

Well good morning everyone. Usually guest preachers start off by introducing themselves. I don't think I need to do that, but I thought it might be helpful to give you a few tidbits of info about my background.

My parents immigrated to the US in 1949 from the island of Cyprus which is less than 50 miles south of Turkey and 75 miles east of Syria. My brother was 2 years old when they came to the US. I was born here. Most Cypriots speak Greek with a pretty distinct accent. My Greek isn't all that good, so I don't want you to think I'm able to open up the Greek NT and easily read it, though I can geek out a bit when it comes to Greek word studies. I'm a civil engineer by training and have worked in the water utility industry for nearly 40 years. I'm pretty much retired, but will do an occasional project if the right opportunity arises. I was raised Greek Orthodox, and my family, especially my mother, was deeply involved in the church. As a teenager, I sang in the church choir, was involved in the church youth group, and was also a member of a Greek fraternity. This was a fraternity for Greeks, not a college fraternity. You'll hear a bit more of my testimony later.

So, it's Advent, and every year we talk about baby Jesus in the manger. As we try to help our children understand who Jesus is, one of the ways we do this is to focus on the birth of Jesus. And why not? Both Matthew and Luke devoted a fair amount of ink to the Christmas story. It's a sweet story, and one that is easily understood by young children.

Yet advent is about so much more than the baby in the manger. In fact, if we were to skip those first two chapters of Matthew and Luke, would we still be able to answer this important question, "Why did Jesus come?" I think the answer is most assuredly "yes," and Mark and John must have thought so as well, since they do not even mention the manner of Jesus' birth.

So this advent season, why don't we look to answer this question, "Why did Jesus come?" And who better to answer that question than Jesus Himself?

Jesus answers this question in several different ways. I'm going to group them into six reasons, but I'm only going to focus on one of them today:

- He came to fulfill prophecy (Mt 5:17)
- He came to represent the Father, to do His will and speak the truth "I have come in my Father's name..." (John 5:43; 6:38; 18:37)
- He came to judge, and divide the people into two camps. The truth He came to bear witness of would create division. Some would hear and accept, others would not and oppose it. (Mt 10:34; Jn 9:39)
- He came to save the lost. (Lk 19:10)
- He came to go to the cross. (Jn 12:27)
- and finally, He came to bring life.

"The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly (Jn 10:10).

LET'S PRAY Thank you Lord, the you sent your son as a baby to do so much for us, but most especially, that He came to give us life. Teach us, through your word today, what it means to have the life, and have it abundantly. We want that, Lord. Amen.

I grew up in a non-native English speaking household. Sometime in grade school, I found out that my pronunciation and understanding of the meaning of some words was off. For example, I would pronounce the word "won't" as "woont" because that was how my mother pronounced it. One day, one of my friends made fun of me, blurting out "woont" and laughing. Needless to say, I was quite embarrassed. You can bet that I made very sure afterward that I properly pronounced every word.

My parents would also use English words in ways that weren't quite correct. Some words from English just don't translate well into Greek, but Greek was the language they were familiar with, so they would do their best and often miss the nuance of the English words that would make it clear they were not native speakers.

The interesting thing about this is that having an incorrect or incomplete understanding of an English word isn't limited to non-native speakers. This also extends to scripture. Many Christians either have a wrong understanding or not a full, thoughtful understanding of key words in scripture.

The scriptures are life-giving, so it is critical that we rightly understand the meaning of the words of scripture, and ruthlessly remove false ideas rooted in an improper understanding of these words that are God-breathed. We should look at key words and make sure we haven't distorted their meanings. I have to admit that I have all too often found myself reading through scripture that clearly means something profound, and just skating over it with a different understanding and without giving it a second thought. Have you done that?

So let's take some time to look with fresh eyes at the meaning of the word "life" in the NT.

