

Risk it all

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Preacher: Daniel Ralph

[0 : 0 0] read God's Word this evening, I want to just give a little primer to it, and that is, I want us to be able to take the equity of the verse and then use it as an application in terms of the two things that the verses are speaking of. So when you take the equity of a verse like you would an Old Testament law, there are some strange laws in the Old Testament, but they carry through in their general meaning. So in the Old Testament, when it says about two and three witnesses, we recognize that that is advanced, perhaps a little bit, by CCTV cameras. You take the general equity of the law, and that is, there has to be more than one person saying, you did it. And the New Testament version could be two or three people, or it could be you've been caught on camera. The cameras themselves have caught you. Another one would be in the Old Testament is that you build a parapet around the top of your house, because back in the day, their houses were flat roofs, and the reason you would build a parapet is so that if someone was up there, they wouldn't walk off the edge, okay, and fall to their, well, they'd hurt themselves. They weren't that high. I suppose you could possibly die, fall off. A New Testament application of that would be, we say, well, how does that pan out in New Testament terms? Well, it would mean something like, if you have a balcony, then make sure you've got a railing around it, okay? So we take the general equity of the law, and we go, right, I understand what it's saying in principle, and then we apply it in its New Testament context from the context that we currently live, so that the whole of God's Word is always applicable.

As we read these two readings, one out of Esther and one out of Luke, you can turn to both or just turn to one. The one out of Luke is in Luke 21, and the one out of Esther, which I'm going to read first, is out of Esther chapter 4. And of course, both these contexts here are speaking of the people of the day, and therefore, you know, we're not involved, but nevertheless, the equity, the value of these verses carry over into our present day. So verse 12 of chapter 4 of Esther 4 says, And then Mordecai, and they told Mordecai what Esther had said. Then Mordecai told them to reply to Esther, do not think that you yourself, that in the king's palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews. For if you keep silent at this time, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another place. But you and your father's house will perish. And who knows whether you have not come into the kingdom for such a time as this. Then Esther told them to reply to Mordecai, go gather all the Jews to be found in Susa, and hold a fast on my behalf, and do not eat or drink for three days and night. And I and my young women will also fast as you do. Then I will go to the king, though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish. Mordecai then went away and did everything

Esther had ordered him. The second reading is in Luke chapter 21. And Luke chapter 21 begins with the widow's offering, which plays a key part in her understanding of Luke 21. But then in verse 10 through to verse 19, Jesus says this, then he said to them, nation will rise against nation and kingdom against kingdom. There will be great earthquakes and in various places famines and pestilences, and there will be terrors and great signs from heaven. But before all of this, they will lay their heads, hands on you and persecute you, delivering you up to the synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors for my name's sake. This will be your opportunity to bear witness.

Sessle it therefore in your minds, not to meditate beforehand how to answer, for I will give you a mouth and wisdom, which none of you, which none of your adversaries will be able to withstand or contradict. You will be delivered up even by parents and brothers and relatives and friends.

And some of you, they will be put, and some of you, they will put to death. You will be hated by all for my name's sake, but not a hair on your head will perish. By your endurance, you will gain your lives.

[5 : 04] Well, may God bless us as we receive those two readings, which are of similar situations. And we'll come back to them in message form after this next hymn. Thank you.

Thank you.

Thank you.

Thank you.

Thank you. Thank you.

[7 : 21] Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

risks, because associated with faithfulness are risks of different kinds. Now, here's the thing to point out, that the Christian life compared to the unbelieving life both involve risks, but the way you value those risks are entirely different, okay? And this is because the Christian has the blessing of the eternal value system, whereas the unbeliever only has the value system of down here on earth and the temporal life that they live. So you then have two value systems, okay? You have two ways of valuing what you have before you. And we said this a couple of weeks ago in a couple of the parables, that Jesus lays it out in terms of advantages and disadvantages.

