

“Sacrifice & Life”

Deuteronomy 30:19–20; Matthew 10:34-39; Mark 14:22–25; Romans 12:1–2; Philippians 2:2–4

The abundant life is found in sacrifice, not self

What lies on the path to the Good Life? It is easy to fall into the trap of thinking that the Good Life lies at the end of a lot of me-time, that a life of meeting my perceived needs is the best way to a life of abundant goodness. But look around

you. Are Americans more or less happy than they were a half-century ago? The correct answer is less happy, despite all the advances in wealth, GDP, women’s rights, and more. And the decline is most pronounced among young adults,¹ which bodes ill for the future.

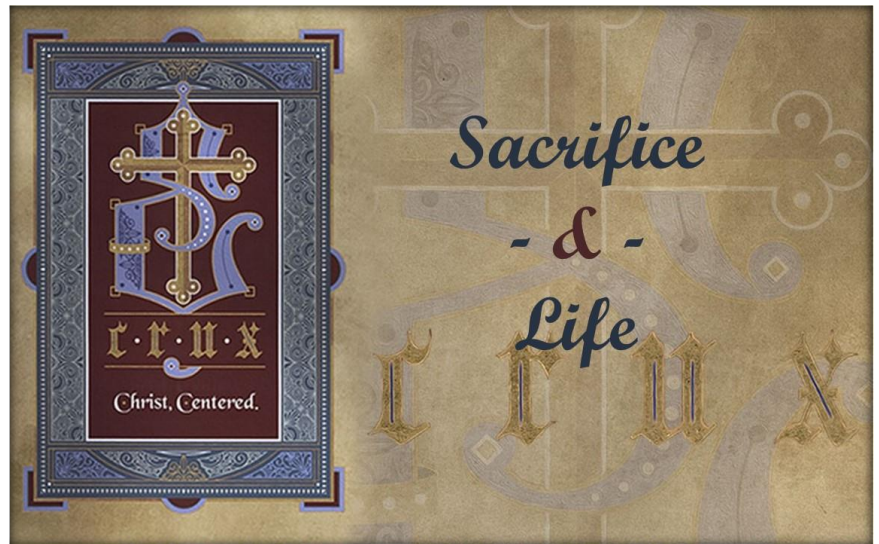
Gregg Easterbrook echoes this in his book from nearly fifteen years ago, *The Progress Paradox: How Life Gets Better While People Feel Worse*. In it he documented the trends of American and European life since the end of World War II. On page after page, Easterbrook demonstrated that just about every objective indicator of social welfare, from per-capita income to home size to education levels, have trended upward with hardly any interruption. Yet, in a 1996 poll, 52% of respondents said the U.S. was worse off than when their parents were growing up and 60% expected things to get worse still. Only 15% felt things were improving. This was in the midst of an economic boom and before 9/11. And now scholars are writing about a “happiness recession” in the *Atlantic*.

The story of the last seventy years has been one of the average person getting better and better off, of practically everything getting better – everything except happiness. God’s Word urges us to understand that stuff and self are not the foundations of the Good Life, the Abundant Life. Instead, self-sacrifice and a community built upon it are the essentials of the life we seek and God desires for us.

The hard sayings of Jesus

Spend even a little time in the gospels and you soon start coming across some hard things Jesus says, such as the parable of the laborers in the vineyard, which we looked at a few weeks ago. On my bookshelf, I have a copy of *Preaching the Hard Sayings of Jesus* by a father and son team. The father, James Carroll, is a life-long Presbyterian pastor. His son and co-author, John, is an associate professor of New Testament at Union Theological Seminary. In the book, they look at a number of Gospel passages that rock us back on our feet, or at least should. For each passage, the scholarly son wrote an interpretation of the passage and the pastoral father took the son’s work forward to a sermon. They seek to knock us out of our “easy chairs of faith.”

Nearly all the hard sayings are in the context of Jesus teaching his disciples, reshaping their understanding of God and God’s kingdom, and of their own place and responsibilities in it. Jesus knew that he had a lot of work to do and pulled no punches in helping them to understand the gospel in all its glory. As John Carroll wrote, “Jesus dares to replace our vision of things with a new one. . . . And so Jesus, in challenging our familiar and comfortable world, can only succeed by making exaggerated claims, by painting extreme images. He must, in a word, *attack* the world that we have allowed to define us, the life we love so much, in order to give us a new life.”



¹ From “The Happiness Recession,” in the *Atlantic* magazine, April 2019.

One of today's Scripture passages contains Paul's words about the "renewing of our minds," this fundamental reshaping of each of us. Perhaps we could think of Jesus' hard sayings as the fire-hardened steel chisels that it takes to break through all our defenses so that we can emerge from our shell and see the light of God's love in all its fullness. We must not shy away from the hard sayings; rather, we must embrace them and pray for understanding.

Finding your life

So . . . Jesus says he came not to bring peace, but a sword, to set a son against a father and more, and then said something about losing our life so we can find it. This brief passage from Matthew (above) is both hard and disconcerting. We hear a call to loyalty and finding our life, but doesn't it seem pretty over the top?