There are primarily 3 different words in Greek that we translate to mean "life." These are ζωη, ψυχη and βιος. βιος is the root from which we get the word "biology" from. I don't want to get into the nuances regarding the differences between each of these words, because it isn't that easy to explain. But there are a few interesting things to note that I believe will help. For instance, here is one example verse in which both ζωη and ψυχη are used: "Whoever loves his life [ψυχη] loses it, and whoever hates his life [ψυχη] in this world will keep it for eternal life [ζωη]. (John 12:25). While God gives life [ψυχη] to all living things, only ζωη is used to describe the life that flows from God as an inherent part of God's nature. When Jesus said He would lay down His life, he used ψυχη. When He said He is the bread of life or the light of life, He used ζωη to describe that life. John 5:26 says "For just as the Father has life (ζωη) in Himself, so He also has granted to the Son to have life (ζωη) in Himself. John in his gospel introduces this concept of ζωη in John 1:4 where he writes, "In him was life, and the life was the light of men."

John, more than any other writer of scripture, uses ζωη to talk about life. He does this in the gospel of John, in his 3 letters, and in Revelation.

Half of the time when John uses ζωη in the gospel, he couples it with the word "eternal." When we read the words "eternal life" we are talking about eternal ζωη. That is the only way it is written in the scripture. It is always and only eternal ζωη. In fact, in John's gospel, every mention of eternal life, except one, is spoken by Jesus.

So what does Jesus mean when He says "eternal life"? Fortunately, He gives us the answer.

John 17:3: "Now this is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent."

[PAUSE]

Now I don't know about you, but when I first read this many years ago, it wasn't the answer I was expecting. Did you notice what isn't in this definition? Nothing about wealth or possessions, marriage or children, food or clothing, prestige or social status, good health or strength, good looks or popularity, intelligence or talent, leadership skill or creativity. No, none of that. Nothing really at all to do with this earthly existence. This ought to make us stop in our tracks and shake out the cobwebs in our heads. In fact, this idea that life isn't about earthly life is a theme throughout Jesus' ministry: Mt 5:25 "Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life [ψυχη], what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life [ψυχη] more than food, and the body more than clothing?" Luke 14:26 "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and

brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life [ψυχη], he cannot be my disciple. Mk 8:35: “For whoever would save his life [ψυχη] will lose it, but whoever loses his life [ψυχη] for my sake and the gospel's will save it.” Or how about the verse we've already seen, John 12:25: “Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life.”

Jesus throughout His ministry was directing His disciples' focus away from thinking of life as striving to survive and thrive during our brief time on earth, but to open our eyes to the life that transcends our earthly existence. A life that is rooted in relating to the eternal Mt 6:19-20: “Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal.”

The life Jesus offers has to do with a relationship with the eternal God, the one and only true sovereign of the universe, and with Jesus, who according to Acts 3:15, is the Author of life. And the implication of the Greek here is that to know God is to be in an intimate relationship with him. This is not an intellectual understanding, but something more, where the knowing is to know everything there is to know...to know completely and fully.

[PAUSE]

Now I'm not suggesting we should all stop what we are doing and live in a cave where all we do is contemplate the eternal. We are clearly called to live responsible lives. What we are called to do is to live responsibly in the midst of this intimate relationship.

Now if you're at all like me, this idea of having an intimate relationship with someone I can't see is a bit difficult to grasp, and even more difficult to experience. If that doesn't describe you; if you have been experiencing sustained times of intimacy with Jesus, then you can check out for the rest of what I'm going to say. In fact, maybe you should come up here and finish the rest of this sermon. [PAUSE] I'm only partially kidding, and what I mean by that is that it is good for us to learn from one another about the ways we've each been learning and struggling with deepening our relationship with Jesus. But more about that later.

[PAUSE]

I want to talk about what gets in the way of us experiencing and living the life that Jesus came to give us in abundance... and what we can do to change that. In the deepest part of you, isn't that what we all long for, to have a deep, satisfying, intimate relationship with Jesus? Even unbelievers have that longing. They just don't recognize where it comes from or how to meet that longing. Jesus says that not only do we not have to, but we shouldn't wait for heaven for us to have that longing met.

I believe there are two primary things that get in the way of fully living this eternal life we have today... knowing the True God and Jesus, His Son.

