

For Me, To Live Is Christ

Rich Nathan

Sunday, November 20, 1994

Philippians 1:21

This morning we are going to consider the verse, actually a phrase, which is the ultimate summary statement of the life of the apostle Paul. If we were to come along to the great apostle Paul and say, "Paul, what is the secret of your existence? What is the meaning of your life? What is your purpose statement? What are you all about?" the apostle Paul would respond this way (Philippians 1:21):

"For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain."

I want to focus on this one simple phrase— "For to me, to live is Christ..." Picture for yourself a personal conversation that you might have across the table with the great apostle Paul. And you say, "Paul, highlight for me the events of your life. Tell me a little bit about yourself. Where were you raised?" He talks about his childhood and the city of Tarsus, what is now Turkey, in Asia Minor. He talks about his parents' desire to grow up as a Rabbi, sending him off to Jerusalem, to study under Rabbi Gamaliel.

He talks about his great love of the Old Testament and the traditions of the Jewish people and his great zeal to practice all the Jewish laws. He was a phenomenal student and absolutely focused on doing the law.

And then he tells the story of that one day when he was on his way to Damascus to persecute Christians because he thought that would be serving God. When he was struck by the blinding light and the Lord Jesus Christ spoke to him and said, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" In that light, he was struck blind, he tells you, for three days until a man named Ananias came along and laid hands on him and prayed for his healing.

Then the apostle Paul goes on and talks about all that he has done in his apostolic career. How he has planted churches all over the Roman world. He tells you about some of the miracles. You begin to inquire, "Well, give me a really hot story" as I did with a Catholic priest one time. I had heard that he was moving in signs and wonders and had a deep love for God. He was a fellow working down on the border of Mexico and Texas. He had a huge prison ministry and a ministry to the poor. He had a food clinic and a medical clinic and a legal clinic. I said to him when I got him alone, he was 70-75 years old, "Tell me your hottest Holy Spirit stories."

He said, "You really want to know?"

I said, "Yes. Tell me about yourself. I really want to hear your hottest stories. I want to know, through you, what God has really done."

And so, I guess he saw my intensity, my hunger and he just began to talk with me about some of the things that the Lord had done. He told me about a time they went into a prison with four pans of food. They thought they were going to feed 40 or 50 prisoners, but the guards released cell block after cell block. Ultimately, 500 prisoners in all were fed from four pans of food. The priest told me, "I have no idea how this happened, but I was there. We kept scooping the food out and when the last prisoner was fed, the food ran out!"

Well, can you imagine doing that with the apostle Paul? “Paul, tell me your hottest stories.” He says, “Well, there was this time that a man fell from an upper story window and came down and cracked his head on the hard stone floor. Every body rushed over. The man was dead. I went over to him and prayed and the Lord raised him from the dead. I said, 'I saw it with my own eyes. The Lord raised someone from the dead through my hands.’”

“Let me tell you about the time that we had a meeting on the island of Malta and we saw every single person we prayed for, healed. Blind eyes were healed. Deaf people heard. Lame people got off of their mats. The infirmed were straightened up. It was an incredible meeting. Every person we prayed for was healed instantly – hundreds of them.”

“Let me tell you about some of my preaching crusades in the cities of Ephesus, Corinth and Antioch...”

He just goes on and on weaving these things out. And then he says, “I have suffered a great deal” and he tells you about times he actually thought he was going to die because his body was so beaten by folks taking him out of the city and hitting him with sticks. Several times he had stones thrown at him and he had to crawl, literally crawl, out of the city, bruised and bloodied. “Oh yeah, then there was that time I started a riot in Ephesus. I really didn't mean to, but these kinds of things just seem to happen when I minister.”

Other times when he was shipwrecked and just had to hang onto a piece of wood from the ship, lest he drowned. It happened to him three times.

And then, of course, from our perspective, we know that the apostle Paul was used by God to write a good deal of what we now call the New Testament, which is the best selling book in the history of the world. And it continues to be the best selling book in the world, year after year. I mean, you talk about Tom Clancy or Stephen King being really hot. Danielle Steele, she has written forty trashy novels. They are nothing. They are a drop in the bucket, all together, compared to how many people have bought the writings of the apostle Paul. And then, on top of that, how many people have not only bought his writings, but written about what he has written in commentaries and theologies and devotional books and magazine articles and newspapers and newsletters. Forests of trees have been cut down just to write about what he wrote. Thousands of PhD dissertations have been written about Paul's thoughts. It was in reading Paul's writings that the whole Protestant reformation was given birth. Martin Luther, as he studied some verses in Romans and the book of Galatians, broke free from the Roman Catholic Church and gave birth to the whole Protestant Reformation just from some words that the apostle Paul said. It was Paul's writings that birthed the Great Awakening in the middle of the 18th century as John Wesley heard a verse from the book of Romans.