There is a way to value the things of this world and become very advantageous in gaining all of those things. But if you apply yourself to that value system, the problem that you have is that you then disadvantage yourself before God. So Jesus says, what is a profit of man if he gains the whole world, okay? He's gained everything, but in the process of gaining everything, he's given everything away. He's forfeited his very soul. So there is a way to gain which leads to loss when you measure it against the eternal value system, the eternal kingdom. Not all gains in this world are gains that make it through the fire, but some gains are. And so there is a way to advantage yourself through disadvantaging yourself, okay? I don't need to have those things in the world. I don't need to gain any of the world, and I won't lose a thing. In fact, I will actually be advantaged in the kingdom of God, though in the world I will live a life of disadvantage. However, the flip side is also true, that I can go after the world and advantage myself in many ways, but then before God, I've sold my soul.

I've forfeited the very precious thing that God has given me. So there's a clear distinction to be made here in both the book of Esther and in the book of Luke, and that is risks are always associated with a value system, okay? What do I value the most? Is it worth it? Is it worth me taking that risk?

And so Jesus spells this out with the disciples here who are about to be persecuted, some of whom may even have their lives taken from them, and Jesus says, it's worth it. Okay, that's the risk, but it's worth it. It's worth to be faithful in such a way where you don't mind losing your life down here on earth, because at the end of the day, nothing can be taken away from you. You don't lose a thing, okay? You lose plenty down here, but that's shortening the measurement. You actually lose nothing eternally.

[10 : 45] So in Luke 21, Jesus is calling us to live by faith and calling us to live by faith to be faithful. So the distinction of risking it all for God is the distinction between an earthly value system and a heavenly value system. And what it means is there are certain risks associated with being faithful to God. There are certain known risks and there are certain unknowns. So I'll give you a classic example. Several years ago, my brother, when we were down at Charleston Harbor in the middle of October, late at night, we jump off Charleston Harbor into the water. Now, of course, there are no lights, so you pray that it's high tide, and you sort of count how many seconds it is before you hit the water.

And there's nothing more frightening. Even though you know that there's water down there, even though you know it's there, for a few seconds falling through the air, suddenly you're not so sure until you hit it. In life, it's absolutely no different. As you live your life, there are known risks in the world that you know it's risky, but then there are also many unknowns. And what stops God's people from acting is sometimes are the unknowns, not the knowns. To really live a risky life, Jesus is saying, is to be aware of all the knowns, not the unknowns. Jesus is not asking us to step out into the dark, into the unknown. No, he's asking us to step out in such a way we are faithful, where it could lead these disciples losing their life. That's risky, but that's faithfulness. And so I want us to make our way through this evening on a few careful distinctions. So you'll notice in Luke 21 that a promise is made that when the word world turns against believers, the believers that Jesus is speaking to here, some of them will be handed over by family members. It could be your mother, could be your brother, could be your husband, your wife. They'll hand you over because of your faith in Jesus Christ.

And some of you, verse 16, will even be put to death. But notice what he says in verse 18. But not a hair on your head will perish. Okay, some of you will be put to death, but not a hair on your head will perish. Well, we've got a problem here if we think that perishing equates to dying.

Because Jesus is making a clear distinction between dying on the one hand and a person dying and not perishing, not a single hair on their head perishing, even for a moment. So how can both be true? Well, both are true in the eternal context. Perishing in an eternal sense means that you will not come to nothing. For a person to perish, it means that that person no longer serves the purpose for which they were created in the New Testament text sense. So when a person perishes, okay, so God gave his son into the world that whosoever believes in him should not perish. Not should not die. Everybody's going to die unless Jesus Christ returns. But the distinction here is you won't perish. And to not perish is to not have to face a life where you come to no purpose, no end. A person who perishes no longer serves the purpose for which they were created. They just, okay, even before they've died, even. And after death, that's true also. So Jesus is getting his disciples here to realize that you can die being a faithful

Christian, but you're not going to risk anything. You will not perish. You may lose your life, but you will not lose anything before me. And so there are risks associated with being faithful to Jesus in this day. And the risks are some of you may be handed over by your family members and you may die.

[15 : 03] But I want you to realize that not a single hair on your head will perish. In other words, you may look as though you're giving everything up for me, but you're absolutely giving nothing up. You don't lose in any way whatsoever. You may die, but you do not come to nothing. Jesus then is defining risk as doing what is faithful, not doing something that you don't know what the outcome will be.

