

Must You Live

by Vance Havner

Vance Havner's sermon challenges Christians to prioritize faithfulness to Jesus over the instinct for survival in a secular world.

Duration: 26:36

Scripture: Luke 14:26, Acts 20:22

Topics: "Life"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker reflects on the dedication and focus of a seeing eye dog and its master. The dog, despite being tempted by a kitten, remains obedient and focused on its task. The speaker draws a parallel to Christians, urging them to be sold out to Jesus Christ and not be easily distracted by worldly temptations. The speaker emphasizes the need for Christians to be faithful and serve God, rather than seeking personal gain or comfort. The sermon encourages believers to prioritize their commitment to Christ above all else.

Transcript

Our Lord said in Luke 14, verse 26, If any man come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple. In Acts, the twentieth chapter, Paul says, And now, behold, I go bound in the Spirit unto Jerusalem, not knowing the things that shall befall me there, save that the Holy Ghost witnesseth in every city, saying that bombs and afflictions abide me. But none of these things move me, neither count I my life dear unto myself, so that I might finish my course with joy, and the ministry which I have received of the Lord Jesus, to testify the gospel of the grace of God.

And in Revelation, the twelfth chapter, and the eleventh verse, it is written, And they loved and nought their lives unto the death. In the days of the early church, Christians had to make a living, even as you and I. Some of these Christians were craftsmen, and they made idols, and gilded them, and sold them to the pagans. Of course, they didn't worship the idols, they didn't bow in their shrines, and some thought it was all right to carve and polish images for sale to the unbelievers.

After all, they argued, somebody will do it anyway, and we have to live. They had a giant of God in those days by the name of Tertullian. And when these Christians said, after all, we have to live, he answered by asking, must you live? In other words, a Christian has only one must in this world.

He doesn't have to live. He has only to be faithful to Jesus Christ, come what may, live or die. There are no ifs, no reservations, no alibis, no provisos in this business.

One didn't have to live then, he doesn't have to live now. He only has to be true to Christ. We must obey God rather than men.

Now, a lot of water has run under the bridge since that day. The issues are about the same now. And there are a great many people who stand on Sunday morning and sing faith of our fathers.

Holy faith, we'll be true to thee till death. Most of them aren't true enough to even get back for the evening service. In the church of Thyatira, in Revelation, they had guilds, which were about the same thing as labor unions.

And they had their get-togethers once in a while, and they turned into rather serious drunken orgies. And if a Christian belonged to the guild, he was supposed to go along with the frolic. If he didn't, he might lose his business.

Pretty much the same thing as when the boss puts on a Christmas party today and the drinks are passed around. And if somebody said, you don't have to do that, they might have objected even as we hear it now. But I must live.

Tertullian would ask, must you live? But of course we're pretty short on Tertullians these days. We have more clever ways and devious tricks by which a lot of church members stay on good terms, or think they do, with Christ and Belial simultaneously. In the Roman Empire, every citizen of the empire, everybody under the rule of Rome, was supposed to take a pinch of incense and put it on the altar, and then give a gesture of, not respect, but submission, even worship, to Caesar, because Caesar was not only the emperor of the Roman people, he was their god.

And of course after they did that, they could go on and worship any god they wanted to. It wasn't a test of theological orthodoxy, it was a test of political loyalty. Now there are plenty of Americans today who wouldn't have a bit of trouble with that.

They'd say, you see, I don't really worship Caesar in my heart, but I'm not sticking my neck out. I don't mind putting a little incense on an altar and making a gesture of loyalty. So what? I'll go through the motions and please the powers that be, then I'll go on to church and worship the way I really believe.

But these early Christians would die before they would put that pinch of incense on the altar. They had only one Lord, and they loved him more than life itself. They didn't have to live, they only had to be faithful to Jesus Christ.

Tertullian would have a rough time getting that over to the average American today, because in this atomic age, the all-important thing seems to be to stay alive at any cost. Somebody asked a boy the other day, what do you want to be when you grow up? He said, alive. Mr. Churchill said that he envisioned a day when safety would be the sturdy child of terror and survival the twin brother of annihilation.

Madame Chiang Kai-shek said recently, because of too much intellectual hand-wringing over the horrors of modern warfare, freedom and the values of human dignity, which we were taught to cherish above all else, have begun to be secondary to biological survival. We don't mind negotiating now with communist gangsters, compromising our national integrity, reversing the American policy of the past, anything to stay

alive. We didn't start out that way.

