

How to Save Your Life

Mark 8:27-38

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

By: Ryan Dueck

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I want to begin with a big question: Why are you drawn to Jesus?

What attracts you to him? What do you find beautiful and compelling? What itch does Jesus scratch? What longings does he satisfy? What keeps you coming back to his church, this community of his followers, sometimes even after long years?

Of course, in asking the question this way I am making a rather large assumption. I'm assuming that you *are*, in fact drawn to Jesus.

Maybe you're not. At least not the way you once were.

I know full well that in the life of faith things can sometimes go stale. Faith can become less of an energizing pursuit and more of a rusty habit.

Maybe, over time, the person of Jesus no longer moves us, no longer shocks us, no longer takes hold of our hearts and minds the way he once did.

I've been watching a show called *The Chosen* over the last little while. It's a multi-season series about the life of Christ. It's free and can be watched on the app or on their website. The first two seasons have been viewed over 160 million times.

I'm not normally drawn to "religious" TV shows. In my experience, they are often poorly done. They feel contrived and overly preachy. At least to me.

But a number of friends have recommended it over the last year. "It might surprise you," they say. "We've been binge-watching it. Our teenagers and young adults even watch with us!"

I've only watched the first six episodes, but I have to say that for me, this show came along at just the right time.

In the midst of all the frustration and division of the last year and a half of COVID, in the midst of all the nastiness out there in public discourse, in the midst of challenges of the present and uncertainty about the future, in the midst of all the hard stuff that takes up far too much of our bandwidth...

In the midst of *all this*, it has been so refreshing to enter into the story of Jesus in a new way.

Yes, the show imaginatively fills in a lot of the gaps in the story. No, not everything in it is found in the gospels.

But the show is reminding me of why I am drawn to Jesus. The show portrays Jesus in what I think is a quite brilliant way.

He is *human*. He laughs, he dances, he plays with kids, he jokes around. He seems like the kind of guy that you would want to hang out with.

More importantly, he embodies the deep love, mercy, and forgiveness of God in a quite beautiful way.

In the first episode, Jesus heals Mary Magdalene of the spirits that torment her. He does this by speaking the words of the prophet Isaiah that Mary's father used to speak to her when she was a little girl: "Thus says the Lord, he who created you O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine" (Isaiah 43:1).

It is a powerful scene. I've watched it many times.

In subsequent scenes Jesus tenderly embraces a leper, healing him from his affliction and restoring him to community. He boldly summons a paralytic to his feet.

In each one of these scenes, I would slightly embarrassingly notice a little tear trickling down my cheek as I watched (sometimes, it was even more than a trickle!).

This is our God, I would think. This is what God is like.

After the episode where Jesus calls his first disciples, Claire looked at me and said, "I would totally follow that guy." "Me too," I thought.

We are drawn to this Jesus who speaks our name, who summons us to life, who offers healing from our afflictions, liberation from that which holds us in chains. We are drawn to this Jesus who looks at us in all of our weakness and offers not judgment but mercy.

People were drawn to Jesus during his time on earth and they have been drawn to him ever since.

Even those who want nothing to do with the church, even those who are fed up with Christians, even those of other faiths or who claim to have no faith at all often express admiration for the person of Jesus.

This despite the fact that Jesus didn't *just* say and do things that bring tears to the eyes of middle-aged pastors.

Jesus also said and did things that, at least on the face of it, could easily repel people and push them away.

Our passage this morning, for example.

There aren't many more difficult things to hear than being called "Satan," which is Peter's fate in today's text after getting the right answer to the question ("Who do you say that I am?") but being unwilling to accept that this would involve rejection, suffering, and dying.

Jesus doesn't stop there. He then says words that I suspect very few of us want to hear:

Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it.

Self-denial? Taking up a cross? Losing our lives for the gospel in order to save them? Could there be a less attractive message?

It is certainly a teaching that fits awkwardly in our time and place. We are trained in countless ways, every day of our lives, to believe that the self is not for denying but for validating, for affirming.

To speak against the self is to speak against the most prominent and cherished idol of our times.

And yet, if we are honest (and it's hard to really be honest), we know that Jesus tells us the truth. We know that our selves can be quite selfish.

In the opening passage of John's gospel, we read the well-known words:

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth (John 1:14).

We need both. We are drawn to the grace, certainly. This is what has me sniffing on the couch while watching *The Chosen*.

We are perhaps not as easily drawn to the truth. Especially when the truth isn't flattering.

Especially when Jesus says that the kingdom of God will not come in the way that we expect or prefer.

Especially when we are called to model his way of life and set aside our own wants and desires for the sake of others.

Especially, in the most extreme cases, when we are called to suffer for the sake of the gospel.

These are not the sort of things that bring a wistful tear to my eye. And yet deep down I know that I need this truth every bit as much as I need the grace of God.

One commentator I read this week asked a question at the conclusion of her reflection on this passage:

In what sense are Christians called to "lose their lives?" What is the life that needs to be lost in order to be saved?