You look over this incredible life, this career that had impact beyond any other man in world history except Jesus, and then imagine saying to the apostle Paul, “Paul, can you reduce everything you have seen, everything you have experienced, everything you believe, everything you are, everything you have ever written or said or felt to a little phrase that I could put on a bumper sticker?”

And rather than laugh at you or tell you that you are an idiot, that you can't reduce such a great mammoth contribution to a bumper sticker, what an insult... “How dare you attempt to sum up my life with a slogan, with a sound byte” the

apostle Paul says, "Well, that would be easy. 'For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.'"

This morning what I am going to do is tackle the first part of that sentence. "For to me to live is Christ." And next week I am going to handle the second part of that "To die is gain" and we are going to talk about dying and what death means to the Christian and to the non-Christian. For to me to live is Christ. Let's pray.

For to me, to live is Christ. Boiled down, squeezing out every molecule of excess, reducing the life of the apostle Paul to its barest essence, the sum of Paul's existence is found in this phrase "For to me, to live is Christ." One thing that my life is about, one thing! Not a multiplicity of things, one thing—my life is about Christ. Now is there anyone of us in this room that could make that statement, "For to me, to live is Christ" and to not immediately be convicted of hypocrisy? Do you feel inside like that is such a lie for me, for you?

We have so much else going on that we attempt to draw life from, draw meaning from, draw satisfaction from. We bow down at so many other shrines and idols. We want so much else in life. Can anyone say this is me and I have no other dependencies, no other obsessions? I have no other game. For me, to live is Christ and Christ alone?

But is it not your heart's cry that this would be more and more true of you? If you are a Christian this ought to be the cry of your heart. Oh, I am not there, but I want to be there. We are caught in this tension of seeing how absolutely we fall short of this singular ambition and singular motivation and singular understanding of life, and yet, that is where we want to go.

One thing. One thing. That is what life is about. One thing.

I don't know how many of you saw the movie "City Slickers" but in the movie Billy Crystal plays the part of an advertising executive. He is a middle class, urban, yuppie-type moving into his middle ages. He decides that he is going out on a big adventure with his friends. They are going to do a cattle drive. But, as an urban, yuppie-type of guy, of course, he goes out west, but he goes with his coffee grinder so he can have fresh ground coffee in the morning. You see him in the movie in the morning he wakes up and grinds the coffee beans and immediately sets off this major cattle stampede as all the cows hear the beans grinding.

Well, he meets a tough, old, grizzled cowboy named Curley (played by Jack Palance) who he is enthralled by. Curly is everything that Billy Crystal is not. He is absolutely certain about the meaning of life. He is self-assured. He is confident, he is secure, and he knows what he is about. After Billy Crystal sets off the cattle stampede, Curly turns to him and says, "Now, we need to round up the cattle and you're coming with me." Billy Crystal is certain that Curly is going to take him out on the trail and kill him somewhere, but he goes with him because he is too afraid to say "no" to this tough cowboy.

Well, they are out at night and the campfire is burning. Billy Crystal turns to Curly and asks him about his understanding of the meaning of life. Curly holds up a finger and he says, "My understanding of life is this." Billy Crystal says, "What? What you mean this. Whaddya mean? Your finger? The meaning of life is your finger?"

Curly says, "No. The meaning of life is one thing. One thing."

Billy Crystal says, "One thing? What one thing? What thing?"

Curly says, "That's for you to figure out."

Jesus says the same thing in the book of Luke. Flip back with me to Luke 10:38:

"As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said. But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked, 'Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!'"

"'Martha, Martha,' the Lord answered, 'you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better and it will not be taken from her.'"

Is there anyone here that could say that they are not more like Martha than like Mary? Martha was distracted, Jesus says, about many things. Literally, it means her mind was divided. That is the definition of anxiety. The definition of anxiety is that your mind is divided, that you are in two minds or in ten minds or fifty minds. That your focus is all over the place, but you cannot bring your mind together around one thing.