Okay? Jesus is not defining risk as stepping out into the unknown. Jesus is not defining risk as stepping out into uncertainty. Jesus is defining risk as someone who steps out in faithfulness to God in the knowledge that they could have their life taken from them. And this is the message to the disciples here. So to live a faithful life is to live a life with certain risks associated with that. You could have your life taken from you, but you will not lose anything. Not a hair on your head will perish. Okay. What about Esther then? Esther, on the other hand, uses the word perish in a different sense altogether. She really does mean death. Esther says, if I perish, I perish. But I want you to notice again that when Esther comes to this conclusion, she's about to do the right thing. The risk that she is taking in that if I die, I die, it is because she's decided eventually, eventually, to do the right thing before God. I'm going to tell the king that I'm a Jew. And if I get found, I'll be found out because I'm going to say it. But, and if I die in letting that news come out, okay, I die. But that's the risk associated with now being faithful. Okay. These aren't risks that unfaithfulness creates.

These are risks that are associated entirely with what it means to be faithful. So in both the case of Esther and the disciples in the, in the gospel of Luke, both these groups of people face known risks by being faithful to God. In other words, if I do live the Christian life the way Jesus wants me to live it, there are certain things that come with that. Hatred of the world, the world will turn against me. But, but I'm going to be ready for them because I know them. And that it could happen to, it doesn't mean that it will, but it could. It's the risk that we all run, but we run it in faithfulness to God, not in unfaithfulness. Now, I want to put in just a slight variation here and to say that some Christians often speak of to truly live by faith is to step out into the unknown, to not have any certainty about the step that you're about to take. But I don't see anywhere in scripture where faith is defined in that form, or as if to say that the purest form of faith is someone who steps out into the world with no safeguards whatsoever and just trust God and do so expecting everything to turn up in the darkness. In fact, when I read true faith associated with uncertainties, I don't read that. What I read is the acts of faith in faithfulness to God's word and the certainties of being faithful. If I perish, I perish. Okay? Some of you will be handed over.

The risks associated with being faithful are quite certain. They're quite known. They're not unknown. But too often people can feel that they're not living a life of faith because they're not stepping out enough in the dark. They're not, they're not doing things where they don't know what the outcome will be. And I know that there may be a little bit about that in the Christian life, but that doesn't seem to be the way that it's been spout out here before Christ. In the words of Christ, before us.

To be faithful carries with it its known risks. I want us to think then about the widow's offering. If you look back at the widow's offering, she gives her last two pennies.

[19:26] And why is it so amazing? Well, you're saying, well, she doesn't know where her next meal's going to come from. The reason why it's so an act of extreme faith is because she's given her last two pennies, not knowing where her next few pennies are going to come from to buy bread. Really? Really? I think she's given her last two pennies because she knows exactly who's going to provide. I don't think she gives, I don't think she gives anything up in the knowledge that God won't provide for her tomorrow like he did for her today. But too often we read the story and think she gave it all up. She gave her last two pennies. She didn't know where her next meal was going to come from. Of course she did. It would come from the same person who gave it to her the day before, God. And the day before that, God. So there's a way to live by faith in the knowledge of what God does. And there's a way to live by faith in the knowledge of your own limitations, where I'm just going to step out and just hope that God will step in when I get myself into trouble. And that's not the way that it works. What's remarkable about the widow's offering is that she gives up her last two pennies. And most of us go, that's amazing because she doesn't know where her next meal is going to come from. But I think the lesson that we're meant to learn is, is she gives up her last two pennies because she knows who her provider is. She knows that it's God.

She does it in faith. Okay? So the risk, she could go hungry the next day, but the possible risk of hunger was motivated out of faithfulness to give the last two pennies in the first place. So either way, it's an act of faithfulness and trust in God that carries with it, it's associated risks.

Now, here's the safeguard. Just in case there is any person amongst us who wants to live a life of reckless abandonment. And I don't think that there is here, but you never know. You know, one of you might surprise me and say, that's it. I'm going to sell it all and just see what happens. I don't recommend it. Okay? I've done it. It doesn't always work out. But God knows how to take care of his people. And I forget the theologian who once said that God would probably look more favorably down on a person acting in faith, making the wrong decision than a person who acts in unbelief, never making a decision. And I think there's an element of truth to that, that God will look down on a person who did it out of their heart, not knowing whether or not it's the right thing to do, but believing that they're doing it for God and go, yeah, he messed it up big time, but his motive was right. Okay? And I think God blesses a person like that, but that's not the model to follow.