I want to close by reading a letter that I wrote to my kids on their fifteenth birthday that I think at least points us in the right direction.

I posted it on my blog and then bribed them to read it with a trip to Dairy Queen because, you know, that's a totally normal way for a dad to open up a conversation with his teenagers. ☺

It's a letter that I wrote to challenge them but also to challenge myself. This is how most of my sermons work, too.

On this your fifteenth birthday, I want you to ask some pretty big questions. Questions like, “What kind of person do I want to be? What kind of person do I want to invest energy into becoming? What is the purpose of this life I’ve been given?”

Is it just to stumble around for a few decades on the planet, tramping toward the grave with as much pleasure and as little pain as possible or is there some higher purpose to it all?”

I want you to know that we humans tend to invest so much of our time and energy in things that are fading away. Money, stuff, entertainment, physical appearance.

All around you, these things assume exalted places in our collective consciousness. But the truth is, they’re all just distractions from far bigger and more important pursuits.

I want you to know this now, at fifteen, so that you can avoid the mistakes that so many of us older folks regularly make, which is failing to pay attention to the things that matter most.

What matters most? Well, a long time ago there was this guy named Paul that was trying to explain to a church what life looked like when it was given over completely to God and God’s purposes for human life.

He came up with a list and he called it the fruit of the Spirit. He used words like love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. These things, more than anything else, are what a human life is supposed to look like.

So, no matter what you end up doing with your lives when it comes to occupation or vocation or whatever (and I know this is the question that many of your peers and teachers are constantly telling you is the most important one to answer), these virtues will be your best and most lasting contribution to this world...

I have bad news for you. As if you didn’t know it already, these fruits are not instinctual. Indeed, your instincts will often take you in the exact opposite direction of these things. You’ve probably observed this a time or two in your fifteen years on the planet. You’ve probably noticed it more than a time or two if you’ve been paying attention to your dad. Sorry about that.

I’m always going on and on about Jesus. I know this can probably be wearisome to you, at times, but it’s only because I think that Jesus matters deeply to the lives that you are called to live, the lives that we are all called to live.

In one conversation with a bunch of religious know-it-alls, Jesus talked about the things that come out of the human heart. He had another list and it wasn't nearly as pretty as Paul's. He talked about how the human heart was the source of all kinds of nasty and disordered stuff. Jesus, it seems, thought that bad selves came rather naturally to us.

This doesn't really square with the narrative that you daily marinate in; I know. In the social media you consume, in the films you watch and the music you listen to, you are constantly told some version or other of what is becoming a very predictable (and inadequate) narrative about what it means to be human.

You are constantly told that your heart is where you find the truest and best version of yourself—the self that you must be authentic to. Your highest aspiration, you are often told, is to be true to the self you find within and to externalize this self to the world which is then obligated to affirm and validate this self.

I regret to inform you that this is a lie. It is a very subtle lie and embedded within it are a number of partial truths. It is a very attractive lie, and it captures the imagination of many people far older than you. But it is a lie, nonetheless.

If we're honest—and it's hard to be honest, I know—when we look inside ourselves, we see that Jesus is telling the truth about us.

We find goodness of all kinds, certainly. But we also find the opposites of the “fruits” above. We find small and selfish selves. We find reactionary judgments and grudges and violence (physical or relational) and harshness and impatience.

We find lust and acquisitiveness. We find fear and a suspicion of peace. We find stinginess and a lack of self-control.

Not always, of course. But these things, along with more inspiring things, reside in the human heart. I know that you know this. I know that you know that in the deepest parts of who we are, we find things that are not worth being true to.

So, I hope you will increasingly come to realize that the goal of life, fundamentally, is not to be true to yourselves. I hope you will set your sights much higher than this because there are far deeper and truer and more beautiful things to be true to than this.

Our selves are wonderful, glorious, unique treasures. They are gifts from God, and they are among the ways in which God's love is refracted and reflected out into a world in desperate need of it.

But there are parts of our selves that, I am afraid to say, our only task is to die to so that better and more beautiful forms of life might be brought forth.

The goal of life is to be our best selves—to be summoned away from attachments to ourselves and to follow God’s call in pursuing the flourishing of our neighbour, our world, and ourselves within it.

So, be true to yourselves. But be truer to God. Because God is a much more reliable thing to be true to than a self.

Oh, and one more thing, I hope you will never, ever forget that that the God who has summoned you and I beyond ourselves and has given us this holy task of becoming human is filled with mercy and loves you more than you can comprehend.

This God’s love is big enough to hold all your triumphs and failures, all your right steps and missteps. This God’s love for you is the reason that you are invited beyond yourself but this love does not depend on your performance.

God loves you at every stage of your being and becoming and always will. And the same goes for me.

How do you save your life? You lose it.

You lose it in the life and death and resurrection of Jesus. You offer it up for love’s sake and find that in so doing you have discovered what it was for in the first place.

May God help us to save our life by losing it in all the right ways.

Amen.