The modern world has lost its ability to pull everything together around one thing. The ancient ideal of the university was that every department, every discipline, every college was pulled together around one universal truth. But the idea of a unifying, single truth that pulls together the women's studies program, the accounting department and the physics faculty at the Ohio State University? I don't think so, at least not in anyone's mind at OSU, other than a common desire to beat Michigan! I heard the definition of a university now is a bunch of buildings tied together by a common management system. No single, unifying truth, just a common management system.

On a more personal level, we get up in the morning and our mind is, almost from the moment of awakening, racing at 6000 rpm. We have dozens of items on our to-do lists. We proceed throughout the day with, you know, all of these things that we need to do and all of the things that we get ourselves into and all of the little rabbit trails.

But the really big game—you know, bagging the moose with one shot—we miss it. Paul says, "I haven't missed it by chasing every little rabbit. I have found what I need to grab hold of, or who I need to grab hold of, and it is Christ." Jesus talked about having a single eye, a single focus for life, not being torn apart by competing loyalties.

Do you understand what the single issue, the one thing is for you all of the time? In the swirl of all of the confusion and all the demands that you live with and that I live with, do you understand what the one thing always is? It is always Christ. If we are talking about your bottom line needs, the questions of your heart, your frustrations, your meaning, your purpose, your motivations, what is going on inside of you, the single thing must always be Christ.

Somebody wrote a book some years ago. It says, "Christ is the answer; what is your question?" He is the bottom line answer to your parents' needs. Do

you realize that? Whatever else your parents' needs, their fundamental need is Christ and more of Christ.

And whatever else your children need, their basic need is Christ and more of Christ. And if you could bring anything to your neighbor that would be of help, do you understand that what you need to bring to your neighborhood as a Christian is Christ. One thing is necessary: Christ. You are to be an ambassador for Christ.

See, I tried to express this when I wrote both our Statement of Faith some years ago and also our Purpose Statement. I wrote in the church's Purpose Statement that the reason Vineyard Christian Fellowship of Columbus exists is Jesus Christ. One thing. Christ. And then I said, "We exist, first of all, to exalt Christ." That means to worship him, to glorify him. We exist to experience Christ and to live out the full implications of being a saved people. And then we exist to express Christ. Receiving and then taking it out and giving away what we have.

So, if you get prayed for here and you get touched by God, we want you to go out and pray for somebody else at your job. And if you learn something about Christ here, then we want you to go ahead and share what you are learning about Christ and what Christ means to you with your family and your friends. Take what you get and give it away.

If someone is sick at work or at school or at Thanksgiving, say to them, "Hey, I wonder if I can pray for you. I'm a Christian and I believe God heals people." I used to do this all the time when I taught at Ohio State and people let me pray for them. I know this can be done in any environment because I've done it. Praying for the sick is not just for our renewal meetings. We learn it here and take it out to the streets. Take what you get here and give it away! See, this idea of one thing, if you were to say, "What is the Bible about?" One word. All 1544 pages in my Bible, the concordance and the footnotes and the cross references, what is it about in one word? It is about Christ. It is all about Christ. People look at the Old Testament and they say, "How do I make sense of all of the things that happened to the Jewish people in the Old Testament and all of the sacrifices and all of these prophecies and all of these different characters that are running back and forth across the pages of the Old Testament. How do I pull it all together?

One word. Christ. Jesus said that after he was risen from the dead, that the meaning of the whole Old Testament was himself. Luke 24:27 "Beginning with Moses and the prophets he explained to them what was said in all the scriptures concerning himself." The apostle Paul echoes that in 2 Corinthians 1:20 when he says, "For no matter how many promises God has made, they are all yes in Christ." They all find their fulfillment, their yes, their amen in Jesus Christ. Theologians use the word "christocentric" to describe the viewpoint that the center of the Bible is Christ.

Let me just demonstrate this for you for a moment from the Old Testament. We begin at the beginning with the story of Adam and the creation of Adam. Well, Jesus Christ is the last Adam. In the same way that Adam was the head of the human race and his disobedience to God affected humanity, men and women and children, for all time, Jesus Christ is the last Adam. And his obedience to God affected the whole new race of people who have come to faith in Christ for all time. Just as the first Adam's brought about the fall and death,

the last Adam's obedience brings salvation and eternal life to those who believe and who are part of the new race of people that God is creating for his own glory.

