**To Live is Christ and to Die is Gain Series**

**“To Live is Christ”**

**Introduction:**

In a couple of week, on the 4th of July, we will celebrate our country’s 241st birthday. In 1776, our country's founding fathers signed the Declaration of Independence. It's an amazing document for a number of reasons, but mainly because it says something that is different from any other foundational document for any other country on the planet.

You probably know at least a few of its famous words: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness."

The founding fathers of our country believed that God, our Creator, has given every individual three rights that cannot be taken away or denied – Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. In our country’s history, Court decisions have been passed to protect Life and wars have been fought to protect our Liberty but it’s the last phrase in this sentence that truly sets the United States of America apart from other countries in the world.

Our founding fathers believed that the pursuit of happiness is an “unalienable right.” It was the intent of our founding fathers that we, as Americans, be a happy people and that the pursuit of happiness was to be as much as who we are as a nation as liberty and even life itself. Americans, as a whole, enjoy a high standard of living but are we happy and are we sure about how to pursue happiness?

**The Pursuit of Happiness**

Disney World proclaims itself as the happiest place on earth but the fact is that it isn’t. According to the “World Happiness Report” (yes, there is such a thing) Norway is the happiest place on Earth, with neighboring Denmark, Iceland, Switzerland and Finland rounding out the top five. America comes in fourteenth (14th). What is interesting is that an entire chapter is devoted to the “American Crisis.” The fact is that America has been in a steady decline on the happiness meter, falling on the scale of happiness every year.

So what is the problem? For some people, their happiness depends entirely on good things happening in their lives. When things are going well, they are happy. When things are not going well, they are unhappy. This causes us to become caught on a rollercoaster of emotions and an endless cycle of experiencing happiness until something bad happens.

For others I believe that it could be boiled down to this: we are pursuing happiness, but we are looking for happiness in all the wrong places. Our clothes aren't fashionable enough. Our cars aren't fancy enough. Our houses aren't elaborate enough. Our jobs aren't rewarding enough. Our relationships aren't fulfilling enough. So, we are happy until the “new car smell” fades away then we need a new car. As Solomon said, *"The eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing."* (Ecc.1.8)

As Christians, I think that it is important for us to seek for a biblical approach to the “pursuit of happiness.” We need the Holy Spirit to get us off this rollercoaster and to break this endless cycle. We must have a godly mindset in our pursuit of happiness. Is there the possibility that we can experience happiness whether we are rich or poor, in good times and bad times, or in sickness and in health?

As I pondered thought I was drawn to the book of Philippians. The Holy Spirit inspired the Apostle Paul to write this epistle to the church of Philippi during his imprisonment in Rome for the proclamation of the Gospel. For me, being in prison would not be the “happiest place on earth.” During my years of pastoral ministry I have visited people in jails and prisons. When I visit these facilities I am always struck with the overwhelming sense of bondage, discouragement, and the lack of opportunity to pursue any sort of happiness.

But in Paul’s letter to the Philippians he uses the word “joy,” “rejoice,” or “gladness” at least nineteen (19) times. While being imprisoned the Apostle Paul warned his readers about the enemies of the cross of Christ (3.18), those who preached a false gospel (3.2), and the danger of self-seeking pride, which would lead to harmful divisions in the church (2.2-4; 4.2). But in the midst of all this opposition the Apostle urged the Philippian Christians to pursue happiness in the Holy Spirit. *Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice!* (4.4) The Holy Spirit had enabled the Apostle Paul to shift his focus from exiting prison to exalting Christ – From focusing on self to serving Christ.

**“For to me, to live is Christ”**

Where does this type of mindset come from? It seems that the Holy Spirit had developed in Paul a Christ-Centered philosophy of life that he expresses in chapter one verse twenty-one: “*For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.”* This Christ-Centered philosophy enabled the Apostle Paul to pursue happiness while being incarcerated. Probably no verse better summarizes Paul’s joy, contentment, and purpose in life. This was Paul’s ruling passion! “*For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.”* This was Paul’s pursuit of happiness regardless of the circumstances surrounding him. “*For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.”* Today I want to focus on the first part of this verse, “*For to me, to live is Christ”* and next Sunday we will focus on the second part, “*For to me, . . . to die is gain.”*

Let’s dissect this short but powerful phrase together – *“For to me, to live is Christ.”*

First, notice that this Christ-Centered philosophy is personal.

**Personal – “For Me”**

Paul writes, *“For me.”* Adopting a Christ-Centered philosophy is a personal decision. It isn’t a decision that someone else can make for you. You must make it for yourself. This is similar to Joshua’s challenge to the children of Israel when he says, *“As for me and my house we will serve the Lord.”* (Josh.24.15b).

Paul had every reason to trust in his own achievements and successes but he was no longer going to put confidence in the flesh. Paul was circumcised on the eight day, of the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the Law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to the righteousness which is in the Law, found blameless. (3.3-6)

But for Paul whatever things were gain, those things he counted as loss for the sake of Christ. More than that, he counted all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus his Lord. (3.7-8) For Paul “for me” was personal.

The Christian paradox is that the way up is down. Christ humbled Himself to the point of death even death on a cross and therefore God highly exalted Him. (2.8-9) A person must come to the point where they say, “for me – to live is Christ.” “For me, to live is not financial stability, not relational happiness, not a promising career. For me – to live is Christ.

The surrender of self is a personal decision. The surrender of self is the key that unlocks the door of salvation in Christ. The surrender of self is the steppingstone that leads to sanctification and glorifying God is all things. A person must say, “I have decided to follow Jesus – no turning back. Through none go with me still I will follow – no turning back – no turning back.” As for me – I will serve the Lord.

