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To Live is Christ

Scripture: Philippians 1:21–26

Philippians 1:21–26 (ESV)

21 For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. 22 If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell. 23 I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better. 24 But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account. 25 Convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with you all, for your progress and joy in the faith, 26 so that in me you may have ample cause to glory in Christ Jesus, because of my coming to you again.

Introduction

Well, Paul is writing from prison with the threat of execution hanging over his head. What will be the verdict from Caesar to whom Paul has sought an appeal to his unjust imprisonment? If you recall from last time, or you can just look at verse 20, Paul is only willing to say that whether he lives or dies, he believes that Jesus will be magnified through him. And that fact leads Paul to make this beautiful observation and indeed a confident declaration in verse 21 when he says, for me to live is Christ and to die is gain."

Now when Paul says, "for to me", he's not endorsing the pluralistic relativism that is so rampant today, as though he is saying "this is what life is to me. For me it's all about Jesus, but for you it can be about whatever you want." That's not the idea of "for me" when he opens verse 21 in that way. Rather, what we're seeing is that Paul here shifts the focus from that of verse 20, where the subject was about Jesus. He was in focus there when Paul says "whether I live Jesus will be honored, He will be magnified. Whether I die Jesus will be honored and will be magnified." And now the "for me" of verse 21 is Paul way of saying, "But let me tell you what life or death means for me." We know what it means for Jesus. He'll be honored and glorified and magnified. What does it mean for Paul? And here is where he introduces these eight magnificent monosyllables. To live is Christ. To die is gain. So beautifully poetic and parallel. We might even say short and sweet. But don't let the pithiness fool you.

There is so much more than just a catchy slogan in these words. These are words that are a deep mine of practical doctrine, and their significance is as weighty as eternity. Your satisfaction in life, your usefulness in life, your joy in life is dependent on you understanding this theme and making it your own.

Regarding the first clause, Matthew Henry says, "It is the undoubted character of every good Christian that to him to live is Christ." It might be an easy phrase to put on a bumper sticker and to post on social media, to wear on a t-shirt, "To live is Christ." But the real test is if we understand it and then actually put it into practice.

And so, my question today is, "What does it mean for the Christian that to live is Christ?" My plan for us then this morning is that we're going to zoom in and just look at these four words in the

context of this overall paragraph. But we're going to look at these words today. And next week, Lord willing, we will consider what does it mean for the Christian that death is gain? But today, we think about to live is Christ. What does it mean? I want to present for your consideration - I think three things that the text makes clear.

1. Life Comes from Christ

The first thing is the most fundamental thing. One who lives by the theme “to live is Christ” is one who acknowledges that their life comes from Christ. The Christian is one who lives a life that is from Christ. From Christ. That is to say that the power even the possibility of life, of living, comes in and through Jesus alone. He is the eternal word through whom God created all things that exist. And it's also by Him that all things are sustained and governed and preserved and kept.

Paul says as much in Colossians chapter 1 in verse 16 and 17. He says, “by him (that is by Jesus) all things are created.” And he says, “all things were created through Him and for Him and He's before all things and in Him all things hold together.” He is the life source of all that there is. And Paul says again in 1 Corinthians 8 verse 6, there is one Lord Jesus Christ through whom all things and through whom we exist. To live is Christ says that the power for living comes from Jesus.

Every human being owes their existence to Christ, whether they acknowledge it or not. But the Christian can say something more. The Christian has to say something more. And that is that Christ is not merely the source of his creaturely existence, but He is the source of his eternal existence. Christ has become the Christian's spiritual life. His righteousness, his hope, his eternal reward. And without that life, without that spiritual life, then there really is no living. Those who do not have Christ are born dead. That's all of us by nature, isn't it? That's who we are.

All of us, every single person in this room, apart from the intervention of our great God and Savior, we are dead. Oh, we might be breathing. We might be talking. We might be moving in this world, but real life, life with a capital L, it's not ours. We're dead. We're dead in our trespasses. We're children of wrath. We're destined for eternity in hell.

But God, that beautiful interjection there of the gospel. But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which He has loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses, He made us alive together with Christ. Amen? I forgot you're not Baptist. Amen? Sometimes I forget I'm not Baptist too, so. Our spiritual life, it comes from the one who is the living one Himself. And the Christian understands that were it not for Jesus, there is no life to live at all. Think about what Paul says in Galatians 2:20. He says, "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.”