- The first is we don't understand, believe and embrace the complete gospel. We're a gospel-centered church, so you should have expected me to say that..right?
- The second is that we don't fully embrace the meaning and importance of the first commandment. If we aren't loving God with all that we are, there will always be something getting in the way of our intimacy. And more often than not, we just don't get what it means to love God.

So let's talk about the first thing that I believe gets in our way of fully living out our eternal life.

The problem we sometimes have is there is a disconnect between what we believe in our heads (or what we've heard we should believe) and how we live our lives each moment. Too frequently, we live in the

light of an incomplete gospel and think in worldly terms of the gospel. This incomplete gospel is NOT good news. In fact, it is bad news dressed up as good news. We may call it good news, but most people recognize that it is NOT good news. Even we don't think it's as good of news as we're supposed to, so we lose our enthusiasm for sharing it with others.

Just because I'm up here talking about it doesn't mean I'm immune from this incomplete gospel thinking. I have to be reminded over and over. I need you to remind me. We need to be reminding each other.

So what is the complete gospel?

A good summary of the whole gospel is in Colossians 2:13-15.

“And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross. He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him.”

There are three main parts to the gospel that Paul talks about here.

The first part of the gospel is that sin had separated us from God, but now we are forgiven. “...having forgiven us” comes first, before the new life. The second part of the gospel is that, though we were dead in our trespasses and sin, this forgiveness opens the door to new life. We were dead, but now we are alive in Christ. Third part is we were in bondage, unable to be freed, shackled and subject to the god of this world, the devil, but now the devil has been disarmed and the chains are gone. That's what the rulers and authorities means here. These are terms for demonic forces...fallen angels who are in league with Satan.

Neil Anderson writes, “All three aspects of the gospel have profound implications for our emotional and mental health. People who don't know they are forgiven will be tormented by guilt [or, I would add, they will just deny there is a problem]. Those who don't know that they have new life in Christ, will think eternal life is something they get when they die, and they will struggle with a false identity and a poor sense of worth. Those who don't know that Satan is disarmed will be terrorized by his lies and fear him more than God. Jesus came to undo the works of Satan (1 Jn. 3:8). **Forgiveness, new life in Christ, and the defeat of Satan are all equally essential for a complete gospel.** It is the latter third of the gospel that most of the world is waiting to hear.”

...and it is this third of the gospel that most believers either don't know about or forget about. And that is exactly what the enemy wants us to forget, because it is the only way he can keep us from fully living out the life we have been given. Paul talked in 2 Corinthians 2:10-11 about the importance of forgiveness, so that “we would not be outwitted by Satan, for we are not ignorant of his designs.” Another translation says “we are not unaware of his schemes.” We need to be aware, not ignorant.

The gospel that most people are familiar with is the first part, that Christ died for our sins...for forgiveness. This is good news, except that it is bad news if it only applies to past sins. And even if it applies to future sins, what kind of good news would it be if you avoid punishment, but you never get to see the Savior? This is the image of heaven that most people have. You go through the pearly gates, Peter lets you in because you've been forgiven...you've got your entry pass...and you spend the rest of eternity strumming a harp, floating on a cloud, or having angels feed you grapes, or playing endless rounds of golf or whatever your favorite things to do are.

And most believers who get to the second part of the gospel will revel in the idea that they have new life now and can relate to God spiritually now, and face-to-face in heaven. But they struggle with living free. They can't shake loose of sinful patterns of thinking or behavior. They struggle with self-worth or

acceptance, or fear or anger. Relationships continue to be difficult. Depression can set in. They believe that the scripture in Colossians that talks about disarming the dark forces of the devil apply only for the sake of forgiveness and nothing more. The rulers and authorities were disarmed so believers could escape the grip of sin that was keeping them from accepting Jesus and being forgiven. Or maybe, at best, they believe that the devil was disarmed so they can experience new life, but they don't really believe they are going to experience anything close to life abundantly. Maybe some Christians, the lucky ones, will experience a good life on earth, but for the majority of believers, their hope is for freedom from these things AFTER they die.