Okay? God looks after a person like that, but I don't think it's a model to follow. So here's a safeguard from the book of Numbers. It's no good to run ahead of God and try and grasp for things ahead of time. That's what caused the fall in the first place. When we look at the garden and the tree of knowledge of good and evil, and Adam and Eve is told, no, every other tree in the garden is yes.

You have a garden full of yeses and one no. Well, you wouldn't think there'd be such a temptation, would you? You got a garden full of yeses and one no. But the no was no, not never. It was a no, not now. And we know that from the book of Hebrews. Okay? That it was a no, not now. And so what caused the fall is there a grabbing for things ahead of time. Okay? Because to have a knowledge of good and evil is to become like God, because this is the very thing that God says to them once they've taken.

[23 : 27] Now they've become like us, knowing good and evil. So it's not necessarily a bad thing that's happened to them, even though it was a bad thing that led to it. Okay? There are two ways to know the knowledge of good and evil, obediently or disobediently. And they got to know it through disobedience, rather than through obedience, which was the way God wanted them to know it over time, which is what we read in Hebrews, how we become mature, being able to discern the difference between good and evil.

So God's people, historically, have always stepped out and then considered God afterwards. Okay? Right. I'll do it. And then I'll go, oh, I should have asked God first. And God's people, repetitively, have got themselves into sticky moments doing that very thing. In Numbers 14, God promises that they are to move into a land that they've never had before. They've never occupied it before, but it's, excuse me, a land flowing with milk and with honey. How do we go in there?

Well, God says, I've removed the protection of the people who live there. You go in and take the land for yourself. It's theirs for the taking. But as you know, the story pans out that they don't go in. They don't live by faith in God. They don't go in and they don't take possession of the land.

And it's the second generation that actually do eventually. But the principle laid out in Numbers 14 is that the reason why God's people were able to move ahead is because the way in front of them was opened up. Okay. The reason they were able to move into the land is because God opened a way for them to move into the land. The reason they were able to take God at his word about the unknown is because God had told them in the present that they're able to do that kind of thing. They acted, if they acted in faithfulness, they were acting in relation to what God had actually spoken to them.

And God always takes his people's limitations into consideration. In the book of Exodus 13, verse 17, it says that God did not lead his people the way of the Philistines lest they see war and return to Egypt, which basically means that God knows how much you can handle on any given day. He knows how much you can handle on any given day. And he thinks that what is ahead of you is too much for you to take.

[26 : 01] He just moves you around the edges. It's going to take longer. Okay. It's going to take much longer than the direct route, but you will get there in one piece. And so God's concern for you is often greater than your own concern for yourself. We go marching ahead and God sometimes has to redirect our paths so that we stay on the path with him because there's a ditch on both sides. Okay. We're the habit of falling off either side and we don't seem to bother which one it is that we do on any given occasion. God wants us to walk with him. So God's people are able to move into this land and not risk a thing. Not because it's all been laid out for them, but they don't. They don't. They turn away. And as you know, eventually the second generation gets in. The point here throughout the whole of the Old Testament, New Testament, when you look at the question of faithfulness to God, is that faithfulness to God always carries with it risks, always carries with it risks. So here's a few applications as we sort of wrap it up. When God tells us to do something, it is because he knows that we're able to do it. God does not exasperate his children. He doesn't give us something to do to get us out the way. And he doesn't give us something to do so that he can sit back and watch us fail.

That doesn't happen. But he does give us stuff to do to test whether or not we have the faith that we claim to have in him and believe on his faithfulness. This means that whatever we do is an act of faith for God comes with it associated risks. This also means that you can lessen the risks by lessening your faithfulness. Okay? You can lessen the risks you face by lessening the faithfulness that you have towards God. Okay? So let's go back to Luke 21 and the disciples.