I grew up in a church that had “altar calls.” Altar calls are mostly used when the preacher gives an invitation to come forward at the end of the service to profess faith in Christ. But altar calls are also used to challenge people in their Christian walk. These are called “sanctification altar calls.” These are opportunities when a person surrenders a habit that is hindering their walk with Christ – Opportunities for people to acknowledge God’s call on their life for Christian service – Opportunities for people to acknowledge that they aren’t truly living a life totally surrender to Christ. I’m issuing an altar call this morning.

Rise up, O people of God!   
Have done with lesser things.   
Give heart and mind and soul and strength   
to serve the King of kings.

Make it personal this morning by saying, “*As for me, to live is Christ!”*

This Christ-Centered Philosophy is not just personal – it’s progressive.

**Progressive – “To Live”**

Paul writes, *“For to me, to live.”* This phrase “to live” could be translated “to go on living.” For Paul the Christian life was a process of moving forward in Christ – a never-ending progression in Christ. Paul’s chief end was to pursue Christ in all things. Paul elaborates on this Christ-centered pursuit when he writes, *Not that I have already obtained it or have already become perfect, but I press on so that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus. Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet; but one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.* (3.12-14)

Paul had been a Christian for at least 25 years when he wrote Philippians. There is no question that he is one of the outstanding believers of all times. Yet over and over he reveals his mind-set, that he was still in the process: *“Not that I have already obtained it”* (3:12), meaning, “I have not yet come to know Christ and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings and conformity to His death in a complete and total way.” (3.10) *“I do not regard myself as having laid hold if it yet”* (3:13). Twice he says, *“I press on”* (3:12, 14); the word literally means to pursue. Paul had been at it for 25 years, but he still doesn’t view himself as having arrived!

In school I ran both cross-country and track. In cross-country you run 3.1 miles across fields, streams, and paths in the woods. In track I would run the 440, which is one time around the track. Running the 440 was smooth and quick with no obstacles or obstructions. Cross-country was completely different. You had to pace yourself, watch you footing, jump over falling trees and streams, always gauging your endurance so you can make a dash to the finish line.

To live the Christian life is like running cross-country. There are obstacles and obstructions. You always have to be focused, determined, pressing forward, and gauging yourself for the big finish when you can say, “*I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith.”* (2Tim.4.7)

Paul knew this. For him to live the Christian life was a constant pressing forward in Christ. Overcoming obstacles this world puts before you. Staying focused on the Author and Perfecter of faith – Jesus Christ. Pressing on toward the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. This is what it means, “to live.”

This Christ-Centered Philosophy is not just personal – it’s not just progressive – it’s possible.

**Possible – “Is Christ”**

Paul had learned the secret of how to live for Christ in any and every circumstance. Whether he was living with humble means or in prosperity, being filled or going hungry, having abundance or suffering need, Paul knew that he could do all things through Christ. (4.12-13)

Christ made it possible. Christ made it possible for Paul to endure all things for the glory of God. Christ made it possible for Paul to shift his focus from exiting prison to exalting Christ. (1.20) Christ made it possible for Paul to shift his attention off of himself and on to serving others. (1.22, 24-25) Christ made it possible for Paul to be content in whatever circumstance he might experience (4.11) knowing that God would supply all of his needs according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus (4.19)

The Person and purpose of Jesus Christ was the sum total of Paul’s reason for existence. *For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen.* (Rom.11.36) For *in Him we live and move and have our being.* (Acts 17.28a)

To “live Christ” means to live in union with Christ, so that Christ becomes our all in all. The concept of being “in Christ” is vital to understanding of what it means to be a Christian. Paul addresses this letter *“to all the saints* ***in Christ Jesus*** *who are in Philippi.”* (Phil.1.1) The instant a person truly believes in Jesus Christ as Savior, he is joined organically in a living, real union with Christ the Head as a member of His body, the church. To be “in Christ” means that all that is true of Christ is true of the believer. The believer is in union with Christ.

Paul wanted to know the fullness of Christ. He wanted to know the power of Christ’s resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings. Paul on one hand wanted to know the power of Christ that overcomes death itself and on the other hand Paul wanted to know the sufferings of Christ so to endure hardship. Paul wanted to be conformed unto Christ. (Phil.3.10)

“To live is Christ,” means growing to love Christ with all of my heart, soul, mind, and strength. (Mk.12.3) It means submitting all of my thoughts, emotions, words, and deeds to the lordship of Christ, so that I seek to please Him in all respects. (Col.1.10) It means growing to experience Christ as my “all in all.” (Eph.1.23; Col.3.11) Every aspect of life must be centered on the Lord Jesus Christ. The glorious person of Christ, and nothing less, is the core of the Christian life.

**ILL:** The wheel illustration

**Closing Thought:**

This morning I want to get personal. Can you say today “For to me, to live is Christ? Have you made the personal decision to follow Christ as Lord? Can you say, “I have decided to follow Jesus – no turning back? Though none go with me still I will follow – no turning back – no turning back.” As for me – I will serve the Lord.

Is the Lordship of Christ progressing in your life? This morning I want to give you the opportunity to confess any obstacles or obstructions that are hindering you from living for Christ. As I mention before, the surrender of self is the key that unlocks the door of salvation in Christ but it is also the steppingstone that leads to sanctification and glorifying God is all things.

Is Christ the core of who you are? Does everything else in your life stem off of your relationship with Christ? Can you say, “For me to live is Christ” or is there something else? This morning I want to give you the opportunity to crown Jesus Christ as your Lord of lords and King of kings.

All of this is possible because of Jesus Christ!

If God is speaking to you today please pray with me.

**Closing Prayer**

**Call to Prayer**

*Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet; but one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead,**I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.*(Phil.3.13-14)

**Benediction**

*Now to Him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to Him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.* (Eph.3.20-21)