

## **Introduction**

At the wedding reception of my wife and I years ago, someone went around to the guests and asked them to record a piece of advice to the newlyweds. Of all those pieces of advice they gave, there's only one I remember now. An insurance agent name William Ittner spoke it to us in the form of a maxim I had never heard. I gave it little thoughts at the time, but it turned out to be one of the most helpful insights I've ever learned. It's the very insight in fact that Solomon reveals in Proverbs 14:4. **"There's no such thing as a free lunch"** and that's what I'm going to preach about today.

## **The Text**

Verse 4 mentions oxen. Oxen were the most valuable assets that farmers in antiquity owned. They were the equivalent of tractors today and thus, essential to a successful harvest. Farmers who owned oxen were able to plant, reap, and sell far more crops than those who didn't.

Knowing enables us to understand the verse. In the first half of it, Solomon observes what happens when a farmer has no oxen. There's no mess to clean up because the manger or stall in which oxen are kept is clean. But there's also not **"much revenue."** The farmer makes only a little money. In the second half of the verse, Solomon observes what happens when a farmer has oxen. There's a mess to clean up because the manger is dirty. But there's also **"much revenue."** The farmer makes a lot of money.

I'd sum it up in terms of gain and loss. When farmers have no oxen, the gain is no mess to clean up. The loss is little revenue. When they have oxen, the gain is much revenue. The loss is a mess to clean up.

## **The Principle**

But so what? Some Christians who know this verse wonder what it's

doing in the Bible. The Ryrie Study Bible paraphrases it this way, "**There is no milk without some manure.**" But what do milk and manure have to do with anything?

I've emphasized over the years the importance of learning the principles for interpreting and applying the Bible. One of those principles is this. When a proverb is activity or circumstance specific, it points beyond the activity or circumstance to a larger or more important truth.

That's the case with verse 4. It's circumstance specific. It's about farmers and oxen. So, it points beyond farmers and oxen to a larger truth. That larger truth is, "**There's no such thing as a free lunch.**"

That maxim originated in a practice of mid-19<sup>th</sup> century American saloon keepers. They attracted customers by advertising a free lunch. But there was a catch. The customers had to buy drinks to get it, which often ended up costing more than the lunch without the drinks. So customers began saying, "**There's no such thing as a free lunch.**"

That helps us understand what the maxim and verse 4 mean. Everything we seek to achieve, experience, or acquire is a tradeoff. It always involves gain and loss. We have to give up something to get something. Or as Robert Schuller said it, "**Every prize has its price.**"

Stop for a moment and think about some of the things people seek to achieve, experience, or acquire. The football coach wants speed. The dissatisfied wife wants a divorce. The retiree wants sun and warmth. The single person wants companionship. The spouses want children. The employer wants competent hardworking employees. The sick person wants health. And on it goes.

Notice what verse 4 teaches about those and all things. There's no such thing as a free lunch. Achieving, experiencing, or acquiring them is going to involve gain and loss, that is, a prize and a price. It's going to require giving up something to get something.

Take marriage, for instance. I understand now what William Ittner was telling me. I gained something in marrying Jill: companionship and a witness to my life. And I lost something in marrying her: the freedom of

not being routinely accountable to someone. I gave up something, freedom, to get something, companionship.

So it's true. When it comes to marriage and everything else in life, there's no such thing as a free lunch. They involve gain and loss.

### **"The Price Is Right" Principle**

Now let's go back to verse 4 again and the coordinating conjunction "**But**" that links the second half of the verse with the first half. It shows that Solomon is making a value judgment about oxen. He's saying that the gain of having them, much increase, is worth the loss, a mess to clean up. The prize, in other words, is worth the price.

Verse 4 reveals a guiding principle by which to live. You all know the television game show *The Price Is Right*. That's the guiding principle that verse 4 reveals. No matter what the achievement, experience, or acquisition is, make sure the price is right before seeking it. Make sure that the gain, what we get, is worth the loss, what we give up.

Doing that is a three-step process. First, we determine the gain and loss of achieving, experiencing, or acquiring something. Second, making value judgments about them, we determine if the gain outweighs the loss or vice versa. We must carry out the first two steps purposely, objectively, and logically – relying on the Bible, the Holy Spirit, and good sense to guide us. We get clarity when we do. We grasp whether or not the price is right. We're then able to carry out the third step. We act accordingly. If the gain outweighs the loss enough, we seek achieving, experience, or acquiring the thing. If it doesn't, we don't.

I once talked with a successful young attorney in Akron's largest law firm: "**I want to make partner in the firm,**" he told me, "**And also be a good husband and father. I can't do both though because of the time they take.**" So, he went through the process. First, he determined the gain and loss of making partner. Gain – money and prestige. Loss – neglect of his wife and children. Second, making a value judgment, he determined if the gain outweighed the loss or vice versa. Judging that

family is more important than money and prestige, he determined that the loss outweighed the gain. Third, having clarity, he then acted accordingly. He quit the firm and went into practice for himself.

