

**The Sixth Sunday after Pentecost**  
July 12, 2020  
Christ the Rock Evangelical Lutheran Church  
Farmington, New Mexico

**Matthew 10:34-42** “Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. 35 For I have come to turn

“a man against his father,  
a daughter against her mother,  
a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law—

36 a man’s enemies will be the members of his own household.’

37 “Anyone who loves their father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves their son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. 38 Whoever does not take up their cross and follow me is not worthy of me. 39 Whoever finds their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life for my sake will find it.

40 “Anyone who welcomes you welcomes me, and anyone who welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. 41 Whoever welcomes a prophet as a prophet will receive a prophet’s reward, and whoever welcomes a righteous person as a righteous person will receive a righteous person’s reward. 42 And if anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones who is my disciple, truly I tell you, that person will certainly not lose their reward.” (NIV2011)

**Choose the Life Jesus Won for You**

Recidivism. Hard word to say. Tougher tendency to conquer. According to some statistics 3/4 of inmates released from state prisons are rearrested within 5 years of their release and 55% are incarcerated again.<sup>1</sup> Anyone who hasn’t ever been in jail is left scratching their head, wondering what they are doing with their life. To an outsider, it seems like a no-brainer. But to the person who has spent significant time behind bars doesn’t just go back to what we consider normal life on the outside. Fitting back in with normal life can be a challenge. One of the simplest explanations is that life on the outside isn’t always what it is cracked up to be. Freedom can be a challenge. Making decisions and determining your own course through each day can be exhausting and disheartening. As odd as it sounds, it can feel easier to just give in to another crime and go back to a more comfortable environment in prison.

Criminal justice reform and helping people adjust to life in society are worthy topics for Christians to discuss and consider how our beliefs will impact the way we treat our fellow human beings. But that’s not our focus today. God’s Word for us today from Matthew chapter 10 causes us all to consider what are you living for? Not, why are you alive. But what makes your life worth living? What is your life about? What direction or goal is your everyday existence heading toward?

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.themarshallproject.org/2014/12/04/the-misleading-math-of-recidivism>

Jesus challenges his disciples. He wants all of us to consider some of the big picture choices we make about life. What are our priorities? Who gets top priority in how we live? How do we define the best life we could have? It's a choice. Jesus says: **"Whoever finds their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life for my sake will find it."** (Matthew 10:39) Jesus comes at us about our choices between peace and hostility, family and faith, a life of struggle or a life of ease. And for people who value being in control of our lives and making our own decisions, it feels too extreme. And yet, when we understand what Jesus is offering and what he is asking, we see it is really no choice at all. Oh, it might be difficult to put into practice in our lives. But a life of full commitment with Jesus has benefits that far outweigh anything we would be asked to give up.

So what are you living for? Usually we get these reminders at the start of a new year. We are encouraged to take some time and evaluate improvements we could be making. Some goals we could be setting. Some accomplishments we want to be able to look back on with pride when December 31st rolls around. But that is one of the upsides of a pandemic. When all sense of normalcy has been tossed aside. When our regular routines have been disrupted. We can view it as an opportunity to consider what really matters in life.

There are all kinds of books and podcasts and blog posts you could read and share on social media that address having a better, more meaningful life. That advice usually directs us away from money and possessions. After all, recent history has taught us that everything you've been accumulating could disappear after a subprime mortgage induced great recession. Don't focus completely on your career. Through no fault of your own, it could get wiped out by an unprecedented global pandemic. No, those think pieces and advice columns encourage us to focus on relationships. We are told to work on ourselves. Learn. Grow. Develop character.

You finally catch the eye of the guy who hasn't noticed you. Your relationship develops from the getting to know you phase to a deeper friendship. Beyond physical attraction, you develop a deeper bond that allows you to enjoy each other. You can't imagine facing challenges or joys without each other. Or you get to hold your baby girl in your arms for the very first time. So precious. So pure. You picture yourself doing everything in your power to give her a bright future. You are motivated to provide for her and give her someone she can respect. Or you have that friend who is always there for you. Closer than a sister. You can always rely on her to support you. Even tell you the honest truth you don't want to hear, but shares it for your own good. Or you can work on yourself. Learn from failures and surround yourself with people who challenge you and cause you to keep growing. Daily express gratitude and focus on life's blessings. All these things can contribute to giving you a richer and more fulfilling life.

In a commencement address at Kenyon College in 2005, David Foster Wallace told those graduate that there is really no such thing as atheism. Everyone worships something. Some people worship money. Some their own body and beauty. Some worship power. Others their own intelligence. He says: "There is no such thing as not worshipping. Everybody worships. The only choice we get is what to worship. The compelling reason to worship a god... is that

pretty much every other thing you worship will eat you alive.” David Foster Wallace was a celebrated author who tragically took his own life. He didn’t worship the God of the Bible. But he was at least honest enough to see the futility of living for anyone or anything else.

