gold-plated, diamond studded iPhone? The cost is \$2.97 million, but it's only a 3G model! Or you can own the world's most expensive television called the Prestige HD Supreme Rose edition. The outer frame is gold with diamonds and the inner frame is alligator skin. The cost is a mere \$2.3 million, but it's only got a 55-inch screen!

A Mexican billionaire bought a 1962 Ferrari 250 GTO from the British owner for a cool \$35 million. Or you can buy a Hermes Birkin Handbag for prices that start at only \$10,000. Or one with gold and diamonds for a sweet \$1.9 million. Or maybe you're into watches. If you own a Rolex it's probably a prized possession. But if you paid \$25 million for a diamond and gold watch designed by Chopard, it might be your most precious possession.

If you're an art lover, you can be the owner of a Jackson Pollock piece called Painting number 5 for \$140 million. Make sure you have room to hang it in your house, because it's 4 foot by 8 foot - the exact size of a piece of plywood, because that's what he painted on.

All these must be cherished possessions by the people who own them. But what is your and my most precious possession? I'll give you a hint: It's not a thing.

I hope we don't spend our wealth on this kind of stuff. But we do have precious things. They might have monetary value or not. I have a crane statue – probably made out of buffalo horn. It was given to me by my Dad's co-workers when I graduated from high school. I've dragged it all over North America for 43 years and when it's not displayed – it's packed very carefully. It's precious, fragile and brings back lots of good memories growing up. The value of these kinds of things - don't have much monetary value – but we give them value because of the relationships and memories.

Today we are encouraged to have expensive experiences. But when I think of one of my vacations – I smile, because one Christmas, when my children were still in high school and university – they surprised us with a monetary gift – to take a good vacation, which we did. But I still wonder how they collected that much money at that time in their lives.

So we rightly cherish treasures, personal and family heir-looms, and experiences. But they also are not our most precious possessions. According to Jesus, our most prized possession is our soul. Jesus said, “What shall it profit a man (or a woman) if he or she gains the whole world and loses his or her soul? And what shall a man or woman give in exchange for his or her soul?” (Matthew 16:26)

In our scripture from Mark today, we have a clear illustration of the tension between us and God and what's most precious. “Then Jesus began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, & scribes, & be killed, and after three days rise again. He said all this quite openly. Peter took him aside & began to rebuke him. But turning and looking at his disciples, Jesus rebuked Peter and said, “Get behind me, Satan! You are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

That's a really unfriendly, immediate and public rebuke! We know the ways of God are different from the ways of the world. The prophet Isaiah tells us, “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts” (55:8-9). The disciples learned this in what must have been for them the most shocking thing Jesus had ever told them up until then.

The Devil is very clever. Sometimes, without our knowledge he uses the people who are closest to us to break our spirits and our obedience to God. Peter was that special friend, who just a little while earlier confessed,

"You are Christ, the Son of the living God."
Peter's good intentions and his dedication to his Master kept him from accepting God's divine plan of salvation for humankind.

Jesus saw through the well-meaning words of his disciple. He caught the devil in the act, and called him on the carpet. He modeled and spoke of the seriousness of concentrating on God's agenda. "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me." This brutal honesty should always startle us and get our attention. No one can ever say that they were not warned of the consequences of following Jesus.

Try to put yourself in Jesus' disciple's shoes. The great hope of the Israelite people at that time was freedom from the Roman dictatorship. Having seen Jesus' miracles, experienced his magnetic personality, and watched him draw enthusiastic crowds; it would have been totally natural for them to assume that Jesus would somehow challenge the power of the Roman Empire. Everything they had seen Jesus do and heard him say had been impressive and had probably encouraged them with big hopes for the future – the restoration of Israel's Empire. Plus they had the inside track to position, fame, power, and riches as Jesus' core 12 disciples.

But Jesus didn't play along. He shook them. He blew their minds and expectations. Jesus probably said to them the worst possible thing he could say. He pointed to what was their most precious possession – their soul, their faith, belief and following Jesus.

Jesus not only rebuked Peter, but then shocked the disciples even more deeply by telling them that his way of the cross might well be their future too. Those who would be his disciples will "deny themselves, take up their cross and follow me." As if that's not enough, Jesus continued with even more unexpected and totally unforeseen news: To save your life you must lose it. You may lose your lives for Jesus sake. For what will it profit you to gain the whole world and forfeit your life, your soul?

This news was so contrary to the disciple's expectations & so difficult to comprehend that Jesus had to repeat it twice more. The second time he spoke of this they still did not understand him, but "were afraid to ask him" (Mark 9:31), probably for fear of being rebuked again.