We should do what that young man did. No matter what the achievement, experience, or acquisition is, make sure the price is right before seeking it.

We'll be sorry if we don't. Two contrasting anecdotes illustrate what happens when the price of what we're seeking is and isn't right.

Some years ago, I went to a store to get a can of motor oil. I took one off the shelf to buy it, looked at the price tag, saw "\$200", and put it back. It was obviously a mistake. It should have been marked "\$2.00". But suppose I took that can of oil off the shelf, paid the check out clerk \$200, and she accepted it. Gain – a can of oil. Loss - \$200. What is the consequence of that financially to me?

I know someone who bought an old Zippo lighter at a flea market for 25 cents. She eventually put it on E-bay, hoping someone might bid a couple of dollars for it. You can imagine her shock when she looked at her computer and saw a bid for over a \$100. But it just kept going up from there until the final bid of almost \$3000. Gain - \$3000. Loss – a 25 cent Zippo lighter. What was the consequence of that financially to her?

Those anecdotes teach us just how vital it is that we make sure the price is right. When the gain of what we're seeking outweighs the loss enough, we're helped. When the loss outweighs the gain, we're harmed. And the more significant what we're seeking is, the more we're helped or harmed.

That then is the message of Proverbs 14:4. There's no such thing as a free lunch. Every achievement, experience, or acquisition we seek involves gain and loss. So let's purposely, objectively, intelligently, and routinely make sure that the price is right, that the gain outweighs the loss. Our lives will go poorly if we don't and well if we do.

### **The Low Cost of Discipleship**

That's the message and its ultimate application is to discipleship to Jesus. Disciples are apprentices. They're people who make the decision to be with Jesus in order to learn and do all that He says. They then arrange all of their affairs around carrying that decision out. As you can see, the decision to be a disciple of Jesus is the most radical decision a person can make and carry out, which reveals the urgency of applying Proverbs 14:4 to it. There's no such thing as a free lunch. Discipleship to Jesus involves gain and loss. So, we need to make sure that the price is right before becoming one. Let's do just that by carrying out the three-step process I mentioned before.

First, we determine the gain and loss, starting with the loss. Dietrich Bonhoeffer explained what that loss is in *The Cost of Discipleship*. We must forfeit some of the things that are normally sought or done in human life. I learned that as an attorney. What attorneys normally seek is to make as much money as they can. They do that by charging everyone the going rate, \$150 an hour. But I couldn't seek that as a disciple of Jesus. He demanded that I charge on a sliding scale, instead, based on what I thought people could afford to pay. Or consider what Jesus called the "**look**" in Matthew 5:28. Remember the 1968 #1 hit song by the O'Kaysions, "I'm a Girl Watcher." Men normally "watch girls" as the song says. But men who are disciples of Jesus don't. Let's be clear about it. Being a disciple of Jesus involves loss. We forfeit some of the things that are normally sought or done in human life.

But it also involves gain. Dallas Willard defines that gain in the single most insightful statement I've ever read, "**The condition of life sought for by human beings through the ages is attained in the quietly transforming friendship with Jesus.**" That's the gain. It attaining the condition of life that everyone wants and seeks. That condition is one of pervasive and habitual love, peace, and joy. Jesus called it "**having life abundantly.**" He meant by that having a life permeated through and through with love, peace, and joy. That doesn't immediately happen, at the moment of decision, but it does increasingly

happen as disciples of Jesus carry out the decision they made.

A disciple I know testifies that he no longer strives inwardly or outwardly when he doesn't get his own way. Having to get our own way is one of the most crushing burdens we carry. He doesn't have it though because love permeates his life through and through. He wants others to get their way, and so, has peace and joy when they do.

Now that we've determined the gain and loss of being a disciple of Jesus, we move to the second step. We determine if the gain outweighs the loss or vice versa. Gain – pervasive and habitual love, peace, and joy. Loss – forfeit some of the things normally sought or done in human life. We make a value judgment. Having pervasive and habitual love, peace, and joy is the grand prize or lodestar of life that everyone wants and seeks. That gain, therefore, outweighs the loss and I mean "by far."

Having carried out those two steps, we have clarity. We see discipleship to Jesus for what it is. Think about that Zippo lighter again. She gave 25 cents. She got \$3000. That's a 12,000% return. What do we call that? It's a "**bargain.**" Well, that's what discipleship to Jesus is. It's a bargain. It is in fact the single greatest bargain in human life. So, we carry out the third step, and act accordingly. We make and carry out the decision to be disciples of His.

## **Conclusion**

Contrast that in closing with making and carrying out the decision not to be disciples of His. I've heard so many preachers and Christians talk grimly about the high cost of discipleship. But what they should be talking about instead is the high cost of non-discipleship. Dallas Willard tells us what that cost is, "**a life of crushing burdens, failures, and disappointments, a life caught in the toils of endless problems that are never resolved.**" Realize what that means. The loss of discipleship is far lower and the gain far greater than that of non-discipleship. So, each of us has a decision to make right now: to be or not to be a disciple of Jesus. Remember as you make it, there's no such thing as a free lunch.