That prince charming doesn’t have to betray your trust and abandon you. That little girl doesn’t have to grow up to reject everything you tried to give her and all the values you worked so hard to instill. That friend doesn’t have to leave you in the lurch when you need her the most. They don’t really have to fail you in the worst ways that would cause you the greatest heartache to show you there is more to life than this. Those relationships can be good and healthy and add meaning to our lives. But there still has to be more. Those people can’t give you ultimate happiness any more than money or possessions or careers can. One contemporary Bible scholar sounds this warning: “If we look to some created thing to give us the meaning, hope, and happiness the only God himself can give, it will eventually fail to deliver and break our hearts.” (Keller, *Counterfeit Gods*, p. 3)

Jesus could leave you undisturbed in what you are living for. He could just announce an artificial peace with you over the things you think will bring you happiness and satisfaction and fulfillment. He could do that. But Jesus knows that it would all leave you empty in the end. That it would cause you to miss out on God’s bigger and deeper and richer life for you. That your truce with a life on your terms would cause you to forfeit real life with him. And so Jesus throws a sword down on earth. Jesus rips apart your comfort level with life, because he is unwilling to let you settle for less than the full life he came to bring. Jesus is even willing to rip apart every relationship that would stand in the way of ultimate peace with God.

Think about it this way. If you discovered your cousin was living on top of a nuclear waste site or an abandoned Uranium mine, would you just shrug your shoulders? it would be uncomfortable to cone to grips with that reality. It would be unpleasant to pick up and move. But ripping off that band aid would ensure a healthier life in the long run. Will the Washington Redskins change their name? First it was their stadium sponsor FedEx. Now Nike, Target, Walmart and Amazon are refusing to sell the team’s gear. But how much pressure will it take for the team to make a major change?

Jesus is making the contrast so stark, so absolute to help us see how clear his vision for our lives is. Life doesn’t have to be devoid of all earthly blessings, but just put them in their proper place. Forsake all to gain Christ. My emptiness finds fullness in his worthiness.

For Jesus, the choice was clear. Jesus gave up everything for you. Jesus had everything that we would consider a complete life. Jesus had a perfect, harmonious relationship with the Father and the Holy Spirit in heaven. He had every comfort uninterrupted by sin or suffering. But Jesus left that bliss of heaven to come to this earth. Jesus descended from perfect harmony to face hostility and rejection. And when Jesus proclaimed the truth, God’s truth, absolute truth, it meant a rupture in peaceful relationships. Jesus endured a sword to bring you back into a restored relationship with your Creator. And to give you real life, Jesus had to give up his life. To bring you peace that lasts for eternity, Jesus had to experience the

agony of hell. To give you a life that will never be separated from his blessings, Jesus had to cry out as he was forsaken by God himself on the cross.

We tell ourselves that we are in control of the choices we make in our lives. But then in practice we act like we have no alternative but to do what our emotions tell us to do. The reality is our choices can have a big impact on our feelings. In *Mere Christianity*, C.S. Lewis shows that love in the Christian sense isn't an emotion, but a matter of the will. When you choose to do something, then your feelings follow. Lewis provides an example from when he was writing during World War II. The negative case is the terrible way the Germans treated the Jews. Then hated them. Or you can use the case of the first slaveholders in Virginia. Once they began to mistreat those slaves and treat them as property, then they started to feel like those people were inferior or second-class human beings or not deserving the same rights.

Jesus wants you and me to make the choices for real life. Choose to live for the one who loved you and gave himself for you. Choose his peace over artificial peace. Choose Jesus even over your closest, most cherished relationships. Choose to take up your cross and follow him whatever the consequences might be. Choose to lose your life for his sake so you find the life he has for you.

The choices Jesus made in his life take all the pressure off you for your life. Because the benefits of what Jesus accomplished by his life and death and resurrection aren't just stored up in some celestial vault for you far off in the future if you don't mess things up between now and when Jesus tells you your time is up. Right now you have the riches of forgiveness that make any possessions pale in comparison. Right now you have your baptismal identity that makes any career dim compared to the meaning and purpose you have through the new life accomplished by washing with water and the Word. Right now you have the commitment of your Eternal Father that is deeper even than the purest bond between husband and wife. Right now you have motivation from your brother Jesus who won't ever turn his back on you. Right now you have the presence of the Holy Spirit speaking the truth you need to hear through Holy Scripture.

It stinks when choices have been taken away from you. When you feel forced to do something you don't want to do. But having just a few choices laid out in front of you can be quite liberating. Brain research shows that having fewer choices helps us make better choices. In a grocery store known for limitless choices, an experiment showed people were more likely to try jam when the options were reduced from 24 flavors to 6. Vanguard saw employees were more likely to choose a company sponsored investment plan when they were given fewer choices. When Jesus challenges disciples with some stark choices, he helps us to choose better. The one who lived and died for you shows you what living is for. Jesus has given you ultimate freedom. And he has given your everyday existence something to live for. Choose the life Jesus won for you. Amen.

*+ May he who began a good work in you carry it on to completion until the day of Jesus Christ. +*