Jesus told them a third time of his impending death, this time with an even more grim and graphic description, namely that he would be condemned, handed to the Gentiles, who would mock him, spit on him, flog him and kill him, but that he would rise again (Mark 10:33-34). Listening to Jesus predict this ending for him must have been the worst three days of the disciples' time with Jesus. It was hard to grasp.

Once at a conference, I heard a woman say in passing, with what I thought was a bitter tone, some thing like, "Expectations are planned resentments." So no wonder Peter rebuked Jesus. What Jesus was saying wasn't part of his plan for Jesus. The disciples were letdown. They had a whole different set of anticipations than Jesus had – which was why it was hard for them to fully grasp and understand Jesus.

Jesus responded that their dreams were a "human" way of thinking. It's what we all would have thought had we been among those first disciples. It was Jesus' way of helping them begin to understand that "my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways." It was a bitter pill for the disciples to swallow! But it was necessary they understand, otherwise they would miss the whole point of Jesus' ministry, that God sent him to give his life for the salvation of them and us – to save our precious souls.

God had not forgotten his covenants and his personal commitment to restore relationships between himself and humanity. Last week we looked at God's covenant with Noah. This week our scriptures talk about God's covenant with Abraham. God makes the point that this covenant is not just for Israel's ancestors and descendants, but it's for all of Abraham's faith descendants, even though our human ways get

between us and our Creator. God narrowed his focus to one family of faith, but then expanded it to the multitude of nations, for generation after generation, for all the people of the world.

But Peter and the disciples tried to get in between that covenant. Later after Peter's rebuke – he had another shocking experience, through a dream and then Cornelius and clear evidence of the Holy Spirit on Gentiles. He and the disciples learned that God's covenants were also for the Gentiles. By then I suspect they were more used to Jesus' surprises and didn't get in the way of God's covenants. And it finally made sense that the covenant with Abraham was for all people around the world.

Jesus was teaching that the Almighty Creator was the God of everyone, not just the Jews. And his Kingdom was and is different. It's one where Jesus helps us not get ourselves between us & God, as we live the theology of the cross. This is a commitment Creator God has made to us, without any conditions we have to fulfill. That's how precious we are to Almighty God!

It's human nature to want to be wealthy, strong, successful and influential. And own precious things. This isn't evil in and of itself. But as the Bible time and again points out, we get in our own way. We get between us and Holy God. This is not just an individual problem. It's a congregational, conference and denomination problem. It's even a national problem. At the time of the Reformation the church commanded armies to force people to do it's will. Its leaders lived like princes, surrounded by wealth and power.

We have the same problems and temptations today. Probably some of the changes we are going through are God's way of telling us, the way you do church needs to change. Adjust your priorities to be in full harmony with what Jesus told us to do. Let go of pride and deny self. In reading the Bible and as we study church history, when God's followers go off the rails, God always intervenes somehow. He sticks to his covenant with us to restore us to

harmony with him and with each other and with nature. This is the call of the Good News.

Brian Bill shares his encounter in Israel with some students, all in their 20s and 30s who were sold-out to Christ. They knew salvation was free and that discipleship was costly.

One of the young men had served on a team of missionaries in Turkey and had witnessed several of his teammates become martyrs for their faith. His prayer while he was in Israel was to ask God if He wanted him to go back to Turkey. When the trip was winding down they all were on a bus traveling to another site and Brian decided to sit next to this brother. Brian asked him some questions and the young man proceeded to tell him that God was leading him back to Turkey. Brian's eyes filled with tears and he didn't know what to say. He excused himself & went back to sit with his wife, Beth.

Brian told her that the young man had made the decision to go back to Turkey, knowing that he too could be martyred for his faith. Brian remembers saying something like this to Beth, "He's going back knowing that he could die." Then he caught myself & said, "Actually, he's already died and that's why he's going back."

We must not miss the words, "but whoever loses his life for Jesus sake and the gospel's will save it." We are called to lose our lives in evangelism to the lost as we proclaim the gospel as we respond to God's covenant with us. We are to spread the good news of salvation through service, peace and justice in this community and on all the continents.

Jesus gives us this hope for the future, but we are called upon to follow him not just for this future, but in this life. To follow him now means a life "more abundant," as Jesus taught. (John 10:10). As one person said, "we follow Jesus not just to be saved or to go to heaven; we follow Jesus because it enriches this life on earth and especially because it's worth it." God has deemed that all souls are precious.