We look through the promises given to Abraham in the book of Genesis. The ram that is caught in the thicket in Genesis 22 as the substitute for the sacrifice of Isaac is a picture of Christ. The whole life of Joseph is a picture of the rejection of Christ by his brothers. Joseph was cast into the pit, but raised up and exalted to the right hand of the ruler of the land. At the second coming of his brothers, Joseph revealed himself to his brothers. Just so Jesus – as Joseph, so Jesus. The Passover lamb in the book of Exodus is a picture of Christ. He is the one whose blood covers us and protects us from the destroyer. He is the one who is greater than Moses. Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of all the sacrifices in the book of Leviticus. He is the one who bears the curse for disobedience to the law from the book of Deuteronomy and he is the one greater than Moses in Deuteronomy 18. Jesus Christ is the true son of David. He is the one to whom all of the prophecies point.

The picture that I get of the Old Testament is as if all of the writers of the Old Testament are standing on the shore of the Niagara River and they have sticks in their hand. They intend, from their perspective, to throw their sticks out into the Niagara River and have them carry across ways across the river. They had a purpose in their minds, for their time to prophesy as they did. But the flow of the current of the river was so strong that all of the promises and all of their statements and all of their viewpoints come roaring over the Niagara down on Christ.

Paul says, "For me, to live is Christ."

Let me add a few prepositions to this so that you understand this even better. It is not just the Bible that is centered on Christ, every preposition is centered on Christ. You probably don't remember what prepositions are from English; they are words like through, for, in, under, by and on. They are connecting words. Christ is the one that draws all things together. He is the connection between all things. Think about it: it is through Christ that God makes himself known—through Christ. Revelation comes through Christ. Hebrews 1 says this: "In the past, God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways. But in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son whom he appointed heir of all things and through whom he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being sustaining all things by his powerful Word."

You say, "How can I know God?"

Jesus Christ said, "He who has seen me has seen the Father."

We know God by looking at Christ. Do you want to know if God loves us? Look at Christ. Christ loves us; God loves us. Will God heal us? Look at Christ. Christ heals; God will heal. All that we want to see about God, all that we want to understand, all that we want to hear—look at Christ. Revelation comes through Christ.

And not only does revelation come through Christ, but redemption comes through Christ. How can a man or woman or child get to God? Through Christ. Jesus said in John 14, "I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father but through me." You want to approach God? You must get to God through Christ. The apostle Paul said, "There is one God and only one mediator

between God and man, the man Christ Jesus.” It is through Christ that we come to God through the blood shed on the cross. That opens the way to God. That tears the curtain to the Holy of Holies so that you and I might approach God and stand in grace through Christ.

Let me change the preposition. Instead of talking about us coming to God through Christ, let’s talk about the basic motive of the Christian life. It is all done for Christ. This single thing. Christ. Through Christ. For Christ.

So many of us shake our heads in wonder when we see people leave homes, families, and jobs to go off to the mission field, to some far away place where things are uncomfortable and food tastes bad, where people get sick, where there is very little money to be made, where an individual can spend their life in a corner of the world in obscurity. You say, “Why would anybody leave America, where we have clean food and clean water and state of the art health care, and all of the supports and all of the props that we have, the pleasure and all of the entertainment, and all of our stuff? Why would we push that aside and go off somewhere?” Because the person has understood the single thing. For Christ, I’ll leave.

You know, back in the 50’s the most popular story in Christian circles was the story of the martyrdom of Jim Elliott and the four others who were slaughtered by the Auca Indians as Jim Elliott and four other young men attempted to bring the gospel to this ferocious Indian tribe up the Amazon River. You say, “What an incredible waste. Why would five young men go deep into the bush to try to explain this message of the redemption through Christ to ferocious Indian tribes, taking their lives into their own hands? They could have had successful careers. They could have risen in the corporate world, had nice yards, spent their Saturdays raking leaves. Why would anyone do that?”

Jim Elliott, who was one of the martyrs at age 24, had a saying that became very famous. He said, “He is no fool who gives up what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.” He is no fool who gives up what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose. For Christ.

