

BETWEEN LUKE 15 & REVELATION 5  
(Between the Lost Sheep & The Lamb that finds us all)

On the last Wednesday of each month, we ask the same question: “How do we LIVE THE LIFE?” In some ways, we are talking about that all the time. At least I hope we are. It is frequently the real topic at our Monday-morning Disciple Band. The phone conference calls on Sunday after church and on other Wednesdays after class often have comments about application. What is the New WAY Jesus invites us into, and how do we actually go about changes and adjustments in our lives that get us closer to the lives we think Jesus wants us to live, and to the kind of person Jesus wants us to be? Of course, we are already that person, or there wouldn’t be any hope for it. But all of us know how often it feels like the real person within is obscured or sidetracked or prevented in some way from acting and thinking and responding to life in ways truly authentic to who we actually are.

So we resonate with a story about a Lost Sheep. Not just once in our lives, but often it feels like we need to be found. Found by a being of wisdom and love who knows our true identity, and who knows “The WAY” from life in this broken world to Life in the Kingdom that is also available to us.

We were talking about the fifth chapter of Revelation the other Sunday. John pictures the great scroll in heaven. It is sealed with seven seals, and it contains the writing of God. That is, the scroll contains the true plan – the real and authentic destiny – of creation. But it is sealed up until Someone Worthy can be found to break the seals. Until that time, all of creation is on “hold.” Enough has been going awry that God has hit the “pause” button. Nothing can move forward. We are just spinning our wheels, putting in time. But God dares not allow the scroll to be opened or for true history to move forward until the Worthy One comes, because, apart from the Worthy Leader, the destiny will be ruined – the plan will go wrong – and perhaps it will end up beyond recall. Better to keep things on “hold” than to let it all be destroyed and disintegrate into nothing. It is not hard to imagine, even now, that all “quality of life on earth” is about to be destroyed.

Then, you remember, just as John is weeping in despair, it turns out that the Worthy One has come. It is announced that the Great Lion of Judah is worthy to open the scroll. Ah yes, King David – only, even more than King David: King David's greater son can break the seals and open the scroll, and Life can move forward. And then, in John's incredible imagery, we look to see the Lion who will open the scroll – and instead we see a little Lamb (*arnion*), with the marks of slaughter on Him. He is the One: He is able to break the seals and open the scroll, and take us on into our true destiny and purpose. And the shivers run endlessly up and down our backs, if we track and understand John at all.

Well, I need to mention to you this evening that over your own personal life and destiny, there is also a scroll waiting to be opened. It is also sealed with seven seals. This scroll contains the purpose and destiny of your own life. Your life is paused – on hold – unless you have found Someone to break the seals. It is the same dilemma: If the seals are broken by someone unworthy, your destiny will be ruined. Your purpose and true identity will be lost. So who is worthy to break the seals of your own personal scroll? Same answer. Same Lamb: the One with the marks of slaughter on Him.

#### WHAT ABOUT OTHER SEAL-BREAKERS?

If we define a “seal-breaker” as one who helps or causes us to move forward in our life, then that means a potentially long list of seal-breakers. Some move us off of a dead spot (a huge favor), but do not influence or stay in our lives for very long after that. Others have impact for a longer time, but over a limited area of our lives. Agents like these we often refer to as our “angels.” We are often incredibly grateful for them. But it takes more than an angel to move us into our true destiny and purpose. The seals are stronger and tougher than most people think.

Sometimes seal-breakers get a person started on a life of good health – eating properly or exercising regularly. Or maybe they teach us good study habits or good morals, or how to interview for a job, or how to dress in effective and acceptable ways. Maybe they help us learn ways to maneuver with grace and dignity in the myriad of meetings and gatherings of our society. In my view, such influences do not bring us to our life-purpose or to our true identity, though some would argue that such things are more important than I realize. And what about somebody

who influences you to become a good golfer or maybe even a professional tennis player? This time your call.

