

Dying to Live, Living to Die

In the name of our Good Shepherd who laid down his life for us, dear friends in Christ: Not quite twenty years ago an LCMS theologian named Harold Senkbeil wrote an excellent book on the power of God's forgiveness in Christ for sinners such as ourselves. In the initial chapter of this book, he paints a grim but accurate portrait of the human condition – how things are for us living under the curse of sin and its deadly consequences. He describes it as a deep seated desire within us. We want to really live, to have authentic meaning and substantial purpose. We seek lasting happiness and satisfaction. We long for genuine relationships, true and lasting love. But we find in this fallen world that nothing ever quite measures up; nothing fully satisfies the deepest desires of our hearts. We always come up short.

Consider: with all our electronic gadgets we are more interconnected than at any time in history, and yet people report overall being lonelier than ever. We have all kinds of entertainments available to us around the clock and more free time to spend on them, and yet people report being bored most of the time. Most people say they want to be happily married and stay that way; yet divorce rates even among Christians are at all time highs, while marriage rates for young singles are steadily dropping. Apparently we're not finding what we're looking for.

Indeed, our predicament is like the one King Solomon describes in the book of Ecclesiastes. There he tells of how he threw himself into one thing after another, trying to find what it is that makes life worth living. He tries the pursuit of knowledge and wisdom, learns a lot but only ends up with more questions. He tries the pursuit of pleasure, but finds that after a while everything that initially pleased him becomes tired and stale. He tries the pursuit of wealth, amasses a great fortune, and then laments that there's nothing worthwhile to spend it on. Oh, and then one day he'll die and the fortune will go to someone who didn't earn it and who will likely spend it foolishly.

So it is for us, always seeking to be satisfied and never quite attaining the goal – not in any lasting sense. The author Senkbeil in his book called our condition “dying to live”. It's a good description of it, first because it expresses the depth of that unfulfilled desire, and secondly because it names where it all ends: in death. That's where all our pursuits eventually come to. We really are dying to live.

And some people take it even farther. There are those who try to find what they are looking for in drugs – either in a feeling of euphoria or an escape from pain. And many of them end up killing themselves with an overdose. There are others called thrill seekers, who engage in various potentially lethal activities and extreme sports. They deliberately put themselves in harm's way because what they are after is the feeling of exhilaration they experience by coming this close to death and surviving. Of course, to recreate the feeling, each time they have to take it a bit closer. And I don't have to tell you what happens when they cut it too fine. One more: not long ago I read a report of a phenomenon emerging in the gay community, specifically among young males. Because they want to engage in high risk behaviors but don't want to have to worry all the time about contracting AIDS, some of them deliberately get themselves infected with the disease. That way they can start the treatments and party on with no more worries – except that their lives will be substantially shortened. Such people as these are quite literally dying to live.

So, what's the solution to the human condition? The Biblical answer is pretty radical. It's this: to live, you must die. What do I mean? Just this: the common denominator in all our pursuits is self gratification. It's what *I* want. *I* want lasting love. *I* want meaning and purpose. *I* want satisfaction and happiness – for *me*. Everything is always about me and my desires. And I have to recognize that's the sinful nature in me speaking. That's the part of me that is under the curse and wrath of God. It can never be satisfied. All it can do is die; die the death of repentance upon hearing the Law and judgment of God against my self-centeredness, my making a god of myself around whom the whole world revolves. Instead of always trying to satisfy the deepest longings of my heart, what I really need to do is acknowledge them as evil and hateful to the Lord, confess them for the sins they are, and turn from them. That's what it means to die the death of repentance.

But only by dying such a death can I find life – life not in pursuits of pleasure, wealth, fame, glory, love or anything else, but life in a person, Jesus Christ, who is the Author and giver of life, who is himself the resurrection and the life, who gave his perfect life for my sin that I might live through faith in him. He is the Shepherd of the soul who grants life through his Word and Spirit and who fulfills all our needs. He delivers life to us. In Baptism, he raised up within us new lives, lives that will endure forever like him in sinless perfection. In his Word of forgiveness and in his Holy Supper he grows and matures our new lives so that we become more like him.

And so our pursuit is to continue this process of dying to live: constantly killing the old selfish nature through repentance, and receiving the Spirit who creates and sustains the new life within.

What's the final goal? It may sound strange, but it's living to die. That's what the new life in you does. It lives to die. This is what St. John is saying in today's Epistle lesson. "By this we know love, that [Jesus] laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers." You see, the focus and purpose of life has shifted. Where the old, sinful life sought its own good, the new life in Christ seeks the good of others. That's where it finds meaning. That's where it achieves its purpose. Like Jesus, it gives itself, it *sacrifices* itself for the life of others.

And in this fallen world, that might mean going all the way. It may be necessary when coming across someone in distress and in a dangerous situation that you risk your life to rescue them, say from where they are trapped in a burning vehicle or building. Or again, you could be called upon to intervene and place yourself at risk to protect someone from violence or a criminal threat. And yes, you might be killed in the process. The new life in you has no fear of death. It lives for others. And it will keep on living for others even if you die.

Of course, such incidents are going to be rare. What are ongoing are endless opportunities *to live* sacrificially for others. This is what John is stressing. "If anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does the love of God abide in him?" The answer is that it doesn't. That's the old life looking out for number one, which is why John says, "Let us not love in word or talk, but in deed and truth."

And let me make this clear: the Lord isn't asking you to save the world. The world already has a Savior in Jesus. Your calling in Christ is to live sacrificially for those he places in your life. Charles Dickens in his novel *Bleak House* created a character named Mrs. Jellyby. She's obsessed with helping the poor children in some obscure African village no one's ever

heard of. She spends all her time and effort raising funds and awareness for these children she's never seen and will never see, meanwhile her own children are sick, half starved, and dressed in dirty rags. Dickens' point was that a lot of Christian philanthropy works the same way. We focus on big needs someplace else and ignore the little needs of those all around us: the spouse who needs your forgiveness, the young person whom you could teach or encourage, the lonely person who is lonely because they have disagreeable personality and can't get along with anyone that you could visit and befriend. Yes, it's a sacrifice. That's the point.

Dying to live and living to die: this how we keep God's commandments and do what pleases him. And this is his commandment: that we believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another. God grant us the grace to do so. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!