Some time ago while preaching in Racine, Wisconsin, I noticed on the city hall card on one side those immortal words of Patrick Henry, and part of it made me think of one of the texts I read a moment ago. Is life so dear or peace so sweet as to be purchased at the price of chains and slavery? I know not what others may choose, but as for me, give me liberty or give me death. Somebody said the difference is Patrick Henry said, give me liberty or give me death, and the average American now just says, give me.

We have to live, liberty or no liberty now. Those men who met in Philadelphia a long time ago in 1776 knew very well when they signed their signatures to that immortal document that they might all die for it. Harrison of Virginia was a heavy-set individual, and Geary of Massachusetts was a skinny sort of specimen like I am.

And Harrison said to Geary, well, I guess we'll all hang for this, but I imagine I'll die instantly being heavy, but I suppose you'll dangle around for quite a while. That's the kind of stuff we started with. They pledged their lives, their fortunes, and their sacred honor.

Now they had some fellows around then called the Olive Branch men, and they said, why don't we work out something with George III? You see, if such fellows were around today, that would be the argument, peaceful coexistence. They proposed a third alternative, liberty, death, peaceful coexistence with George III. They were ready to do anything but die.

And if they had prevailed, we'd have life without liberty, which would be worse than death. It's been pointed out that these 56 men who signed the document were not wild-eyed revolutionaries such as followed Castro around. They were men of wealth and education and integrity, most of them.

They already had security. What they wanted was liberty. Now today we have liberty, and what we want is security, and we're likely to lose both of them.

The supreme thing now is to live, however, no matter what the price. There was a time when some things were more precious than life. Theodore Roosevelt said that one of the characteristics of a nation on its way down is that safety first becomes more important than duty first.

Tertullian might well ask at a summit conference today, must you live? Peace at any price, they say, is better than no peace. Life at any price, they say, is better than not to live at all, better red than dead, which reminds you of the Israelites way back in Exodus, saying why we'd have been better off back in Egypt than to die out here in the wilderness. That's the same thing, same logic.

We have an obsession today for saving our hides, even at the loss of honor. Save our skins and lose our souls. Tis man's perdition to be safe when for the truth he ought to die.

They found out a few years ago that you couldn't do business with Hitler. Mr. Chamberlain tried that. Mr. Chamberlain was a fine gentleman, but you couldn't deal with Hitler, so they had to supplant Mr. Chamberlain with Mr. Churchill, who was a realist.

We're not even purchasing safety by the present course. Some things are more important than survival. It's better to die with a conviction than to live with a compromise.

I know that self-preservation is a powerful instinct, but it's not the most important thing on the face of the earth. Christians don't have to die. They only have to be faithful, not only until death, but unto death, if necessary.

When a man becomes a Christian, he loses the right to his own life. He's no longer his own. He's bought with a price.

He's the personal property of Jesus Christ, bought and paid for by the blood of Calvary. Living and dying are purely incidental. He's in this world for only one purpose, to glorify Jesus Christ, whether by life or by death.

If he lives, he lives unto the Lord, and if he dies, he dies unto the Lord. But whether he live or die, he is the Lord's. To me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.

That's the philosophy of the Christian. He counts not his life dear, as Paul said. And Jesus said we must hate our own life, and I read to you in Revelation that they love not their lives to the dead.

I don't know of any other place where it'll work out to die is gain. To me to live is money, to die is no, you can't take it with you. To me to live is fame, and to die is no.

It won't work there. Only people who have said to me to live is Christ can say to die is gain, because being a Christian makes even death a paying proposition. And anything that compromises that all-out loyalty to Jesus Christ is to be refused in any cult.

Now a pinch of incense to Caesar may look innocent. And some people may think it perfectly silly that you don't do it, especially if you don't mean it, if it's only a gesture, and in your heart you worship God. But a true Christian will not even make the gesture.

He will not by life or lip pay even a token of allegiance to another. I know that seems erratic now. But if belonging to a pagan guild today compromises your vows to Christ, you'd better lose your job first.

We don't have to eat. We only have to be faithful. Some people say, well, there are no applications now of Paul's principle in Corinthians about meat offered to idols.