In any case, there are those of whom we say, “This person changed my life.” Sometimes a mate has an enormous influence on someone’s life direction and purpose. Paramahansa Yogananda, the Buddha, Muhammad, Lao Tzu, and numerous others have impacted the lives of millions. Among those millions, many would say, “My life was never the same again” (i.e., after coming in contact with this “light”).

In many places, Christians tend to go into competition or rivalry when other major seal-breakers are brought into the picture. I think this is unfortunate. Why do we not simply share experiences with those who have found other seal-breakers? Must I be jealous of committed Buddhists? Am I really afraid that their path is so much superior to my own that, if we compare notes and experiences, it will quickly be seen that my WAY is greatly inferior? So I have to “put them down” – or put their path down – before this truth can come to light?

On the other hand, if we are going to “Live The Life” that Jesus invites us into, we do have to have some notions (concepts, understanding) of what that Life is like and how we are going to live it. If we run into those who are following a different path (because they follow a different seal-breaker), will we not learn more and share more if we have some clear notions about the Life *we* are living? In any case, one principle will remain true for them and for us: if we do not follow our seal-breaker with single-minded focus and allegiance, no path or way will move us toward Life for very long or for very far.

A true seal-breaker, by definition (at least my definition), does jump-start us from a life “stalled out” or frozen or “on hold” in some manner. That is, no one seriously follows “The Eightfold Path” – any more than they follow the Christian WAY – until it is clear that their own efforts have come to some kind of dead end. I consider it to be a universal experience (truth) that we do not choose *any* spiritual WAY until something happens to awaken us to the futility of life as we have known it and experienced it so far. Oh, lots of people get interested in spiritual paths – read about them, talk about them, muse about them – from time to time. But I said “choose.” Nobody *chooses* to walk a spiritual path until all the normal ways of the world around us close down for them.

Anyway, if we follow Socrates (or Epictetus), for instance, that breaks a lot of seals, according to some of his followers. But from a Christian perspective, it does not free us from “Sin, Death, and the Devil” – it does not open up a WAY for us to move into our true identity or vocatio or into eternal Life.

So why is the Lamb, with the marks of slaughter on Him, so important to us? So important, in fact, that apart from the Lamb breaking the seals that have our lives stalled out and stymied, we cannot imagine moving forward, getting past our despair, finding any light or purpose that empowers us to move on again.

The “marks of slaughter,” of course, is merely John’s poetic imagery, but we know he is referring to the crucifixion of Jesus. The Path we follow – the Life we Live – depends on what the crucifixion and resurrection reveals. Why resurrection? Well, the Lamb is alive despite the slaughter, or He wouldn’t be coming to break the seals for us. It shows that our seal-breaker has uncanny and unlimited power – enough to survive all the destruction we have ever known or heard about. Enough to break any seal ever made.

Our seal-breaker has gone to the depths of all the fear and the despair that destroy or terrify us. He has conquered them – and then He has come back for us. The Lamb is worthy to break the seals precisely because He opens up Life beyond all fear, all earthly destruction, all paralysis of unworthiness, guilt, shame, terror, death. Any seal-breaker who does this only partway (from our perspective) will not be able to carry us through when Life gets real and truly tough. In short, only the Lamb with the marks of slaughter on Him is worthy and powerful enough to truly break the seals – and to get us on a genuine Path of Life.

So, who do *you* ask to break the seals for you? And while we are on the subject, what *are* the seven seals? Fear, guilt, unworthiness, loneliness, addiction, depression, despair. Or perhaps you are sealed up on the other spectrum: pride, envy, anger, sloth, greed, gluttony, lust. The Lamb has the power to break them all.

If we want to Live The Life, it is imperative and essential – but more than that, joyous and incredible – that the Lamb comes for us, and leads us into ways that do release us and guide us toward our true selves: our actual identity and purpose and potential. From a Christian perspective, if we get very far from the grace, forgiveness, hope, and love

of the Lamb, we will soon find ourselves back at the dead ends where the Lamb found us in the first place.

Over and over, what interferes most with our Living The Life is our forgetting to trust the Lamb, follow the Lamb, go on believing the Lamb's reassurance that we do have worth and value and things to accomplish – and even some ways to cooperate with the Lamb, who is also freeing others.

