

Favorite Quote

by Mikhail Markhasev

"For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?"

Gospel of Matthew 16:26

True sayings are like signposts on the road of life, pointing us in the right direction. We keep them as needed reminders of what's meaningful on a journey often marked with diverging paths. But, sometimes, when our strength fails, these sayings keep us.

The piercing questions spoken by Christ to His disciples at a turning point in His ministry were a fortifying truth which sustained me during an especially trying time. In my early 20s I was awakened to the reality of life's meaning and consequence. A whole new universe was unveiled, as I learned to see life with spiritual eyes wide open. I realized that I had a soul -- this invisible composite of unknown substance which somehow enveloped my character and retained everything sowed into it throughout my life, with significance beyond my comprehension.

As a prison convert, I dragged along a mountain of monumental mistakes. The foundation of my former life was built on violence, delusion, and deceit. It now had to be demolished by my own hands, and I was afraid. I did not grow up in church or a religious family, so this new path was unfamiliar and unpredictable. The stakes were high: I was a proud youngster, a soldier in a criminal cause to which I had pledged myself completely, turning my back on everything sacred. The immutable world of concrete and steel, saturated with the electric tension of prison politics and instant mayhem, was the world I had chosen and was content with. The older gangsters housed in my

SHU unit were the ruthless superstars we worshipped and sought to emulate. It didn't matter that I was in prison: my life's cause was fused to a criminal organization whose career ladder led downward in a spiral of unending destruction. In this game, one misstep would result in serious harm and lifelong consequences. As a "lifer" I was willing to do whatever it took to stay afloat, and considered myself fortunate to be in position to learn from the best.

There is nothing rational about this mindset. When one lives by the law of the jungle in the civilized world, one is comfortable in the jungle where force is the only law. Put another way, a regular fish is terrified of getting tossed into a shark tank. But for a predatory creature the shark tank is his natural habitat. The problems arise when a shark no longer wants to be a shark, and attempts to shed its teeth and violent tendencies.

It was at this point, with all bridges burned, that I had to take the first feeble steps toward rebuilding the smoldering pile of my past. Where and how was I to start? What did I have left after effectively detonating my family and future, along with many other victims? More importantly, my predicament in prison was sealed by law: by being honest and dropping out, I would only make myself a target and lose the respect of my peers -- something I dreaded more than death?

Through my destructive lifestyle I lost everything and gained my warped world. Now, if I were to go against the grain of the convict code and take responsibility for my actions, what would I have left? I now had to choose weakness and vulnerability by turning my back to the only "world" remaining -- the one I embraced, after everything good slipped through my blood-stained fingers. I could not anticipate what God had in store for me: my mind was convoluted with confusion and conflicting thoughts.

The words of Jesus Christ provided clarity and certainty during a time of impenetrable darkness. From an eternal perspective, my everlasting soul outweighed the temporary gains of this passing world. Yes, I could still cling to the madness which had become my second nature; I could still succeed by lying to myself and others, I could still wilfully pledge myself to this false cause. After all, at this lowpoint of my life, what did I have to lose or live for? And yet, I somehow sensed that if I did not now take a step toward failure in this evil undertaking, there would be a Hell far worse than the one I already created...

My soul now stood naked and abased before the God Who preserved me and embraced me even when I was determined to enlist in the ranks of His enemy. I now received the strength to gradually tear down the house of lies I labored so hard to erect. I could trust God with my future, and hang my soul's fate on the nail of Christ's truth. I trusted His words to be stronger than death, even if I stood to lose everything, including my life. The gain and loss of the soul or the world was the scale which helped me to weigh where I was in my life, who I was, and what I aspired to be. The answers proved to be as difficult as the questions, but despite my misgivings the direction of my journey was now clear.

With time, Christ's penetrating questions became the solid foundation against which I smashed all my doubts and cowardice. I did not understand how my soul, sinful and seemingly worthless, was of more value than the whole world, but I knew that at the end of both my life and the world stood the Creator and Redeemer of both. He would be my ultimate Judge and Justifier.

The first wobbly step toward honesty hardened into a determined conviction leading to action. With the bedrock of eternal all-or-nothing

consequence, I found the courage to do what at the time appeared impossible and unthinkable: come clean with my family about my criminal life and lies, apologize to my victims, abandon my appeal (as the only remaining token of my sincerity), quit drugs, and reject the gang life -- to which I was dedicated blindly and zealously. I still marvel that I was able to leave the gang without getting stabbed.

Almost twenty years later this powerful verse still resonates in my heart. No matter the consequence, I am reminded, that true success in life is not measured by external power, prestige, or popularity, but in maintaining and cultivating one's soul -- even if it means losing the world. Life is an all-or-nothing venture: one cannot almost live or almost succeed, it demands total commitment to what is essential and true. After certain life stands certain death, and after this perishing world, one's imperishable soul remains. In the light of that, the only true failure in life is the failure to become the person God created me to be.