

## TRUTHS THAT TRANSFORM

**“To Live is Christ ... to Die is Gain.”**

Have you been following the Cleveland Guardians lately?

They got off to a good start this season, and they are in second place which is about 8 games behind the first place Minnesota Twins. There is no way they will make the play offs unless they can catch the Twins and finish in 1<sup>st</sup> place in our Central Division.

Professional sports teams start a new season with high hopes of winning it all. But about now, when most of the games are already in the books, and when the season isn't turning out the way they hoped, it raises difficult questions. Questions like: If the Guardians aren't going to take 1<sup>st</sup> place, win the Division, and go to the playoffs, should they sell their good players now when they can get a lot of money for them from teams still in the hunt? If they dismantle the team, which players would they give up? What would the Guardians get in return? Or should they still make a run to win this season?

Is this a year they try to win? A year to gain experience so they are better next year? A year to bring up minor leaguers to try them out?

The answers to all those questions hinge on one basic question. That big question is: WHAT ARE WE TRYING TO DO? Trying to win THIS year? Get into playoffs THIS year? Or BUILD for next year? Or start over? All decisions about individual players boil down to: WHAT ARE WE TRYING TO DO? What is the mission here? Everything else follows the mission. All other questions become clear, once they decide what the purpose is for the rest of this season.

(By the way, the Guardians are trying to catch up to the Twins. They are going for it all.)

Like sports teams, people have missions they live for.

One man boldly gave his life for the purpose of forming a new nation of 13 states independent from the King of England. He was

instrumental in forming the United States of America. This man was John Adams.

In 1789 a man began an 18 year long effort to end slavery, standing before the British Parliament and working until finally in 1833, only 4 days before his death, a bill was passed to abolish slavery in the United Kingdom. His work in England directly contributed to the movement to abolish slavery in France, and 30 years later, in the United States. Who was this man who lived for this purpose? He was William Wilberforce.

In the late 1800's, two brothers announced that the age of the flying machine had arrived. They worked at this cause even though they had 10 long years of disappointing experiments. Finally, Wilbur and Orville Wright did it, and the age of air travel was born.

In the 1940's a young evangelist determined to give his life to a ministry where packed stadiums of people who did not know Jesus Christ, could hear the proclamation of the Gospel. Through Billy Graham, 210 million people heard him preach live, and one Billion people heard him proclaim the gospel through TV and radio.

People whose lives have great impact are generally people who are crystal clear about their mission in this life. They have a clear answer to the question: What are we here to do?

A lot of us don't ever really examine our life's mission. It's because we're not very proud about what it is we are really living for.

I've known men who live to go hunting. That's what they talked about, dreamed about, spent their time and money on. Their greatest achievements are the antlers mounted on the walls of their home.

Many parents spend their lives striving to have the most successful kids. So, they enroll them in all sorts of extracurricular stuff, and spend their lives carting their kids around.

For some women, their personal mission in life is to pursue beauty and attractiveness to the point where every man notices her. That's her mission.

Some retirees live their lives to age gracefully. They want to use their savings to enjoy themselves as best as they can for as long as they can.

Now I ask you: Would these people want those mission statements made public? No, I don't think so. Why? Because those mission statements are not worthy of the allegiance of their one and only life. It would be embarrassing.

I'm around a lot of churches. Some churches mission becomes keeping the history alive, and that becomes why the church exists. For other churches, their mission becomes keep the building open and repaired. Some churches exist for social justice. To Feed the poor, house the homeless. Some churches mission is beautiful classic music. Other churches mission is accept everyone. Inclusivity. No judgement zone substitutes for the Bible's Gospel.

Often, what we say we are living for is not what we are living for. We SAY what our purpose is, but live a different way. Really in the end it's what we DO that shows our mission more than empty words, or words that hope we will one day do it.

In fact, I think the way the evil one works his tricks is he attempts to keep most people from acknowledging the unvarnished truth about what it is they're really living for. Because if we face the truth about what it is we're really living for these days, some of us would just step back in shock and say, "Oh man, that's true. I hate it, but that's true about me. I'm living for this, or for that."

A good way to get perspective on this is to ask other people what they see is important to you. Ask some folks who know you well – friends, family, neighbors – "What do you notice is important to me? What topic do I talk the most about? What do I spend my time on? What do you notice I care the most about?" You might not like the answers that you get back. You might be shocked or embarrassed at what other people say you live for.