[PAUSE]

Living life on earth waiting to die to get the reward is NOT living life abundantly, would you agree?

Now it is third part of the gospel that often gets overlooked. Brothers and sisters, the good news is this: "WE are no longer in bondage! The devil and his dark, demonic forces have no power over us, except whatever power we choose to give him. The chains have been broken and the prison door has been opened. We just need to believe that and walk out of that prison and never go back!!

Many of you know that Pam and I are involved in a ministry called Freedom in Christ Ministries. The purpose of the ministry is to help people understand who they are in Christ, that they can truly live the abundant life Jesus came to give us. We do this through teaching a series of truths found in the scripture about our identity in Christ, about the battle for our minds and the schemes of the devil who is working now to block us from living the life we have been destined to live. Once the truths are understood, we offer a time for people to, with our help, prayer and guidance, reconcile with God in key areas of their lives.

In helping people, what we see most often is the removal of layers of bondage that have built up in people's lives over the years that have inhibited them from living the life Christ has given us. There is newfound freedom to grow and mature. The maturing process still needs to occur, but the hindrances are removed, sometime all at once, but most often in layers as new areas are exposed and dealt with.

The bedrock on which we do this ministry are the truths of the Bible, believing that knowing the truth, as Jesus said, will set us free. And we share the truth of the complete gospel to give people hope that they can indeed live abundantly the new life they have in Christ.

I'm sure you each know believers who are struggling. We could tell you many stories of the devastation that many sweet, loving believers have experienced. Mental torment, depression, condemning thoughts, marital strife. They sometimes abuse drugs and alcohol to deaden the pain. At the core of almost all of these struggles is belief in a lie or lies. Jesus called the devil a liar and the father of lies. Lying and deception are the devil's main weapons. He cannot take away our new life, but if he can get us to believe a lie that the promise of all that comes with our new life doesn't apply to us - that's true for others, but not for me - then he can convince us to stay in bondage to the lie. Believing a lie convinces us that we are stuck in having to live with that lie.

How does the devil plant those lies? Two ways: First, by influencing what the world thinks and then hearing the lies repeated all around us. Second, by planting those lies in our minds. Are you surprised by that or maybe don't believe that's possible? Then you have just bought into another lie that he can't do that to a believer. Witness Ananias in Acts 5. What does Peter say to him? "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit?" There are other scriptural examples as well.

Maybe, you were in bondage to a lie or lies in the past. Maybe you feel that way now. It's a feeling you know all too well. Maybe it's your past that comes back to haunt you, that the devil uses to accuse you. If any of this rings even a little true in your life, Pam or I would love to talk with you, because learning

about and believing this third part of the gospel, that we are free from the lies of the devil, that he has been disarmed, is immensely freeing. It's radically life changing.

[PAUSE]

I want to encourage you today to remember these three parts of the gospel: Forgiveness, New Life, and Freedom from the power of the devil.

[PAUSE]

Now I've talked about how an incorrect or incomplete gospel keeps us from experiencing an abundant life. The second thing I believe that gets in the way is that we don't fully embrace the meaning and importance of the first commandment.

Next month will mark 45 years since I began walking down the path of surrender to Christ. I was in college and as a freshman I remember being alone in my dorm room at my desk, bible open, and yielding to the lordship of Jesus Christ. That was the beginning of a long journey with a lot of ups and downs. For years, I thought eternal life was something I was destined to receive after I physically died, because that was the gospel I understood. I thought it was life insurance, and after receiving Christ, it was up to me to live my life as a good Christian. I now realize that was and is a lie. 1 Jn. 5:11-13 says, "And this is the testimony, that God gave (past tense) us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. Whoever has the Son has life (now); whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life. I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life (now)."

[PAUSE]

As a civil engineer, I've been trained and expected to do my work in a rational manner. Emotion isn't supposed to play a role in the engineering process. Well, emotion isn't typically needed to do a calculation. Maybe it's OK to set that part of us aside for that kind of task, but in most things in life, and absolutely when it comes to relationships, we can't set part of who we are aside and hope to be healthy and fulfilled in life. Our emotions are an integral part of who we are.

