

WHERE IS THE LIFE IN THE LIVING WHEN THE LIVING SEEMS LIFELESS?

SERIES: JESUS, SAVIOR OF THE LOST

By Ron Ritchie

I really enjoy reading, which is interesting since I never read a book until I was 22 years old. Since then books have been an important part of my life. One of my dear friends, Eff Martin, shared a book of poetry by T.S. Eliot with me. Eliot became a Christian later in life, and died soon after winning the Nobel Prize in 1948. One of his poems, "Choruses from the Rock," was about man and his struggle with reality. I will read part of it:

O world of spring and autumn, birth and dying!
The endless cycle of idea and action,
Endless invention, endless experiment,
Brings knowledge of motion, but not of stillness
Knowledge of speech, but not of silence;
Knowledge of words, and ignorance of the Word.

All our knowledge brings us nearer to ignorance,
All our ignorance brings us nearer to death,
But nearness to death no nearer to God.
Where is the life we have lost in the living?
Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?
Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?
The cycles of heaven in twenty centuries
Bring us farther from God and nearer to dust.

This poem gives spiritual insight into the empty, vain treadmill of the current world philosophy on which man's own ego-centered flesh and the devil himself has placed the human race. It is a treadmill on which all of us chose to walk in the past, going nowhere and yet encouraged the whole time by the evil one to keep going. It is a treadmill with people who are seemingly charming, clever, intellectual and knowledgeable about history, philosophy, religions and science. Yet as we relate to them on a personal level we are reminded of our own spiritual history; they are now where we once were, without a clue about how to get off. They do not know about a personal God or living life as he intended it to be lived, to its fullest here and into eternity, to his glory. So the question we want to address is: Where is the life in the living when the living seems so lifeless?

II. The only life worth living is found in Jesus, Luke 6:20-26

And it was at this time that he went off to the mountain to pray, and he spent the whole night in prayer to God. And when day came, he called his disciples to him; and chose twelve of them, whom he also named as apostles: Simon, whom he also named Peter, and Andrew his brother; and James and John; and Philip and Bartholomew; and Matthew and Thomas; James the son of Alphaeus, and Simon who was called the Zealot; Judas the son of James; and Judas Iscariot, who became a traitor. And he descended with them, and stood on a level place; and there was a great multitude of his disciples, and a great throng of people from all Judea and Jerusalem and the coastal region of Tyre and Sidon, who had come to hear him, and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were being cured. And all the multitude were trying to touch him, for power was coming from him and healing them all.

Ministering in Galilee, our Lord had previously healed a man with a withered right hand on the Sabbath. As a result of this miracle, the man who had been healed rejoiced because his hand had been made whole, as did the people in the synagogue. The Pharisees, however, were filled with mindless folly and murder. Their hearts were so hardened that they joined ranks with their political enemies, the Herodians, in order to plot Jesus' death.

Matthew 12 and Mark 3 report that following this miracle Jesus' ministry became extremely popular. Thousands began to follow this popular teacher and healer, coming from Galilee, Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea and beyond the Jordan, as well as people from the seaside cities of Tyre and Sidon north of Israel (modern Lebanon). Instead of trying to solve the problem of how to minister to the masses by himself, Jesus went off to the mountain to spend the whole night in prayer to God. Once again, we get the clue to living life on this earth in the sight of God: Depend on God for everything. Prayer was the key to our Lord's life and ministry. Through these conversations that he was able to accomplish his heavenly Father's will on earth. He had informed his friends and enemies alike that he did nothing and said nothing without first checking in with his Father. In this context Jesus went to prayer to ask his Father who of his many disciples should be chosen as apostles.

Our Lord was directed by his Father to disciple an inner core of men, the apostles, who would in turn disciple others, and thus reach out into the multitudes. An apostle was "a sent one," a man with a message who was sent out to deliver that message. He was not merely a Federal Express delivery person with a message packet from someone across the nation. In this context, Jesus, "the apostle and high priest of our confession" (Hebrews 3:1) was asking his Father to choose apostles who had already demonstrated that the message of the kingdom of God had changed their hearts. By the power of the Holy Spirit they would be able to deliver that same life-changing message to anyone willing to listen. The message had already changed their hearts; that is why it was so powerful and convincing.