That is the motive to do anything. Why should you not keep all of your money, but give some of it to the church of Jesus Christ? Why take your excess and give it away instead of consuming every dime that you own on more stuff and more stuff? Why give it to World Missions? Why give it to the poor? Why do anything? For Christ.

I was talking the other day to a fellow from the U.S. Center for World Missions. One of our young couples here in the church is now living in Singapore. Jim and Sara Meyer have decided to take their lives and devote them to video taping different people groups, different tribes, around the world who have never heard Jesus’ name even once. They have no witness. To video tape these peoples and then to distribute those tapes around the globe where churches could adopt a group and pray for that group and maybe send someone to that group to tell them about Jesus. Jim, you may know, was a rising star in advertising. He was helping to produce commercials for Wendy’s and working his way into the big leagues of marketing and advertising. Jim is quite skilled and people like him. He made all of the right connections. He was on the fast track. He leaped off the fast track to go out and do this task. Why?

I talked with Jim's supervisor the other day out at the U.S. Center for World Missions. We talked about the meaning and purpose of the work that Jim and Sara are engaged in and his supervisor said something that, oh my goodness, caught me in the heart. He said, "Well, you know, Rich, we are engaged in nothing less than attempting to bring about the end of history."

Talk about a single focus. To work in something that would bring about the end of history. Are you that focused? Man, I'm not. Jesus said that this gospel must be preached to all nations and then the end would come. I do this so that I might quicken the return of Christ. To bring him near to me. For Christ's sake. That is the motive. For Christ. You know, it is not just the big things we do for Christ; it often is the little things where the love of Christ is most tested. Will you be the first to talk after a fight? Will you honestly report all your income? Will you be careful regarding your expenses on the company's credit card? Will you get out of bed and get the baby, or pretend you're asleep? Little choices of servanthood. Why? When you're tired and it is inconvenient, why? For Christ.

And what is it that we are attempting to do with our lives? The goal is to look like Christ. Through Christ, for Christ, like Christ. We want to live like he lived, loved like he loved, speak like he spoke, pray like he prayed. This is what God wants to see in people in his church, people who look like his Son Jesus. It's all about Christ. Do you get it? Why Paul said, "For me, to live is Christ?" I could go on with the prepositions. We live in Christ. We build our lives on Christ. It is under Christ our Lord, unto Christ, that we move. Christ. He is the one thing.

Let me break this little phrase down even further. Paul says, "Not only for me, to live is Christ, but for me to live, to really live, not just to survive, not just to get by, not just to hydroplane over the surface of life, but to live life in all of its fullness is Christ."

You know, Christopher Lash, who many of you may have heard of, if you have taken a college sociology class wrote a book called *The Minimum Self* in which he postulated the idea of living with the threat of the bomb has shifted culture's basic attitude from developing a life for ourselves to simply surviving through a week. He says that people go through saying, "Well, if I can just survive this week, I will be OK." I don't know how many of you have ever said that. "If I can just get through the day..." "If I can just get through this hour..." And we see that kind of mind-set of short-term thinking in our corporations. Part of the loss of world dominance for American corporations through the 80's, and we are just beginning to turn that around, was the inability to put together long-term plans. It became good enough to just get by.

We are a very short-term society. It's all about survival. Go to the bookstore and you will see things like "How to Survive a Bad Marriage." What a great way to live. "10 Steps to Parental Survival," that's a lofty goal. To spend your children's growing up years with you surviving. My goal is to get through my kids' teenage years and have Marlene and I still alive when they leave home.

Paul says, "That is not what my goal is. My goal is to live with all that that means." Kind of like the Garth Brooks song, "Life isn't tried, if it's merely survived if you are standing outside of the fire."

There are so many different kinds of ways that people try to find life and real satisfaction, real fulfillment. You have the Hedonist philosophy. Well, to find

life you just try to experience as many different kinds of places, foods and experiences as you possibly can. The goal of real life is to travel the world, go to the very best hotels and have the very best room service, to eat the very best food and wear the very best fabrics on your body, to live in the very best house with the very best kitchen. It is the Epicurean philosophy—Eat, drink and be merry.

Others have adopted the cynical approach to life. It is all empty. It is all meaningless. It is all a big con game. Christianity and every church is just a con. The book of Ecclesiastes describes this. “Vanity, vanity—all is vanity.”

Still others who are religious believe that life is found in the doing of religious duties. I multiply religious activity and in that I find life.