Okay, what is the best way not to face death? Well, deny your faith. Imagine it like this. We live in this country, which you're aware of, of course, and other Christians live in other countries where there are persecutions. Now, both Christians reading the same passage understand that they're to be faithful. Okay? Both Christians in both countries reading the same passage understand that they're to be faithful. And being faithful means that there are associated risks. Okay? But the risks to a Christian in a country where there are persecution compared to the risks in this country where there are no persecution of Christians means that faithfulness, while still required for both of us, has different levels of risks for both of us depending on where we are.

And this is the very thing that Jesus is speaking about. Being a Christian is risky. Okay? Not risky in the sense that you lose anything before God, but risky in the sense that things can happen to you depending on who you live under, where you live, what country you're in, whether it's a country that persecutes Christians, or whether it's a country that just thinks that Christians are a non-essential people like this nation, whatever it may be. So Christians who are living in countries with our persecutions are far more aware of the risks associated with being faithful than perhaps we are because there is no persecution for our faithfulness. We can be unfaithful and we can be faithful and there's not much measure of difference. But in a country where the difference is going to be measured by the state, then it's clearly obvious that being faithful before God carries serious risks to you and your family and to your church. Serious risks. Here's the exhortation then as we sort of close this. Remember Esther. Remember Esther. But as you remember Esther, remember Esther from the beginning, not from chapter four. And the reason I say that is because Esther is not the model woman you want to follow. You don't want your daughters to grow up and be like her. Okay. We said, well, she made the right decision. Well, okay. But notice how she made the right decision. Esther decided to reveal that she was a Jew when there was no, when she was going to be found out either way. Esther only came clean that she was a Jew when Mordecai pointed out to her, look, you're going to be found out either way. So when she realized that the course of action of being found out or just saying that I'm a Jew were equal, then suddenly there were no more risks associated with telling anybody. It was the same for both. Either I die by saying that I'm a Jew or I run the risk of saying that I'm a Jew and not die. But either way, there's going to be a persecution of Jews here and I might just be able to do something about it by revealing that I am a Jew. And that's Esther's caught between a rock and a hard place. The only reason Esther is faithful is because the balance between risk and faithfulness is nullified by the fact that she's found out either way. In other words, she's faithful at the point when her unfaithfulness no longer pays off.

Okay. I'm going to be found out anyway. So why not just tell the king I'm a Jew? And that's a real lesson, but not one to be modeled by any of us. Where our faithfulness to God only kicks in when our unfaithfulness no longer pays off. When our true identity is going to come out anyway. I don't think that's a model to follow, even though the lesson learned from it is the same as the one in Luke. That when you show your true identity as a follower of God, it comes with certain risks. So remember Esther. But remember Esther from the beginning.

[32 : 19] And remember that she understood that the question of faithfulness and risk was a straightforward equation. It was an equation of balance. Meaning that if I want to lessen the risk, then I reduce my faithfulness. Okay. If I want to eradicate the risks altogether, then I eradicate my faithfulness altogether. However, the moment my faithfulness to God increases, so does the risk associated with that faithfulness increase. And I can't get away from that. That is one of the sort of biblical equations that God has put in of balance. And most of us know that if we want to keep friends, there's certain things we don't talk about. Okay. What are you doing? Well, if it's a question of Christianity and friendship, you're doing the very thing that Esther's doing, which is your balancing faithfulness risk ratio. In order to keep that, I ease off on here so that I can have an ease off on here. We all do it. And so what's being pointed out here is that to be truly faithful to Jesus, in this country, less so, but in countries where there is persecution, it carries with it serious risks, risks. So here's the final thought as we close. All the way throughout scripture,

Jesus makes it abundantly clear that to be faithful means that some people won't like it. To be faithful means that we're faithfulness in a world where people will not like our faithfulness to God, because we won't do what they want us to do. And we won't, we won't bow the knee to the government. We won't bow the knee to Caesar because we bow the knee to Jesus. And the risks that come with only bowing the knee to Jesus means the possible death from Caesar, which is what these early disciples would face. But remember the verse, the one that's often quoted about the God and the spirit that he gave us, that he did not give us a spirit of fear to fall back, but he gave us a spirit of power, love, and self-control. Let me finish with the words of Jim Elliot, who said this, he is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to keep what he cannot lose. Amen.

Amen.