

HOW TO SAVE YOUR LIFE
Sermon by William W. Williamson, Jr.

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Mark 8:27-38

I noticed that none of you appeared startled when in the scripture reading we read the words of Jesus which say: “Those who would save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake and the gospel’s will save it.”

That’s a pretty shocking thing that Jesus says. “Those who will save their life will lose it.” Huh? We all want to save our lives. A big part of our energy is spent every day thinking about the preservation of physical life, and making our lives safe and secure.

For instance, we seem as a society regularly to get into discussions about issues surrounding the end of life. Many of you remember the controversy surrounding Terri Schaivo last year. She was the young woman who had been in a vegetative state for over a decade, and her husband was petitioning the courts to have the life-support systems removed. The parents of this comatose woman opposed any move to take the life supports away. “We’ve got to sustain her physical life at all costs!” Before the thing was finished and the life supports were removed, the president and even our own senator, Dr. Bill Frist, had weighed in on the issue. “Life is precious! We’ve got to save her life!”

But Jesus says: “Those who would save their life will lose it.”

Or again, ours is a day that is fixated on physical conditioning. You’ve got to be healthy. One writer speaks of “physical fundamentalists,”¹ people who as diligent about their diets as earlier generations were about their devotions. A New Yorker cartoon has one person

¹ James Gustafson, quoted in Albert H. Keller, “Needed: A moral voice from the Church on death and dying.” *The Presbyterian Outlook*, April 25, 2005, p. 15.

say to another: “I just wish you would try counting your blessings the way you count your carbs.”² We’ve got to save our lives!

But Jesus says: “those who would save their life will lose it.”

We see images on TV—makeover day on Oprah, or the svelte actresses on “Desperate Housewives,” that set a physical standard for attractiveness. And many in our world strive for that sort of physical perfection by spending time in the gym or going under the surgeon’s scalpel. It’s the physical that matters.

But Jesus says: “Those who would save their life will lose it.”

Jesus says this strange and troubling word while he is on the road with the disciples. On the way he asks them: “Who do you say that I am?” Peter, answering for the group, replies: “You are the Messiah.” You are the one, Lord, for whom we have waited. After you there is no other. You provide the meaning and purpose of our lives. We will follow you.

But then Jesus starts to say some troubling words: “We are going to Jerusalem where the Son of Man will be rejected and killed, and after three days rise again.” It is Peter, of course, who is disturbed by these words of Jesus, so he takes charge. He had just declared that Jesus was the Messiah, Jesus was in charge. But now he takes Jesus and tries to explain to him how it’s not good for the Messiah to die. But Jesus rebukes Peter: “Get back behind me, Satan. You’re trying to play God. Get back in the position as a follower.”

Then Jesus calls the whole crowd along with disciples: “Does anyone want to follow me?” (After what Jesus has said, there are probably quite a few who do not want to follow.) “If so, then deny yourself and take up your cross and follow me.” You think you can save your life by your own efforts? You are mistaken. “Those who would save their life will lose it, but those who lose their life for my sake and the gospel will save it.”

You think you can work hard and gain the whole world? What’s the point if you lose your life? You think you can bargain with God to save your life on your own terms? It’s a bad bargain. If you spend all your time and energy working to save and keep and preserve physical life, you’re headed in the wrong direction.

² *The New Yorker*, September 5, 2005, p. 92.

The strange thing about Jesus from our modern point of view is that he doesn't seem to have much interest in physical life. Physical life or physical death doesn't seem to concern him very much. In fact, not just for Jesus, but pretty consistently through the scriptures, to be fixated on our physical bodies is a form of idolatry. The important thing in the Bible is not living a bunch of years, but what you do with the years you've got.

In fact, living a lot of years can be something of a curse. Someone asked an elderly gentleman how he accounted for his long life. And he replied crustily: "Oh, just bad luck!"³

The value of human life is to be found, not in our biology, but in relationship. Human life is covenantal—it has to do with relationships with God and other people. One writer says: "Human tissue or bodies are worthy of respect, but the intrinsic value of human life is not located in the material stuff, such as cells."⁴ The value of human life is found, not in the length of years, but in things like forgiveness, in showing compassion and in working for justice, in receiving and in giving the love of God.

So Jesus says that if you really want to live, if you really want to know life in its fullness, then do that thing that seems counter-intuitive: deny yourself and take up your cross and follow Jesus. Living life to the fullest means not fearing death. We have heard of people who are so scared of dying that they never get around to living. Giving your life to Jesus, and following him to the wild and dangerous places where he leads, is finally the best and fullest life.

Raymond Brown, the New Testament scholar, has said that the reason why the gospels described the death of Jesus in such detail, is that these accounts are to serve as a "how to do it" manual for Christians, especially Christians in times of persecution or suffering. Do you want to know how to die when the time comes? Do it like Jesus, bearing witness to faith in God even at the time of death.⁵

³ Malcolm Muggeridge, *Vintage Muggeridge*, Geoffrey Barlow (ed.), (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1985), p. 30.

⁴ Albert H. Keller, "The embryonic stem cell controversy and beyond." *The Presbyterian Outlook*, September 12, 2005, p. 7.

⁵ Keller, "Needed: A moral voice . . ." p. 15.

Alan Paton, the South African novelist, was a courageous opponent of apartheid in that country. Because of his courageous opposition, his life was often in danger. During that time he wrote this prayer:

Lord, give me grace to die in Thy will. Prepare me for whatever place or condition awaits me. Let me die true to those things I believe to be true. And cause me not through any fear of death to fall from Thee.⁶

Mere survival is not the goal of human life. Christ has made us free, so free that we don't have to worry about saving our own lives. We are free to live for others, even if it costs our physical lives.

I suspect that in the deepest parts of your heart, you already know the truth of which Jesus speaks. Life's meaning is not to be found in trying to save your life. But you already know that, don't you?

At some point in your life you wanted to be famous, through that great novel you were going to write, or your paintings, or your rock band. But fame passed you by, and life's meaning is not found in fame anyway.

Later you gave everything to make your work a success. But, as they say, no one gets to the end of life and wishes they had spent more time at the office. That sort of success is not where life's meaning is to be found.

Or, you wanted to make a lot of money. And maybe you did. But never quite enough to satisfy. For life's meaning is not there.

Maybe along the way it has been important for you to be physically alluring: six-pack abs or a curvaceous body. But gravity has its inexorable way with us and things start to fall. It is not the physical that brings life's meaning.

So isn't it time you gave up all those other ways, all those idols, all those attempts to save yourself on your own terms, and simply give yourself over to Jesus. You lose your life for the sake of Jesus and the gospel. All you do is quit trying so hard to do it yourself. You open your hands, and you let go and trust Jesus. What have you got to lose?✠

⁶ Keller, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