I experienced this in a similar way as a college student selling pots and pans. I learned that the best way to sell my wares was to be sold on the product myself. I could endorse the cookware enthusiastically because my wife and I used it and were aware of the features that made it superior to any other. How much greater to bear testimony to the Christ! The pans offered a meal for a day, whereas Jesus came to give us bread for life. He required men to come alongside to portray that message through the new life that they had received in him.

Sometime during that all-night prayer session Jesus' Heavenly Father placed 12 names on his heart. In time these 12 men would become the first stones placed on the foundation of Jesus Christ on which the church would be built. Luke 9 records that our Lord delegated his power and authority to each one of them so that later the last apostle, Paul, would write in II Cor. 12: 12: "The signs of a true apostle were performed among you with all perseverance by signs and wonders and miracles." After Pentecost, the Lord sent his Holy Spirit upon them and they became the official emissaries of the new society on earth, the church. They would carry the message of Jesus Christ not only to their own Jewish nation, but to the Gentile nations over the next 30 years.

These 12 men were from many walks of life--fishermen, politicians, publicans--all living under the Roman oppression. They were lives that were essentially going nowhere, lives which were missing something in their spirits. When they came in contact with Jesus--the Light of the World, the Bread of Life, the Good Shepherd, the Resurrection and Life, the True Vine, the Son of God--and contrasted their lives with his, it fleshed out their dullness, boredom, and aimlessness. They realized that only a relationship with Jesus Christ could fill the emotional and spiritual hunger that they experienced.

Who did Jesus pick to lead others to a knowledge of the kingdom of God? First, Jesus picked Simon, a local fisherman from Capernaum, and renamed him Peter (Rock). (We would probably call him Rocky today.) He was married and we know that his mother-in-law's home was located close to the local synagogue. Peter was in the fishing business with his brother Andrew, as well as James and John. He was impetuous and boastful, yet Peter was deeply sensitive concerning his own sins and failures, especially after he denied his relationship with Jesus during our Lord's trial. After the resurrection he was restored to fellowship and ministry with the

Lord, and emerged as the leader of the 12 on the Day of Pentecost, after being filled with the Holy Spirit.

Peter became known as the apostle to the Jews, ministering for some 30 years in Israel, in addition to some of the Gentiles in Turkey. He wrote two humble letters, I and II Peter, to the second generation of Christians in northern Turkey, as well as co-authoring the Gospel of Mark. Eventually, Peter was martyred for his faith during the persecution of Christians by Nero around 62 A.D., and tradition tells us that he was hung upside down on a cross on the Appian Way, outside Rome.

Listed second was Peter's brother, Andrew, a disciple of John the Baptist until John pointed to Jesus and said "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:36-40). He then went and told his brother Simon, "We have found the Messiah." Later both brothers dropped their nets and followed Jesus for the rest of their lives, first as disciples and then as apostles. Tradition says that he died on a cross in northern Greece because he refused to sacrifice to idols when asked by the governor of that area.

Next are James and John, brothers who were fishing partners with Peter and Andrew on the Sea of Galilee. They also met Jesus on the shores of Galilee and dropped their nets to follow him. Later, our Lord would call them "the sons of thunder" due to their quick tempers. James and John, along with Peter, would be in an inner circle of apostles.

Ten years after Pentecost James would be the first Christian martyr under the sword of Herod (44 A.D.), in the first persecution of Jerusalem. On the other hand, John, the one whom Jesus loved, lived the longest. He ministered in Jerusalem for about 15 years, and then moved out into the Roman world, finishing his ministry in the city of Ephesus. From there the Romans took John and put him on the Island of Patmos for 18 months, where he wrote the Gospel of John; I, II, and III John; and the Book of Revelation. He returned to Ephesus until he died a natural death at the age of 90.