Perhaps that takes us back to the Lost Sheep of Luke 15. It seems to me that we are endlessly bouncing back and forth between the necessary self-centered awareness of how much God loves us, and the true desire we have to help others. We only “help others” when we have real awareness of how much God loves them too. But we won't get into all the foibles and traps of what happens when we try to help others with merely our own compassion and concern. Most of us know very clearly, when we are honest with ourselves, that we do not have the power to break the seals. What really matters is that we know who does.

Nevertheless, when we are filled with awareness of God's love for us, eventually that spills over to a genuine love for others. (It isn't truly selfless, but we no longer wish or want to “use” others for our own personal needs or aggrandizement.) So if the Lamb finds us and breaks the seals that are holding back our lives, we have a growing desire to help others to trust the Lamb so that the Lamb can break their seals and get them back on track to their true lives. It is called “evangelism.” There is no Living The Life if there is no evangelism. Just as there is no twelve-step program if you take away the twelfth step. (The twelfth step is AA's version of evangelism.) The Christian Life does not and cannot occur in a vacuum. Living The Life always means a huge opening-up of what is possible for us. But that inevitably leads us into a vast increase in our desire to share this WAY and to walk it with others.

Since evangelism is so abused and misunderstood in our time, a few axioms about evangelism may be appropriate here. Of course, axioms about evangelism are also axioms about Living The Life. We could explore each of these axioms in greater depth – and add other axioms to them – but just to get us started:

## TRUE EVANGELISM

1.) True Evangelism never coerces. Never tries to persuade others against their will. Never tries to decide ahead of time who will be interested and who will not be interested. As always, we watch Jesus. When did Jesus ever try to force anybody to follow Him? Invitation was always the core of His approach. That has not always been true of His followers, but it most certainly needs to be true of us.

2.) True Evangelism is a synonym for Christian friendship. It is an offer (invitation) of genuine friendship in Christ. If we want to share and walk the Life with others, there can be no “love ’em and leave ’em” approaches. There can be no “scalp-hunting” mentality. The mass approaches – and the focus on “salvation” and “winning souls for Christ” – that so permeate today’s notions of evangelism are by definition fake and counterfeit notions of evangelism. If the core of Christianity is relationship – if the reality of Living The Life is connected to LOVE – then pretended, short-term “love” is a travesty of everything we know about Christianity. (Images of prostitution, one-night stands, and cheap-shot promises do come to mind.) I repeat: True Evangelism is a synonym for friendship in Christ Jesus.

3.) True Evangelism is a genuine invitation into Christian friendship that will evolve into Living The Life together. That means people will seek vocatio together; study and pray together; team up, when guidance suggests it, to accomplish things together, to help another person together, to redeem or transform some area of the church’s life together. These are only hints, of course. There is no limit to what Jesus can suggest to us if we are willing and listening.

4.) True Evangelism will never be a numbers game. It will often let people go (when they show no interest or make it clear they don’t want the friendship). Shaking the dust and moving on is, after all, a Christian teaching straight from Jesus.

5.) True Evangelism will often plant seeds – and wait for the Holy Spirit to bring growth. If we are confident (trust = faith = trust) in the love, power, forgiveness, grace, and purpose of our Lord, we do not have to be nervous, apologetic, or uptight about offering Christian friendship to others. If they do not want it, fine. The problem is keeping up with those who *do* want it.

In closing, I want to mention one of the great bugaboos of Living The Life. It will not surprise most of you. Every time I find the principle in some new guise or in some new circumstance, I realize I needed to hear it again.

The real secret of Living The Life is found in following the guidance of the Holy Spirit. If we do this once a month, it will transform our lives. Of course, we hope to do it a little more often than that. So we adopt patterns and practices of morning prayers, hoping that each day we will be reminded to open our minds and hearts to the influence of the Holy Spirit. And every time and every way that we can find a willing obedience to the whispers and suggestions and guidance and influence of the Holy Spirit of our Risen Lord, that is the core and center of the way we Live The Life.