If we were to have asked St. Paul the apostle what his life's mission is, he'd be proud of it. He'd say, it's worthy. It's God-honoring. His life's purpose is recorded in Philippians 1:21: "**For me to live is Christ, to die is gain.**"

Would your mission be Paul's? Friends, Satan will try to stop you from living for Christ – alone. How does Satan try to stop you

from living for a purpose that brings a smile to God's face? Satan tries to stop you, by DISTRACTING you.

How does the Evil One distract you? By taking something good in your life and turning it into the most important thing to you. Like this: Are eating healthy and exercising good things in your life? Yes, they are! They are good gifts from God. And yet, if that's what you live for, if your life's ambition becomes having 6-pack abs to show off, having a physical appearance that looks like "Real Housewives of Beverly Hills," then the devil has distracted you. You have turned from a life lived for God to a cause that's focused on your own selfish desires.

Some people get distracted so that the Approval of Others is most important to them -- trying to gain the affirmation of a parent, or a boss, or a spouse.

Some people's life is wrapped around having good times with friends. Others its their car collection. Others live to quilt or sew.

Here's another mission we get distracted into by the Evil One: we get distracted to make our life's mission - Setting the record straight. This is kind of a scary one, but there are many people (too many people!) whose life goal is to get even with someone who hurt them, set the record straight, prove their innocence, or work out their anger. Would a small group of people who know you well say that's what you're living for?

Now I have to ask you, "Are you satisfied with that? **Is Your Life's Mission Worthy of your One and Only Life?** When you get to your last day, are you going to look back and say, "Yeah, that's just how I wanted to live my one and only life"?

You know, Jesus said, "***Whoever is not for Me is against me,***" Matt. 12:30. Let me repeat that. Jesus said, "***Whoever is not for Me is against Me.***" See, if you live your life just doing whatever you're doing, living for *good* things but not *God's* things, then you're actually *against* Jesus. You're hurting Jesus' mission. Jesus' mission is to work through you to save other people. You're sinning against Christ.

If we were to have asked St. Paul, the apostle Paul, what his life's mission is, he'd be proud of it. He'd say, it's worthy. It's God-

honoring. His life's purpose is recorded in Philippians 1:21: ***“For me to live is Christ, to die is gain.”***

Now, that mission is kind of surprising. If you had asked a young Paul, a young man who went by the name of Saul – if you had asked him what his life was all about he would have said, he lived his life to kill Christians. He poured all of his energy into killing Christ-followers, throwing them into prison, and stamping out any belief in Jesus Christ.

But Paul's life completely turned around. Why? Because Paul met Jesus. Jesus came to Paul. Paul experienced to the amazing forgiveness of Jesus, the depth of His love, and the transforming hope that only Jesus can give. Christ came and won Paul's heart, and so Paul is just completely sold-out for Jesus. He says, “For me ... to live is Christ.” What Paul is saying is, “My relationship with Christ is the highest priority relationship in my life. For me to live is Christ, is to relate to Jesus Christ as the highest priority relationship in my life.”

When Paul wrote, ***“To Live is Christ ...”*** He meant several things. Paul meant, “I want to obey Jesus.” “I want to do God's bidding.” ***“I want to live my life to thank Jesus by doing what pleases Him.”*** How about you? Will you do God's bidding? Let Him direct and lead your life? Will you live to thank Jesus by doing what pleases Him – regardless of the cost to you?

Second, when Paul wrote, ***“To Live is Christ ...”*** He meant: “My relationship with Christ is the highest priority relationship in my life.”

Paul had parents that he loved. He had friends, colleagues, teammates, cellmates from time to time — he was in prison a lot. He loved these people and treasured relationships. But Paul's loyalty and devotion to Jesus Christ clearly superseded every other relationship in his life. You see, Paul knew the limitations of human relationships, the frailties, and the disappointments associated with them.

And because Paul had been in prison multiple times, he knew if he had to, he could survive for a long period of time with no human contact. Solitary confinement was no stranger to him. At the same time he also knew he could not survive without his relationship with

God. It was too central to who he was. It was his hope; it was his strength; it's what he relied on when all the chips were down.

Listen to what he writes in the Book of 2 Timothy about one time he was imprisoned and then put on trial for spreading the love of Christ. He says, "***At my first trial not a single person came for my defense.***" Then he says, "***But God stood with me, and he gave me strength.***" *2 Timothy 4:16*

You know what Paul is saying? Sometimes friends come and go. Sometimes loved ones come and go. Sometimes human relationships just disappoint. My relationship with God is central and it's what I need more than anything else. For me to live is to relate closely to Christ.

Paul held human relationships loosely. He held on to Christ with all his might.