Or think of how he puts it in Colossians. He says to them, he says, "Your life is hidden with Christ in God." I love that image. Our life as Christians is so bound up with Jesus that Paul says it's hidden. And I wonder, is that a way of describing your life, dear Christian? Are you so fused to Christ? Are you so absorbed in His excellencies and His glory? Are you so hidden in His all sufficiency that if people want to get to you, they first have to find Jesus, because you're hidden in Him because He is your life.

The Christian should not be able to even conceive of existence apart from their Savior. And that's in the grammar of this verse, verse 21. You look there, the way Paul writes this in the original, it actually lacks a verb. So, it doesn't say to live “is” Christ, in the Greek it just says, “to live Christ.” It's almost as though Paul is putting an equal sign there.

Life equals Christ. No Christ, then you have no power. You have no will. You have no strength. You have no purpose. There is no point. There is no life. But to have Him is to possess not just the power to breathe, the power to live, but the power to live forever.

Now there are many who claim Christ as their Savior and would even claim this slogan as their own "to live is Christ." There are many professing Christians who are still, even if subconsciously, resting in their own works, their own diligence, we might say, their own qualities in order to get them to heaven. They take Christ, but then they try to marry their works along to His or they fall back on Him as a mere safety net when they when they fall or fail. But that is not to make Christ your life.

And we need to be very cautious here, friends, because of how easily we can all be deluded into thinking we have made Him our life when actually, we're still operating as though we are our own self-sustaining source of life. Oh, how we daily need to repent to God, to our Savior, and say, "Lord, forgive me. You are not just my help. You're not just my aid, nor merely are you my crutch. You are my life. And forbid that I should ever try to take a step toward God, take a step toward heaven apart from you, Jesus, because I can't."

And so Christian, a question I think that this text impresses upon us is this question. Who is Jesus to you? How do you think of him?

The doctor Martin Lloyd Jones, that great British preacher, Welsh preacher, ministered in London for decades. He's preaching through Philippians and he gets to this verse in verse 21 and he asks that question, who is Jesus to you? And it's interesting. He says, I feel I need to stop expositing the text at this point and just keep asking that question over and over and over. Who is Jesus to you? Who is he? To the Christian, Christ is everything. Is that how you feel, friends? He's the thing, the one that makes a Christian a Christian. And so, Lloyd Jones would say, "Are you fully satisfied in Him? Who is He to you?"

John Newton answered that question posed to him 100 plus years earlier with this beautiful lyric. Newton says, "If asked what of Jesus I think, although my best thoughts are but poor, I'd say He's my food and my drink, my life, my strength, and my store. My shepherd, my husband, my friend, my Savior from sin and from thrall. My hope from beginning to end, my portion, my Lord and my all." That's the testimony of a man who could say, "For me to live is Christ." He recognized that life came from Jesus.

2. Life Is Lived for Christ

And a life that comes as a gift from Christ can only be properly lived if it is lived for Christ.

And that's the second thing we can glean from our text. To live is Christ means that the primary means by which we expend our energy is in service for Christ. A life that is from Christ must be a life that is for Christ or about Christ we could say. Now if we had formed ourselves we could live for ourselves. But the Bible tells us it is He who made us and we are His. And guess what? That's delightful news. That's delightful news.

Notice in these verses that we've read, that for Paul, a life lived for Christ is a joyful thing. This is to me so convicting when I read this text. Paul is contemplating that he's soon to be killed and he'll be brought into the immediate presence of his Savior in heaven. That means no more sin, no more suffering. It is a it's a small wonder, right, that he would say that that option is by far better in verse 23.

And yet, even though it's better, as you read these verses, Paul does not present life in heaven and life on earth as the choice between treasure and trash. Because to Paul, the choice isn't between

living on earth and living in heaven. That's not actually the categories he's set up. The choice for him is between serving Christ or seeing Christ. But in either way, Christ is at the center of all that Paul is. And for Christ to be at the center means that there is no disappointing option.

So life in heaven, life on earth, it's not the choice between treasure and trash. Paul presents it as the choice between two really wonderful options. So wonderful that he says even, and you see it in our text in verse 23, “I am hard-pressed between the two.” He says, I'm not really sure which choice I would prefer. Now we have to notice this is hyperbole. This is rhetoric. There is no question - life in glory with our Savior is far better. There's no debate on that.