The first commandment in Deuteronomy 6:5 says, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might." The point of the commandment is to love God with the entirety of who we are. Nothing left out. This includes our emotions, our bodies, our mind, our will... everything about us. Just like in human relationships, we need to bring all we are into that relationship with God.

While I was in college, months after that night in my room when I surrendered my life to Christ, I started to get a sense that I was approaching my new faith in a rational, some might call, stiff, manner. It seemed a bit too intellectual.

I vaguely remember one night when I began to realize that there was more to this new faith than facts, rules, reading and trying to be a good person. I began to think there was something that was missing in my relationship with God. So, I started to ask God to reveal more to me about what it meant to love Him.

Fast forward 30 years later, after getting married, having children, buying a house, getting deep into a career and all the other things that occupy our time and distract us from the more important things in life, Yet, in the midst of this, I felt God sparking a desire to explore again what it meant to love Him. At some point along the way, the word "affection" seemed to become central to what I was growing to understand. Love is such a misused and abused word in our culture, so I needed to come up with another word to help me understand what it was about love that I wasn't getting.

So over that the last 10-15 years, affection is what I think about to help my understanding of how God wants me to relate to Him. Affection is something that draws us to another person, an animal (like Truffle here), or even an object. It stimulates a desire to draw closer for the purpose of better understanding, of smelling a fragrance, hearing a voice, of just experiencing and relishing being in the presence of a special person, or animal, or in seeing the beauty of a majestic mountain. We are drawn closer and want to experience more. There is joy in that. It makes us feel more alive, and it becomes even better when we have that affection returned. That, to me, is the emotional essence of love.

One of the important characteristics of affection is that when we direct our affections toward those most highly valued things and people, and most especially towards God, it crowds out our affections for lesser things. It crowds out our desire for sinful pleasures. One of the chief strategies for overcoming difficult habits or behaviors is to increase our affection for healthy relationships and for God Himself. Our affection for God will crowd out our desire for fleshly gratification.

God seeks our affection. Have you wondered why? Because the more affection we have for someone or something, the more it is valued by us, and that is why God seeks our love. But more than that, He knows that as we love Him more, we become more satisfied, more fulfilled....more alive. He is worthy to be valued, glorified, made much of. This is what John Piper means when he says, "God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in Him."

So where to go from here? Let me suggest three things.

- 1) Regularly check our perspective on what is real life
  - Ask God to increase your affection for Him. Ask Him to help you understand and feel this affection in the deepest parts of your soul.
  - Ask God to reveal the foolish ways in which you're not focused on the life He has given us. One of the ways I do this is to pray Ps 139:23-24 - Search me, oh God, and know my heart. Try me, and know my anxious thoughts, and see if there be any hurtful way in me, and lead me in the everlasting way." which I take to mean eternal life.
  - When He reveals those hurtful ways in you, repent of those foolish ways.
  - Be in fellowship with people who you can ask & will tell you how they see you living with an eternal focus, and how not....and with people who want you to do the same for them...and people who will clasp hands with you to move in those new, wise directions. Pam and I would love to talk to you.
- 2) Then, as you let go of that old way of thinking, as your eyes are opened to the ways you can more fully live the life God has given us, fall deeper in love with Jesus, the Author of Life, and revel in the only life that is guaranteed. There is a reason why God gave it as the first commandment.
- 3) Lastly, let this love spill out of you. Tell others about what this life is all about. Share with them the complete gospel. Be personal. Talk genuinely about what this life means to you. Admit that you're only part way down the path of understanding and living that life. Invite them to join you in discovering all that there is to this life.

Deep inside of us believers, we all long to love God more deeply and to be in intimate relationship with him, living life abundantly. For many, perhaps all of us at one time or another, this desire has been buried under a load of lies. I find myself there all too often. We need each other's help, to encourage each other when we forget, to remind one another of the truth of the complete gospel.

Let's pray.