

IS IT WORTH IT?

Those of you who work in a business environment are familiar with the acronym CBA: Cost-Benefit Analysis. Wikipedia defines a CBA as a *process* which involves "...weighing the total expected costs against the total expected benefits of one or more actions in order to choose the best or most profitable option."

Businesses usually measure benefits in terms of revenue—dollars. They are primarily interested in getting the most bang for the buck. What will return the greatest profit on their investment of capital, labor and material?

For instance, When I was in the second grade, I made an impromptu lemonade stand. I squeezed some lemons, added water and sugar in improbable amounts and set up shop on the sidewalk outside our house, selling lemonade for five-cents per glass.

When my father came home from work, he walked me through a Cost-Benefit Analysis. We figured the cost of the lemons and sugar, and subtracted the income from those few glasses I sold. Even my second grade mind could grasp that this wasn't a money-maker.

Cost-Benefit Analyses are not just for the world of business. At some level, all of us do a CBA for every decision we make. Our default mode is to act in our own self-interest, so we're always evaluating what lies before us. Is this a worthwhile investment of our time, attention, energy and money? We may not always evaluate correctly or consider all possible outcomes, but when we contemplate our choices, we're always asking: is it worth it?

What have you concluded from your Cost-Benefit Analysis of following Jesus? Is it worth it?

That depends, I guess, on what we're measuring. If we're thinking into eternity, the New Jerusalem in eternal God's Kingdom is worth more than eternal punishment in the Lake of Fire. We get that pretty easily. We want life in the sweet by and by.

But if we're measuring life in the not-so-sweet here and now, we can easily come to different conclusions. For instance, Asaph was one of David's chief musicians. He played the cymbals in the temple praise band. Asaph had a crisis of faith that he recorded in Psalm 73. He wrote: "...I envied the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked. They have no struggles; their bodies are healthy and strong. They are free from the burdens common to man; they are not plagued by human ills. Therefore pride is their necklace; they clothe themselves with violence. ...This is what the wicked are like—always carefree, they increase in wealth."

And then he did a Cost-Benefit Analysis: "Surely in vain have I kept my heart pure; in vain have I washed my hands in innocence. All day long I have been plagued; I have been punished every morning" (Psalm 73:3-6; 12-14).

Asaph was plagued by the fear that in the short term, serving God wasn't worth it. Non-believers seemed to live measurably better lives. They had more money. They had more fun. They had better health. They got away with stuff that would land him in deep trouble.

But then Asaph adds this: "When I tried to understand all this, it was oppressive to me till I entered the sanctuary of God; then I understood their final destiny" (Psalm 73:16-17).

Asaph realized that we can't divorce the here and now from the by and by. Any viable human Cost-Benefit Analysis of life must reach all the way into eternity. How will our investments of time, energy and resources now pay off in God's eternal Kingdom?

The Prophet Malachi preached to people who were asking the same questions as Asaph, and had come to a very similar conclusion. Scholar Ralph Smith observed: “The people were speaking like the Psalmist in Psalm 73; but they did not go into the sanctuary as the Psalmist did.” They made their evaluation solely from the perspective of their immediate present. Their Cost-Benefit Analysis led them to conclude, that no, serving God wasn’t worth it. In fact, it was worthless.

Turn with me to Malachi 3:13-4:3.

This is God’s final dispute with his people, the last prophetic confrontation in Malachi. It is very similar in substance to Israel’s complaint in Mal. 2:17ff. In the earlier dispute, Israel complained that evil people were getting away with their evil. God wasn’t giving them what they deserved.

In this passage the focus shifts from God’s justice to God’s fairness. Israel complains that God hasn’t treated them as they deserved for serving him. Read this backwards into the book and we get a much clearer insight into why Israel was behaving badly. If serving God doesn’t pay off, why honor God with one’s best? Why keep your marriage vows if something sweeter comes along? Why give away ten percent of your income? If serving God is futile—worthless—what’s the point?

That question picks at us in very deep, secretive places. We may short-change God with our giving because our Cost-Benefit Analysis suggests that we’re better served spending that money on ourselves. We don’t like what’s going on in our marriages or our families but may refuse to do the tough inside work of evaluating honestly what we’re contributing to the mess. We’re unwilling to consider change because we’re not convinced the sacrifice is worth it.

We go to church and maintain the externals of faith. We wear our Christianity like a comfortable old shirt. But inside we maintain personal sovereignty, choosing for ourselves how much or how little of ourselves we will invest in serving God. Why? Because from our limited perspectives, God has disappointed us in the past. Our Cost-Benefit Analysis has concluded that if God can’t be counted on to come through for us, we’re not going to be disappointed again.

This is a subtle poison that seeps into our souls unawares. We live in a broken world that often disappoints. Nothing is the way it should be. We harbor unrealized expectations that whisper deep lies to us: “I will be happy when...,” or “I would be happy if...” But our “when’s” and “if’s” perpetually elude us. We watch other people—not necessarily nice people—enjoying our “when’s” and “if’s” and may easily conclude: it’s not worth it. It’s not worth the personal disciplines necessary for knowing God. It’s not worth the time and energy to serve God. I’ll be nice and go to church, but what do we really gain by taking God seriously?