But what Paul is doing here by presenting it in this way, is he's challenging us to see that a life lived on earth for Christ is a lot better than we might give it credit for. Paul's reminding us here that the Christian is one who who loves life. Even the Christian that longs for heaven, still loves life. Do you love life? Friend, every day is a gift for the Christian. Even the reality of sin, the presence of trouble and trials cannot eclipse the fact to the Christian, that God's goodness pervades every aspect of this world.

We don't want to wish our time away here in order to get to something better. Even though what we will get is better, rather what we're called to do is to redeem the time and make something better of what we have until the Lord calls us to Himself. But just because heaven is better, do not make the error of assuming that earth is bad. It is a pagan notion, not a Christian one. It is a pagan notion that says the material world is only evil, and we need to be released from that to the spiritual realm - that's the only place where there's anything good. That is not what the Bible teaches. It's not what the incarnation proves and it's not what we're going to be reminded of when we come to the table here in a few minutes. That which is physical, which is tangible, God made to be very good, and He's redeeming those things. But notice Paul's not saying that either. He's not saying that this world is evil and only heaven should be something that Christians look forward to and enjoy.

No, the Christian loves life right now because it's a means of serving his Savior. And who would want to wish that away? Think about another passage very similar to verse 21. That's Galatians 2:20. I mentioned it earlier already. You know it. But but it's sort of like a commentary on this verse. Paul says there that “I've been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me.” And then he says, "And the life I live in the flesh”. What he doesn't say, “I hate and I can't wait to be rid of it." No, he says, "The life I live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and who gave Himself for me." Life is a means of loving the Christ who loved us and who lived for us. We want time here on earth not for mere trifles, not for personal pleasures, but for the opportunity to serve our Savior and to commune with Him in that service.

Look at the way Paul describes that service in our text in verse 22. “If I am to live on in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me.” He does not say that means painful toil. He says it's fruitful labor. It's all positive for Paul. These verses are just a remarkable insight into the heart of a man who was so completely surrendered to his Lord that he could not conceive of a bad outcome.

Now one last thing about a life that is lived for Christ and in service to Christ I want to draw it from this text. And that is to say, it's impossible to understand what it means to live as Christ apart from life in the church. It might sound very noble and virtuous to say, “to live is Christ” but it will mean nothing if there's no way to express it - to put hands and feet to it. It'll just be words. But the way to bring the slogan to life is in the local church. That's Paul's focus. Look at verses 24 and 25.

He says that he will experience rewarding fruitful labor by serving the Philippians. He says, "But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account, Philippians." Convinced of this, that you need me basically or you need work yet to be done. I know that I will remain and continue with you

all. Why? For your progress and your joy in the faith. Now, think about that for a moment, what's happening here in this paragraph.

Commentators have pretty much universally noted that this is perhaps the most personal of Paul's writings, this little paragraph here. But yet, even with this very personal profession, Paul is not at all individualistic. He says, "I'm here to be with you all for your progress, for your joy." Philippians. And so what Paul's saying here, doesn't that kind of push back against the mainstream ethos of today's world, even today's Christian world? Many professing Christians are perfectly content to take Christ, but to leave His people, to not make a habit of attending and participating regularly in public worship, to say nothing of actually joining with a local church through formal membership.

We live in such a “Jesus and me” kind of world. That's all people want. It's all they think they need. But if there was ever a “Jesus and me” passage, it's this. Philippians 1:21–26, as Paul expresses his personal ambition to live for Christ, to be with Christ. But notice Paul can't talk about Jesus and me without also talking about me and the church. The way he lives for Christ is by living for Christ's people. And the same needs to be true for all of us who would take this theme as our own. To live is Christ.

It happens here, friends, dear members of Midway. Sinclair Ferguson said in one of his books, "It is simply not possible to live a God centered, Christ centered, Spirit-led life unless my life is also church centered." Or I think of the words of one of my professors who said, 'If you want to know how much someone thinks of Jesus, ask them what they think of the church.’ Now, we don't want to be reductionistic about it. Paul is not saying, you know, show up at church and do churchly activities.

That would be setting the bar too low for what Paul has in mind here. Rather, he's demonstrating that Christian love is fundamentally concerned with the spiritual welfare of other believers. Again, look at verse 25. He says that he's going to continue with them. Why? For your progress and joy in the faith, not just to have potluck dinners together, right? Not just to meet up for times of fellowship, no.

He says for your sanctification, for your progress in godliness, for your joy in Jesus. So, I think there's some questions we ought to be asking ourselves. Are you invested in the spiritual progress of other people? Do you rejoice when someone else grows in Christ? Do you view your presence here in church as a means of encouraging others, being an instrument, an agent of sanctification in the lives of others? Have you ever thought, is there anybody else's joy in the faith that is partly dependent on your faithfulness?