Paul says, “You don’t get it.” An abundant, full, rich, satisfying, deep, meaningful, purposeful life is found only in Christ. Not just a bunch of activities and not just in satisfying my body, doing stuff for my body. I can do all of that and end up incredibly dead and empty. Ever live that one? Stuff your body and up empty inside? And those of you who have engaged in religious activities know that you can run and run and run and do all of your activities and at the end of everything, preachers have certainly seen this, at the end of all of the religious activities, you just end up with a hand full of nothing. No life.

Paul says, “For me to live, and really live, is Christ.” See, you have to connect up in your mind, life and Christ like the apostle John did. You trace through the book of John and that is what you will see. There is that connection drawn 36 times between Christ and life. From the beginning verses of the gospel of John the apostle writes, “In him was life...” John 17 says, “This is life eternal, to know you the only true God in Jesus Christ who now ascent...”

You want life in the midst of a depression, life in the midst of your bad marriage, life, real living, when every thing is being pressed on you and you are just not able to drain a drop of life out of circumstance and you are not traveling around the globe and drinking the finest of wines, but you still want life? Every where, the Bible says, no one of you should ultimately be denied real, fulfilling life. You can find it in Christ. There is life to be had for the taking. Just grab hold of Christ.

The reason that you find life in Christ is because Jesus said in John 5, “For just as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted it to the Son to have life in himself.” Christ is the very definition of life.

And apart from Christ, there is no life. Just a bunch of stuff that is ultimately empty, but no life. In fact, the apostle Paul in Philippians 3 goes so far as to say, “Apart from Christ, it is all just dung.” It is all worthless. It is all garbage.

Friends, I say this with all affection, but if you don’t have a deep, growing, intimate relationship with Christ, you don’t have anything that you will find real life in, ultimate fulfillment in, deep satisfaction.

You know, this isn’t obvious when you are young. When you are young it seems like whether you have Christ or don’t have Christ really doesn’t matter. Watch two people when they are young. One has Christ and the other doesn’t. Both seem to be living. Both seem to be enjoying themselves. Both seem to be happy. But you know, as you watch a person who doesn’t have Christ live out a Christ-less existence, what you find is that their lives just get hollower and

hollower and emptier and emptier. So that they arrive at the end of life as completely hollowed out, emptied boxes. Nothing left. Reduced to a ghost-like, burned out, and burned over ash-like existence.

But you watch somebody who has drawn from Christ, drunk from Christ, drawn near to Christ and you find someone whose life has become more and more and more and more full.

Do you understand that it is the pursuit of life that is the basis of your obeying God? You are faced with a temptation to say something against someone else. You know that it is wrong, it is gossip. But you are really faced with the temptation to gossip. You are faced with the temptation to lie because it would be easier in the moment for you to tell a lie. You are faced with the temptation of lust. Or to not forgive someone who has hurt you. To not let it go and to give it to God. You are faced with a number of temptations over the course of a day and you say, "Why should I obey in this instance?" Just simple duty because you ought to? Because obeying is right? Both of those things are true. You ought to obey. Obeying God and God's commandments is right.

Do you understand that your obedience leads you to life? Full life? The experience of life? Way back when Moses spoke, he held up the commandments of God in Deuteronomy 30:19-20 and Moses said,

"This day I call heaven and earth as witnesses against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life so that you and your children may live and that you may love the Lord your God. Listen to his voice and hold fast to him for the Lord is your life."

When you obey God in the face of temptation, what you are doing is choosing life. On the other hand, every time you decide to sin, you are saying, "I choose death" inside. I am sowing death. The wages of sin is death. What I reap from giving into temptation is death in my soul. Surely, all of you have experienced that. The promise, of course, is that you're finding life, that if you sin, you'll experience life. Haven't you noticed that when you live in disobedience to God that you feel dead inside, cut off from God? That you feel numb and calloused? That you find it hard to love? Hard to pray? Hard to engage others? You feel exhausted, empty, depressed? You are cut off from God. The Lord is your life. Therefore, choose life. The apostle Paul says, "For me to live, really live, is Christ."

And finally, what I want to do is focus on those first couple of words. We talked about Christ being the one thing. We talked about really living. And now I want to focus on those first few words, "For to me, to live is Christ."

It does no good to have this stuff out there as an abstraction. Oh, yeah, Christ is supposed to be the center. He is the one thing. When a person focuses on him, they find life. No. These truths need to be smashed against my forehead. They must be personally applied. For to me, to live is Christ.