Next, the Father instructed Jesus to choose Philip and Nathanael (or Bartholomew). Philip may have gone with Andrew and Peter to hear the preaching of John the Baptist. It was during that time in the desert that Jesus said to Philip, "Follow me." According to John's gospel, Philip subsequently found Nathanael: "'We have found him of whom Moses in the Law and the Prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of Joseph.' Nathanael said to him, 'Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?' Philip said to him, 'Come and see.' Jesus saw Nathanael coming to him, and said of him, 'Behold an Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile.' Nathanael answered him, 'Rabbi, you are the Son of God; You are the King of Israel.'"

In one of our previous studies, we learned about Matthew (Levi), a Jew who was a public servant of Rome serving in a tax booth in Capernaum. Hated by both Romans and Jews, he was held captive physically, emotionally, and spiritually in his tax booth. However, when the Lord "noticed" him and said, "Follow me," Matthew immediately left everything to follow him. It was Matthew who gave a party so that all his fellow sinners could meet Jesus also. Very little is said of him over the next three years of Jesus' ministry, but we do know that he wrote the Gospel of Matthew through the power of the Holy Spirit, to demonstrate to the Jews that Jesus was the promised Messiah.

Luke then lists Thomas (called Didymus, "the Twin"), but it is the Gospel of John that gives us greater insight into his character. We mostly know him as "doubting Thomas," but to reduce his character to that difficult moment after the resurrection would be unfair indeed. In John 11, when the Master insisted on traveling to Bethany on the occasion of Lazarus' death, Thomas was more than willing to die with Jesus. He was aware of the political climate, that Bethany was just two miles from Jerusalem where the Pharisees were plotting to kill Jesus. Despite the physical danger, however, he exhorted the other disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him." He did doubt the resurrection of Jesus Christ, but once the risen Lord appeared in his presence to accommodate his unbelief, Thomas was humble enough to cry out, "My Lord, and my God!" He then served him all the days of his life.

Next is James (the lesser, younger one), followed by Simon the Zealot. Not much is known about James except that his mother's name was Mary (Matt. 27:56), and she was one of the women who went to the tomb to anoint Jesus' body on Easter morning. Simon the Zealot had been in a Jewish political party which opposed the Romans oppressors, even to the point of civil rebellion. The Zealots practiced guerrilla warfare for the

purpose of overthrowing the government. They did not want to pay tribute to Rome, but wanted the Messiah to rule Israel.

Next was Judas, the son of James (Thaddaeus). All we know about him is in John 14:22-23: "Lord, what then has happened to you that you are going to disclose yourself to us, and not to the world?" And the Lord answered and said to him, 'If anyone loves me, he will keep my word and my Father will love him and we will come to him, and make our abode with him.'

Finally, Jesus chose Judas Iscariot, a man from Kerioth, in southern Judea. He was the treasurer for the Lord, and was later pointed out to be a thief. Sometime during their relationship Judas became disappointed in the Lord when he told his disciples that his kingdom was a spiritual kingdom, rather than a physical kingdom that would overthrow the Romans. Jesus wanted to invade the hearts of men rather than the capital of Rome. When the Lord began to explain that he was on the way to the cross as the final "Lamb of God" who had come to die for the sins of the world, Judas became more disillusioned. However, he stayed with Jesus right up to the Last Supper, when he allowed himself to become a vessel for the devil. He then appeared before the High Priest, betraying Jesus for 30 pieces of silver. Judas reappeared before the High Priest after Jesus was tried and condemned, threw the silver at his feet, and then the "son of perdition" departed and hanged himself. These 12 men were placed on the Lord's heart to accompany him in his ministry and then take the truth out to the next generation. Jesus took full responsibility for his choices. He told his disciples in the Upper Room the night before his death, "You did not choose me, but I chose you" (John 15:16) that they might be with him. (Mark 3:14). Jesus said early in his ministry, "Did I not myself choose you the 12, and yet one of you is a devil?" The Lord knew who he was choosing, including Judas.