Paul could not describe what it meant to live for Christ without talking about the Philippians. And if you and I are to live for Christ, it means we are to live for the spiritual progress, for the abiding joy, of our fellow believers, especially those to whom we are joined together with in the local church.

Well, as we come to the conclusion of our considerations, look at verse 26. And we see again, Paul is joyful at the prospect of remaining alive even though it means for a time separation from the immediate presence of his Savior.

And why is he joyful about that? Look at what verse 26 says. It says, “so that in me you may have ample cause to glory in Christ Jesus because of my coming to you again.” Now notice, look there closely. Paul's desire is not that his return would make them more impressed with Paul, more grateful to Paul, more dependent on Paul. He wants their joy to terminate somewhere else, namely in Christ. He says, I want to come back to you so that you have ample cause to glory in Christ.

3. Life Is Aimed at Christ

And so here and we consider finally that to live is Christ means that our life must be unto Christ, aimed at Him. Right? For the Christian, our life is not just from Christ in source, not just for Him or about Him in service, but it is unto Him in aim and in purpose. Now all pastors worth their salt should say what Paul is saying here - that the reason they serve people isn't so that they would get glory, but that Jesus would be glorified. But really this is how every Christian ought to live.

That's what Paul's reminding us, that it's not simply enough to do good things, even good things, good Christian things. Paul wants us to ask, “why are we doing them?” What's our motivation behind our service? Is it so you hope that you could become the center of people's conversations, the center of their hopes, the center of their affections? Is it to advance your own name, your own reputation, your own little kingdom? Or is it to see others drawn closer to Christ?

There's a world of difference between doing things for Christ and doing things so that Christ would be glorified. Because the first can become a way of actually trying to make much of ourselves. Look at how altruistic I am. Look at how hospitable I am, how generous I am. I hope people will remember my name. But if we're doing things that Christ would be glorified, then we recognize, I want to decrease so that He can increase. That’s where Paul wants the Philippians to arrive at as well.

He says, "If I'm coming back to you, it's because I would love for you to glory not in me, but in Him." So, dear Christian, this is what our lives are for as well. This is what your life is to be about and headed towards, aimed at. And can you say that that is true of you today? Do you recognize that your work, your relationships, your parenting, your service in the church, your suffering, your ordinary faithfulness, all of it is to be gathered up into this one great ambition - that Christ alone would be praised, that He would be glorified.

His name is the name that will endure forever, not ours. His kingdom will last forever, not ours. His glory is the great end toward which all things are moving. As Paul will even say later in chapter two, one day soon every knee will bow, every tongue will confess. He gets the glory. Since we know that's where all of history is headed, then we live best now by living with that in mind, living with that goal in view.

And so let me bring us back to Paul's four remarkable words. To live is Christ. Can you say it? Do you mean it? Would others say it about you? As they think on your interests and the way you spend your time, the way you spend your money, the things you talk about. Would other people looking in, would they be able to say that for him or for her to live is Christ? Or would they say for him to live is career? For her to live is money, comfortability, health, safety. What's the theme of your life? What would people say for him to live - his video games, sports, music, popularity?

Or would they say, by the grace of God, would they say, "Oh, I can see that in all that they do for them to live is Christ." Is Jesus the reason you get up in the morning? Is He the one for whom you spend your strength? The one whose glory you seek. Can you say that to live is Christ? Friend, if you cannot say it with every fiber of your being, don't despair. For the Christ who is our life is also our forgiveness.

And He invites you to come to Him today and to bring your half-hearted “to live as Christ” and to plead of Him. Please make it true of me, Lord. Give me a bigger view of your glory and your goodness. Give me pure motives and affections. Plead with Him that that He would make this true of you, because it's the only way to live. You ask Him of that today and He will do it.

For there is no one who has ever come to Christ and said, “My life is not as it should be. But I recognize, I know, you are the all in all and I'm just a poor sinner, but I need my life to conform more to yours and I need to find more passion in your glory and I need to find more pleasure in your service.” There is no one who has ever come to Christ and made that petition to whom He has said, “No. Too late. You failed too much.” To all who in true faith, weak though it might be, come to this Savior and say, "Be my life." He says, "Yes, yes.”

The one who begins a good work will see it to completion. He will surely do it. Friends, it's the only way to live. For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever and ever. Amen.