With all the hard sayings, it is best to begin with the basics. The Good News is our proclamation that Jesus is Lord² – no one else, nothing else. And if Jesus is Lord, then, well, Jesus is Lord. *Merriam-Webster's* defines lord as "a ruler by hereditary right or preeminence to whom service and obedience are due." That works for me. There may be many minor lords and kings and powers in this world that demand service and obedience, but there can be only one Lord, one King of kings, one Lord of lords. For the many millions living within the Roman empire, the Lord of Lords was Caesar. But the Christians proclaimed that the Lord of Lords is Jesus, to whom even Caesar would one day bow.

And as the Lord of Lords, Jesus demanded undivided loyalty to himself. If that meant a son would be divided from his father, then so be it, Jesus came first. If it meant that a daughter would be shunned by her mother, then so be it. Jesus came first. You and I don't live in a world where our loyalties are likely to be tested in so direct a way. But in the lives of the early Christians such tests came far too often.

And because Jesus is Lord, finding the life we seek must begin by submitting to this Lord who loves us and gave himself for us, who gave his life so that we could find true life. Our Lord sacrificed himself so that we might have abundant life. Here lies the path to the life we seek.

The hard chisels

Take a moment and read through all of today's Scripture passages. "This is my body . . . this is my blood . . . those who lose their life for my sake will find it . . . figure out what God's will is . . . set aside your selfish ambition . . . look to the interests of others, rather than your own . . . choose life!" The Bible is constantly challenging us to see this world and ourselves in a very different light than most of us were taught.

In the two verses from Romans 12, Paul does not concentrate on Jesus' teachings but on the implications of what Jesus has accomplished. And what Jesus has *accomplished* is so profound, so creation-altering that the only proper response is to offer ourselves—all that we have and all that we are—as a living sacrifice, for God has demonstrated that he is worthy of nothing less (v. 1). We can never stay as we once were. The trip to the Good Life demands nothing less than our transformation, the complete and utter renewing of our minds such that our thoughts, feelings, and actions are conformed to the ways of God, for in that we find the abundant life Jesus came to give us.

How does this transformation happen? How can we put to death the old self (the living sacrifice) and put on the new self (the renewing of the mind)? Only by the grace of God. This renewing of the mind is the work of God's Holy Spirit (see Romans 8:5-9). If it were up to us alone, we couldn't get there. Make a trip to Barnes and Noble and count the self-help books. Many of these are filled with excellent advice. The problem is that we just don't actually do much of it. No, only by grace can we ever hope to live a life that is pleasing to God. And a life that is pleasing to God is the Abundant Life.

² Christians will often say something like, "Jesus is Lord of my life." Well, alright, but I think it misses the mark. The point of the *evangelion* is that Jesus is Lord of everyone, whether they know it or not. It is not my agreement that makes Jesus Lord, it is God who has made Jesus Lord. Jesus is Lord even of those who deny him. Read the great Christ-hymn of Philippians 2:5-11 on this. To put it another way, the *evangelion*, the Good News, is not a private proclamation; it is a very public proclamation that encompasses all of God's creatures and creation.

“Filled with all the fullness of God”

In Easterbrook’s chronicling of American anxiety and unhappiness, so much of it seems to stem from a deep dissatisfaction and emptiness. We might chase after lots of stuff and status in this life as we seek to fill our hearts, but as Augustine wrote more than 1500 years ago, our hearts will not rest until they rest in God, or as Paul puts it in his letter to the Ephesians, until we are “filled with all the fullness of God” (Ephesians 3:19).

But what an odd phrase. How could we possibly even speak of being filled with God’s fullness? We are not God. Is it simply some sort of nice sounding but meaningless sentiment? Of course not. Rather, it is the climax of a prayer. Paul prays that the Christians—individually and as a body—might be strengthened in their inner being, rooted and grounded in love as they come to comprehend and to know the limitless love of Christ. Paul prays that Christ might dwell in the hearts of these Christians. And all of this takes our eyes and hearts ever upward to the very fullness of God.

When Christ dwells in our hearts, we gradually come to see that the path to the abundant life isn’t marked by self and stuff, but by sacrifice and self-giving love. Fred Craddock put it well:

What we do know for sure, however, is that Paul regarded as inappropriate to the body of Christ the selfish eye, the pompous mind, the ear hungry for compliments and the mouth that spoke none, the heart that had little room for others, and the hand that served only the self.³

Jesus showed us the path of sacrifice and Paul called the earliest believers to walk that path every day. It is the path of love, true love, life-transforming, world-transforming love.

Daily Bible Readings *More on sacrifice and life*

Monday	Psalm 16	“You show me the path of life.”
Tuesday	John 11:17-28	“I am the resurrection and the life.”
Wednesday	John 15:12-17	“No one has no greater love than this . . .”
Thursday	Ephesians 3:14-21	Filled with all the fullness of God.
Friday	Philippians 2:6-8	Jesus’ sacrifices
Saturday	2 Corinthians 11:21b-29	Paul’s sacrifices

³ Fred B. Craddock, *Philippians, Interpretation, a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Atlanta, GA: J. Knox Press, 1985), 38.