After the Lord chose his 12 apostles from among the many disciples following him they moved off the slopes of the mountain onto a level place. The Lord looked out on the large crowds "who had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were being cured. And all the multitude were trying to touch Him, for power was coming from Him and healing them all."

I cannot help but look at this list of apostles as well as the people on the slopes of this mountain without thinking what a wonderful, loving and patient Lord we have! Before the Lord appeared in their lives these men were stuck in the Roman oppression, the Jewish legalistic system, and the mundane, daily routine of lives going nowhere. When the Father laid on our Lord's heart to choose the 12--men from a common Jewish religious heritage, a variety of business and political backgrounds, who had vastly different temperaments--he was willing to walk into empty lives with an offer of eternal life if they would only put their faith in him as Lord and Savior. By the power of the Holy Spirit he was also willing to bring their minds and hearts together to focus on a single cause, the building of the church of Jesus Christ in their generation. They laid the foundational truths that would help every succeeding generation, of which we are the grateful recipients.

In 1962, when I was at Dallas Seminary in my second year of graduate work, my professor invited about 10 of us whom he was discipling to a retreat on a farm a few miles outside the city limits. There we were to sit under the teaching of one of his friends, a pastor from Palo Alto, California. I felt an obligation towards my professor to go, but was under pressure because my wife and I needed the money that I made as a Teamster on the weekends. My wife encouraged me to go, however, assuring me that God would provide.

For the next three days I listened to that pastor from California teach about "the New Covenant," the message that we are to live depending on our Lord Jesus for everything in our lives. I realized that something was seriously wrong with my Christian walk. I had been trying to get my life lined up with the scriptures, but was caught in a form of legalism that was killing my spirit. I wanted to serve the Lord, but it was getting too hard; I was failing in almost every area of my life, and that failure was compounded by guilt and shame.

I had arrived for the weekend spiritually exhausted, and as I listened I became fearful. If this pastor's teaching was true--"everything from God and nothing from us"--then my 10-year experience with Christ was wrong. Deep in my heart it all rang true, but if I believed him it meant I would have to change my entire Christian life style. I would have to get rid of all the things that were uniquely me and take on the character of Christ; it felt as if I would be tumbling into a great void. So I began to challenge this teacher on almost every point. By the end of that weekend, however, I moved from living a life under the law which only produces death, to a life

given over to the power of the Holy Spirit which produces life. It is life as God intends us to live in Christ Jesus, filled with joy, peace, and the wholeness of eternal life now. As I walked out the door of that farmhouse I will always remember the hug that pastor, Ray C. Stedman, gave me. My life has never been the same since.

Where is the life in living when the living seems so lifeless? Again I would say,

II. The only life worth living is found in Jesus, Luke 6:20-26

And turning his gaze on his disciples, he began to say, "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who hunger now, for you shall be satisfied. Blessed are you who weep now, for you shall laugh. Blessed are you when men hate you, and ostracize you, and cast insults at you, and spurn your name as evil, for the sake of the Son of Man. Be glad in that day, and leap for joy, for behold, your reward is great in heaven; for in the same way their fathers used to treat the prophets. But woe to you who are rich, for you are receiving your comfort in full. Woe to you who are well-fed now, for you shall be hungry. Woe to you who laugh now, for you shall mourn and weep. Woe to you when all men speak well of you, for in the same way their fathers used to treat the false prophets.

After the Lord chose his disciples, he began to teach them the secrets of the kingdom of God on the mountain slope. The multitudes were there to be physically healed, but our Lord taught that the physical healing was but a shadow of the spiritual healing he wanted to bring to the hearts of his people. Matthew 5 says that our Lord then sat down and taught his apostles and disciples the secret of living life in a new spiritual society, the kingdom of God. Many in the crowd were also privileged to hear the Lord's blessings to those willing to listen and obey, and the warnings to those who refused.