It is so easy for individuals to maintain that old Roman Catholic distinction between the great saints and then the ordinary people. Folks say, "Well, you know, only the very great Christians would be able to make the statement about how their lives are consumed by Christ. I have all of this other stuff going on – family commitments and mortgage payments."

“Well, I understand that was true for the apostle Paul. For Paul, to live is Christ. After all, Paul had that great vision on the road to Damascus and, if I had a vision like that, maybe I would feel the same way.”

You need to break down in your mind, Christian, this distinction between the great people and yourself and to say, “No. This is supposed to be true for me.” For you. Christianity means nothing, absolutely nothing, unless it is taken and applied for me. And if I can’t put on the front of sentences, “For me,” then it is just an abstraction. It is just a philosophy.

You have to be able to say this. This is what my goal is—to be able to say, “For me, to live is Christ.” Christ is where I personally want to find life in this next year. Christ is where I want to find life in the next forty years. To be able to say this about myself in an increasingly true way.

See, what saves a person is not the belief that Jesus died for the world. It is wonderful to believe that Jesus’ death on the cross paid for the sins of the world. It is extraordinary when you begin to believe that God so loved the world that he sent his only begotten Son. But I will tell you, you and I will miss heaven by a trillion light years until we believe that Christ died for me, for you. The bottom line is what does Bible verses mean for you? For your life?

Great, God loves everyone. Do you believe that God loves you, you by yourself and not just part of the world? Somehow we are afraid to take this stuff and really slam it home and apply it to ourselves. Maybe we feel that it would be self-promoting. Oh this is too great, too grandiose. I know what I am saying is so simple, it may seem like it isn’t worth saying that most of us struggle with this issue. Not that God loves, but that God loves us. He doesn’t just love the whole church. He doesn’t just love the Vineyard. He doesn’t just love leaders. He loves you. And it is you that he wants to have say, “For me, to live...For me, to live is Christ.”

In his famous commentary on the book of Galatians, the great Reformer Martin Luther was commenting on Galatians 2:20, “I am crucified with Christ, nevertheless, I live, yet not I, but Christ lives in me and the life I live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God who loves me and gave himself for me.” And as Luther reviewed all of the words, “I” and “me” and “my” and “my life”, he said that all of Christianity consists in the pronouns, when an individual can say, “Mine. I, me and connect themselves up with Christ they are Christians.”

Christianity is not a spectator sport. It is a participant’s sport. We see this in the communion meal. You just don’t watch others take the bread and the wine, but it is with your mouth and your teeth that you chew the bread and you swallow it with your throat into your stomach. You drink the wine with your own mouth. And it goes, again, into your own stomach. In the same way, you must be able to say, “For me, to live is Christ.” You say it.

So, how do we measure whether for you this is a true statement? It is so huge! How can you gage whether this is true of you? Well, you measure it the way you measure anything. I would measure this kind of statement against myself by asking first, “What am I doing with my excess?” There is a certain amount of time that is given to your work, a certain amount of time given to sleep, a certain amount of time given to something else. Where is my excess time going? Is it drawn to Christ? Do I reflect on Christ when my thoughts don’t have

to be somewhere else? Do I immediately go to Christ's Word, to prayer, to the sharing of Christ?

What do I do with my excess dollars? Do they all get consumed on me? To say, "For me, to live is Christ" means that my excess ought to be going, at least in part, to the cause of Christ in world missions, to Christ's church, to the poor who Christ said were the least of his brothers.

When you think about the future, not only about your excess, but a second test that I would use is when you think about the future, what do you focus on as a goal? What is your goal for the future? Is it all career plans and house decorating plans and relationship plans. Or do you say, "What I really want for my future is to have this phrase be true of me: I want to grow into this being truer of me."

The third thing I would ask is what do you think everyone around you needs? First of all, what is the single thing your children need to gain fulfillment in life? What is the single thing your parents need before they die? Your aunts, your uncles and grandparents? Your neighbors? What does your circle need?

And when I think about this I say to myself, "No price is too great. No price is too great. Christ is the pearl of great price. He is the treasure in the field. Money and time and the energy of this church, in terms of my own life and career, goals and future, no price is too great for this one thing: Christ. For to me, to live is Christ. Let's pray.