First thing when Paul says, "For me to live is Christ," it means I relate to him closely. Second thing Paul says is, "***And to die would be gain.***" Paul's convinced that if he has to give up his life in order to carry out God's mission, it would be worth it.

Paul is saying that if he's going to wind up being martyred for the sake of Christ, he says, "That's really not a problem. Because when that happens, if I get killed, I'll be translated into the next life where I'll enjoy the presence of Christ forever."

When you have a personal mission like Paul's, you put yourself in a win-win situation every time. You get to live for the highest earthly purpose imaginable. And when you die, you get promoted to be with him forever. What's not to like?

Sometimes I imagine a chief prison official coming to Paul's prison cell in one of the cities where he has been imprisoned for sharing the message of Christ. This chief prison official is coming to him and saying, "Hey Paul, now you stop spreading the message of the love of Christ in this prison or else."

And I could just picture Paul listening quietly and then saying, "Mr. Warden, sir, my personal mission in life is to live for Christ, to honor Christ, to serve him, to point people to his love. That's my main thing. I'm going to keep doing my mission, as I understand it

from God, inside these walls and outside these walls if I ever get out.

"And just so that you're clear on another thing, your 'or else,' your threats, don't scare me much. Because you see, for me to live is Christ, to die would be gain. So if you take me out, if you kill me, you're going to usher me into a life resplendent with the power, beauty, and presence of the One I serve. So Mr. Warden, I'm just going to keep pursuing my mission. You do what you have to do."

How do you deal with a guy like Paul? Are you starting to understand why the guy turned the human world upside down? He was a one-man wrecking crew for the sake of Christ in the world. That's the power of having a God-honoring personal mission statement and living it out in the power of the Holy Spirit every day. Your life becomes an unstoppable force for God and for good in this fallen world.

Nothing gets you off-track, and nobody can intimidate you. Nobody can lure you or distract you off mission because you're clear. You know why you're here, what you're doing. And in the power of the Holy Spirit, you live it out every day.

I know that some of you could say something similar. Like Paul, Jesus didn't mean that much to you. You were living in guilt; living with fear; your life wasn't counting for anything and you were frustrated with that; you hated yourself, hated others, hated life. And then, you didn't find Jesus, but He found you. His amazing forgiveness paid for all of your past wrongs. You felt new, and clean, and pure because of His love – because He died on the cross to pay for all you've done and all you'll ever do. You were given a hope – a hope of spending your forever in heaven – and that hope is certain and sure because that hope isn't based on what YOU have to do -- it's based on what Jesus has done for you – that HE died and rose again. And Jesus gave you a new purpose to life – you can live to share with others the amazing love of God that has transformed your life. You can share with others so that their eternity is altered and they can spend their forever in heaven. You have a new joy of living due to the fact that your life isn't all focused on you anymore, instead it's all about thanking God for the

wonderful gifts He's given you. Some of you are like Paul, and your whole life's purpose has been turned around by the goodness and grace of Jesus Christ. You say, with St. Paul, ***"for me to live is all about Christ."***

Now, for others of you, you haven't had that experience, or maybe you're just not so sure that you're ready to say that your life is all about Christ because He means so much to you due to all the wonderful blessings you've experienced from Him.

Now, right here, I could just tell you to BE LIKE PAUL. But you know what, we can't. We can't live for Christ, we can't enjoy His blessings, we can't be headed toward heaven, without FIRST having Jesus Christ touch our own hearts and lives, and minds.

Christ's purpose, has always been to live for you. He came down from heaven, He lived on this earth, He lived a perfect sinless life – all for YOU, for your benefit. He took all your wrongs and sins and all of your misled life on Himself, and He carried it all to the cross for YOU – to pay for it all there. And He rose again on Easter – for YOU – to open the way for you to live again, with Him forever in heaven. Jesus said He came ***"To seek and to save the lost."*** And you and I have certainly been lost. But He did it all FOR YOU. Nothing could deter Him. And had you been the only person who ever lived, He STILL would have done it all – lived, died, rose again -- for you. He loves you that much! His purpose has always been to seek and save You!

And so Bought by Christ's love, set free by His forgiveness, given hope by His gift of grace, WON'T YOU SAY – I NOW WANT TO LIVE FOR HIM?! Won't you live your life for the One who saved you, and gave you a new and eternal life?!! Won't you let Jesus be the compelling motive in your life? Won't you say, ***"For me ... to live is all about Christ, ... and to die, that's gain!"***

Every one of us need meaning and significance in our lives. We want – and need – our one-and-only life to matter. May this truth: ***To live is Christ, to die is Gain,*** transform you life so you live in the FULLNESS of God's blessing, now and forever. Amen!