Matthew 5:3 records Jesus' words: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." Our Lord offered his disciples the key to the kingdom: Admit your spiritual bankruptcy and be blessed by being filled with the King and the spiritual riches and resources of his kingdom. The apostle Paul said the kingdom of God was not eating and drinking but righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit. The kingdom of God is the Lord ruling in the hearts of men and women who are willing to love and serve him through the Holy Spirit, displaying his character to the world. The rabbis would use the concept of the kingdom of heaven in terms of a political Messianic kingdom, when Judaism of the Pharisaic sort would triumph over the world. In contrast, Jesus showed that the poor in spirit are those who realize that they have no merit or righteousness of their own on which to stand before God. Due to this lack of merit, they cannot offer God anything in themselves to enter into the kingdom. They are characterized by utter dependence on God. Psalm 34:18 says, "The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit."

"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness for they shall be satisfied" (Matt 5:6). The hunger described is of a spiritual nature. Righteousness comes from the character of God; we cannot produce it from ourselves. Jesus distinguished the believer from the Pharisees who produced a self-righteousness, rather than the righteousness that the Lord gives. Isaiah 61:10 says, "I will rejoice greatly in the Lord, my soul will exult in my God: For he has clothed me with garments of salvation, he has wrapped me with a robe of righteousness" [that is, Christ himself]. The righteous have an appetite for the things of God. Moses said in Exodus 33:13, "If I have found favor in your eyes, teach me your ways so I may know you and continue to find favor with you. . . . Now show me your glory." (Ex. 33:13,18). In Psalm 42:1-2, David said, "As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. . . ." Jesus said that if you want to be truly happy, then hunger and thirst for the living God to invade your life.

"Blessed are those who mourn for they shall be comforted" (Matt 5: 4). We are to mourn over our sin, but then be set free in the Spirit to laugh in the joy of the Lord. David wept over his sin with Bathsheba and then experienced the forgiveness of God: "Blessed is he whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord does not count against him and in whose spirit is no deceit" (Psalm 32:1-2).

"Blessed are you when men hate you, and ostracize you [excommunicate you from synagogue and the Jewish community] and heap insults at you [e.g., hiss you off a stage], and spurn your name as evil for the sake of the Son of Man. Matthew 5 says, "Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." Jesus himself experienced this hatred, insults, and mocking throughout his ministry and so would his disciples: "If the world hates you, you know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of this world, the world would love its own, but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you, 'A slave is not greater than his master. If they persecuted me they will also persecute you'" (John 15:18-20). For the sake of the Son of Man, the key to living the Christian life is to be the object of persecution so as to be a reminder to the world that Jesus lives in you. Peter wrote to the Christian community in northern Turkey some 30 years later: "If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. But by no means let any of you suffer as a murderer, or thief, or evil doer, or a troublesome meddler; but if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not feel ashamed, but in that name let him glorify God" (1 Peter 4:14-16).

Jesus concluded this list of blessings by saying to them, "Be glad in that day, and leap for joy, for behold your reward is great in heaven; for in the same way their fathers used to treat the prophets." He was telling them that there is more to life than what is in this world. He exhorted them to become part of his kingdom, to penetrate Satan's kingdom of darkness with his light. They would be persecuted for his name's sake, because when Christ comes into a community, he divides it into those who are in the process of being saved and those who are in the process of perishing. From Moses to John the Baptist to Jesus, the true prophets and spokesmen of God have been treated this way.

In summary, Jesus was saying that those who declare themselves spiritually poor are blessed with the King and all the spiritual resources of the kingdom of heaven. Those who are hungry and thirst for God's righteous character will be given his righteousness. Those who weep over their sin and the sins of others will be forgiven and given a deep inner joy of the Lord that will result in laughter. Finally, those who are persecuted for Christ's sake can look forward to a day of rejoicing in heaven. In reality, he was instructing his apostles to live out their lives on this earth with the spiritual perspective that what is seen is not all there is.