These aren’t questions we ask out loud with our friends or in our Sunday School classes, but at some level, we do ask them.

Look at verse 16: “Then those who feared the Lord talked with each other...”

It sounds like Malachi is telling us how some in Israel responded to God’s rebuke. These were faithful men and women who took God seriously; who took faith seriously. They feared God and they talked with each other.

I wonder what they said? Malachi doesn’t record their words, but he clearly implied that they encouraged each other in their faith. They lamented the erosion of confidence and trust in God’s love and faithfulness. They didn’t point fingers. They did take personal responsibility for their own doubts and disappointments. There was repentance and re-affirmation.

And it was communal. They weren’t flying solo. They leaned on each other. They remind

us that we're better together. We need each other.

And God heard: "...the LORD listened and heard. A scroll of remembrance was written in his presence concerning those who feared the LORD and honored his name."

The kings of Persia who ruled in those days kept a daily journal of the events of their reign. They recorded notable people and kept track of their contributions to king and country. The Book of Esther tells the story of Mordecai who exposed a plot to assassinate King Xerxes. The text says: "All this was recorded in the book of the annals in the presence of the king" (Esther 2:23).

God is drawing on that same cultural practice to indicate his delight and his special memorializing of those who fear him and honor his name. These are people with a heart to do what is right. They serve God willingly, not mechanically or out of dull, tedious duty. They have chosen to enjoy God.

King David wrote: "Do not fret because of evil men or be envious of those who do wrong; for like the grass they will soon wither, like green plants they will soon die away. Trust in the LORD and do good; dwell in the land and enjoy safe pasture. Delight yourself in the LORD and he will give you the desires of your heart. Commit your way to the LORD; trust in him and he will do this: He will make your righteousness shine like the dawn, the justice of your cause like the noonday sun" (Psalm 37:1-6).

He could have been writing for Israel in the time of Malachi.

When Asaph wrote Psalm 73, he told us that he didn't understand why bad people prospered and godly people sometimes suffered. He wondered if serving God was worth it, until he entered the temple and considered final outcomes.

In Malachi, God takes us to the same place. This life is too short to measure the fulness of God's faithfulness. Look at Mal. 4:1.

God speaks of eternal outcomes. An appointed day has been fixed on God's calendar. On that day, evil people will get what they deserve. No matter how substantial they appear now, on that day they will be exposed as stubble and reduced to ashes.

When we lived in Eastern Oregon I helped a wheat rancher burn the stubble in his field. After the harvest, farmers would plow a fire break around their fields and set them on fire. The fire consumed the straw and stubble, killed harmful insects and destroyed weeds.

On the day Louis burned his field, I sat on the tailgate of his pickup with a torch fueled by a propane tank. The torch was about five feet long and had a three inch nozzle. We started on the downwind side and as Louis raced around the field, I held on with one hand and held the torch to the stubble with the other.

As the fire encircled the field it created its own draft. A huge circle of smoke and fire converged on itself and consumed everything. Within minutes it was over. The ground cooled quickly and we could walk on the ashes.

God says the day of judgement will be like that for wicked people. They will be consumed in an eternal fire. Nothing will be left. Everything that made them persons of substance in this life will be vaporized.

Look at verse 2.

Several ancient cultures, including Persia, used the image of a winged, solar disc to represent royalty. God draws on that common image to describe a day when the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings—a picture of it's warming rays.

The Prophet Isaiah used similar language to describe that day: "Then your light will break

forth like the dawn, and your healing will quickly appear; then your righteousness will go before you, and the glory of the LORD will be your rear guard” (Isaiah 58:8).

This is the day when God makes all things new. It’s the day when everything is turned to the way it’s supposed to be. It’s the day when God’s people receive their rewards and by God’s amazing grace, have lavished on us far more than we deserve.

“And you will go out and leap like calves released from the stall!”

Have you ever gone outside on a bright warm morning when everything felt right? It was your day off. You had a refreshing night of sleep. You’re awake and alert and you feel like laughing and jumping in every direction at once.

If you can remember a day like it, it was just the tiniest taste of your first day in God’s eternal kingdom. We’ll leap about like calves who have been penned up for a long, cold time and finally get turned out to warm spring pasture.

Is it worth it, to follow Jesus? Is it worth it to give yourself in service to Christ and his Kingdom? Is it worth it to cultivate those spiritual disciplines that shape Christ in you? Is it worth it to tithe, to be faithful to your marriage, your family at home and your church family? Is it worth it to deny yourself guilty pleasures and do right?

It depends on how long your measure is. If it only reaches into the near future, then you may well conclude that no, it isn’t worth it. But if your measure stretches into eternity then it will be worth everything, and more.

Malachi’s message calls us to a more significant Cost-Benefit Analysis than we are used to conducting. May you open your heart to God’s Spirit to expose the conclusions your heart has reached about the worth of serving God. Jesus likened his Kingdom to a costly pearl that was worth everything. Is it?

And if you need encouragement for your own soul, talk to each other. Find like-minded spirits and affirm your faith commitments. In this, as in most things, we’re better together.

God will listen. More than that, he’ll record your names and conversations in a scroll of remembrance. And the day will come when he’ll read that scroll, and reward his servants, and you’ll go out and leap like calves released from the stall.