Yet there is a constant and continual tendency (to put it mildly) to undermine and undercut this allegiance to the Holy Spirit. Often we are unconscious (or only semiconscious) of the ways this is being contradicted and interfered with. One way is that we are forever trying to find a rule, a stance, a position, or an opinion that is in and of itself the essence of Christianity. Then we think we can apply that rule, stance, position, or opinion to any and every situation we encounter – and thereby Live The Life. We think that as long as we can be true to that opinion or position, we are being faithful to Jesus. That is dead wrong. Which is to say: that is wrong, and we are “dead in the water” if we forget it.

Of course, Jesus is the one who first made it clear that this cannot work. His constant battle with the Pharisees and their rules – in fact, with the entire Old Covenant – is part of the core drama of His story (His life and ministry on earth). Relationship with God is certainly part of the Old Covenant. But the essential understanding of the Old Covenant is that relationship with God depends on keeping the Covenant, which means following the rules: We follow the rules in order to be acceptable to God. A good relationship with God depends on following the rules. The blessings and benefits from God will come only if we keep the Covenant. And if we do not keep the rules, we will get punishment, or at least abandonment, from God.

The New Covenant is the reverse. Relationship with God supersedes and comes before all rules. And by the time the New Covenant is fully enacted – at Pentecost – obedience is no longer about the rules. It is about following the guidance from the Holy Spirit that comes in the onflowing relationship – and the onflowing conversation – between us and the Spirit.

Life keeps changing from moment to moment. New challenges may remind us of previous circumstances, but rules do not always give us all the instructions we need for any new circumstance. Compassion does not always apply in the same way to every individual we meet. What is called for in one circumstance is not always identical to what would be most appropriate to the next opportunity we face. Nevertheless, and to this day, we are forever trying to follow a written word – a Bible – instead of following a Living Word – Jesus. The Living Word means a vibrant and real relationship instead of a rigid code that is written. Of course, the written code feels safer to us. Its very rigidity appeals to us as a safeguard against subjectivity – against our moods and emotions and personal mistakes. What if we misunderstand the guidance? (Of course, we never misunderstand the biblical texts, do we?)

In any case, many of our most difficult arguments come when we are arguing over the rules – and forgetting the core principles of relationship. That happened to us as recently as the class we had a couple of weeks ago about Elijah and Jezebel. Very quickly, in the discussion which followed that class, we were trying to come up with some rules that we could and should apply to all situations and all circumstances. “Never mind our relationship with Jesus; just give us the right rule so we can be right all the time.” Insidious, isn’t it?!

“We should always help someone in need.” “We should never help someone in need.” “We should only help people in need when certain conditions are present.” And the assumption behind such arguments is that if we can just once get the rule clear, then we can apply it the same way every time and always be right – always do the right thing. But the only “right thing” on our Path is to be obedient to the Holy Spirit. And we are not always sure that we have heard the guidance clearly or understood the instructions rightly. We want to be right? Who do we think we are?! *Where* do we think we are? Humility is still the top virtue of the Christian Life. There is a reason for that.

There is no such thing as a generalized type of person in need. What if the Holy Spirit actually knows the person in need, and knows what the need really is and what is truly appropriate in each situation? Will the guidance always be the same? Often, to us, the situation will look the same on the outside, but it will be very different in full-spectrum reality. And of course, this illustration is only a tiny hint at the kinds of things we face and try to respond to all the time.

I claim that we cannot Live The Life by figuring out a list of rules, coming up with a few stances, or holding some opinions that we are really proud of. If that were the case, we could save a lot of time and energy and caring by simply applying our prefabricated rules to every choice we come to and every person we meet. We cannot Live The Life that way. We Live The Life by continually trying to tune our inner minds to the influence and guidance of the Holy Spirit in every situation and circumstance we come to.

And yes, I know: Relationships are far more demanding (as well as far more exciting and rewarding) than following the rules. That is why the more familiar versions of Christianity will always outnumber us.