The Lord then turned to those in the crowd who were living only for the blessings of this earth and gave them the flip side of the coin. "Woes" come as a surprise because these thoughts were contrary to current social beliefs. Our Lord was showing his heart of compassion by warning those outside the kingdom of the spiritual consequences of their decision to reject the King and the spiritual blessings of his kingdom. He was primarily speaking of the ever-present self-righteous Pharisees who lived their lives in utter contrast to the four spiritual blessings he had just taught.

Jesus began by saying, "Woe to you who are rich, for you are receiving your comfort in full." Many of the Pharisees and Sadducees were rich and their sole ambition was to attain riches. They received what they went after and were now experiencing its comfort in full. Unfortunately, their comfort produced an emptiness of soul and spirit, with no hope of future rewards. Years ago, when I returned from Africa out of the service, I was overwhelmed by the many elegant homes that were being built in my community in contrast to the hunger and poverty that I had just left. My wise Christian friend remarked, "Don't worry about it, Ron. Let them have it; that's all they get." For those who seek riches as the ultimate goal, Jesus' simple word rings true.

"Woe to you who are well-fed now, for you shall be hungry." The gluttons of the day will be so filled that all desire for food will be lost. They will spend eternity hungering for satisfaction and meaning, but will remain in a state of spiritual starvation. A handsome young man who epitomized this idea was in my home last weekend. He commented that all the illicit relationships he had had with women never seemed to satisfy him. He was a living example of the woe to which Jesus was speaking.

"Woe to you who laugh now, for you shall mourn and weep." The Romans and Greeks, the Pharisees and Sadducees, and the tax collectors all gave parties filled with wine, laughter, and songs. The day was coming, however, when "the party is over and it's time to go home." When they went home, it was to hell. There are many in our society who are given over to laughter, comedy, funny movies, stand up comedians, fun, fun,

fun. Certainly, they laugh, but they never mourn or weep over their own spiritual condition and the fallen lives of others around them. One day in hell they will weep and mourn forever.

"Woe to you when all men speak well of you, for in the same way their fathers used to treat the false prophets." In the days of Jeremiah false prophets would come in the name of the Lord and prophesy false dreams to tickle the people's ears. Although the people loved to hear them and they were well regarded as from the Lord, they were no more than man-pleasers. God told Jeremiah, his true prophet, that he never sent them (Jeremiah 14). When a disciple is asked by Christ to speak the truth in love, this spiritual truth often angers the person or splits a group down the middle as those accepting the truth of God or rejecting it; rarely do all people respond with favour. Jesus was telling his audience to beware when all men speak well of you, for it may mean that your message is so watered down that no one is challenged to change their evil ways.

Where is the life in the living when the living is so lifeless? The only life worth living is found in a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. This truth is evident when we think of what occurred in the dull, boring, going-nowhere lives of the 12 men called out of the marketplace and public sector to follow Jesus. Once called, they found themselves not only enjoying a personal relationship with their long-awaited Messiah and King, but being taught the secrets of how to live in the kingdom of heaven while living on this earth. They came to the full realization that "The kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit" (Rom 14:17).

I would like to challenge you to accept Jesus' words and make that choice to step into faith as a new creature in Christ. Receive a new life--not the old one cleaned up, but a brand new one. Step into faith, declare your spiritual bankruptcy, and go out a new creature in Christ, filled with the life, joy, and peace of Christ. When you ask him to come into your life, you are asking the Savior to forgive your sins. You then become a child of God, and he gives you power to live life like you never understood before. Make that choice. Listen to the Spirit telling you how much Jesus loves you.

Our heavenly Father, we ask you to work among us. For those of us who desire to follow you, please continue to encourage our hearts. Thank you for the new life we have in Christ, the power of the Holy Spirit, and the joy and peace that we have been given. Thank you that while we live on this earth we are full of the life that is you. Father, for those who are here this morning who are asking the questions deep within their hearts, "Where is the life in the living when the living seems so lifeless," I pray that they will be moved by your Spirit to turn to Jesus Christ who is the resurrection and the life. All who believe in him will not perish, but have eternal life. Amen.

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