Well, I think the principle is just as relevant as it ever was. There are plenty of ways in America of offering incense to Caesar, polishing idols is a flourishing business here. The business world, the economic world, the social world is under the God of this age, and he's no friend of grace.

To be sure, we can't all make a living in businesses run by Christians. I don't mean that. Most of the world's traffic today is in the hands of unbelievers.

And it's not obligatory that the top man in your line has to be a church deacon or the main office filled with Sunday school teachers. We have to work in a pagan world. That's what we're here for, to let our light shine in a dark place.

They don't need it in a light place. But when the senate demands that we carve images and burn incense as it were to Caesar, then we have only one law. And if our living or even our life is involved, Tertullian is perfectly up to date when you ask, must you live? You say that's radical.

Yes, sir, it's radical. It's so radical that it turned the world upside down one time and would do it again. But today we want to go at it piecemeal like cutting the dog's tail off by inches, which is slow business and hard on the dog besides.

We might as well have it all over with at the moment, suddenly. Have you compared our approach today with our Lord's psychology in this matter? I've already mentioned it before, but when the rich young ruler came along, his problem was money, but today we would say, well, let's not get on that now. Let's take him in.

Later on we'll discuss the money problem. Suppose it had been some other problem, same principle. Jesus said, we'll settle it first.

Now, that's not the logic of today. Of course, this thing reaches out in a thousand directions. Can a Christian sell books in a secular bookstore or a Peyton place or a Lady Chatterley's Lover or what have you? So? Can a Christian waitress work in a restaurant where liquor is served? After all, I don't run the place.

I only work here and you have to live. Well, old Tertullian would say, must you live? I think about that many times in my part of the country and the tobacco belt. I wonder what Tertullian would say.

They not only make cigarettes and sell them and smoke them, they raise the tobacco. What would Tertullian say? Well, this is the way I make a living. I think Tertullian would say, plow it under.

Must you live? Now, there aren't any easy solutions to these things. But sometimes, my friends, we must cut knots when we can't untie them. Sometimes the best way to get through a problem is to cut the knot by a determined decision for Jesus Christ.

I tell you, this present brand of country club Christianity is never going to make a dent on this world situation. And the church upset the world until Constantine became emperor and became a church member and had the army baptized and Christianity became popular and he pretended to be Christianizing paganism and what he did was paganize Christianity. And from that day to this, the bars have been down.

It became a big church and eventually split between Rome and Constantinople. But something went out that never has come back except as here and there little bands start up with the old fervor all over again. That's the way Baptists started.

That's the way all these great groups have started. They were Protestants protesting, which doesn't mean being against something all the time, because really it means standing up for something positive. Now, of course, there's infinitely more to the Christian faith than refusing to gild images and offer incense to Caesar.

We have to be more than just the kind of folks who don't sell beer or leave the sons and daughters of Iowa to rise because they sponsor dances. That's the negative side. But there is a positive side and both are in the New Testament.

It's true that we're not to be just nonconformists, we're to be transformists. Not just nonconform to the world, but transform. But while we put on the Lord Jesus Christ, we're to make no provision for the flesh.

1 John is a positive book if ever there was one. And yet the very last word in 1 John, sweet as it is, is little children keep yourselves from idols. That's a strange way to end a book like 1 John.

That's the way it ends. And although the ideal I grant you is to be so in love with Jesus that this world doesn't present any problem, most Christians just aren't that far along. And we're assuming too much.

We are oversimplifying the issue. We need to hear old Tertullian today, Thunder out must you live. The devil has cleverly set up this present age so that what puts butter on my bread determines too often my ethics and my conduct.

We've developed a pleasant, agreeable Christianity at times at this age, a sort of an amiable neutralism that raises no eyebrow at gilded images and offering incense. I don't mean that you have to make a martyr out of yourself and go out of your way and try to attract attention. Have you ever noticed that the Hebrew children didn't make martyrs of themselves? They didn't do a thing in the world, but just remained standing like they had been while everybody else bowed.

That made them conspicuous, of course. But all they had to do was just be like they'd been. And that's all any Christian has to do today, to be conspicuous.

You just be a Christian. You don't have to go out seeking that. That would be dreadful.

Old Daniel was just praying like he always had prayed when they said, you've got to change your program. And into the lines Denny went. But he didn't march up and down the street praying out loud to say, you see, I believe in praying.

I don't believe in doing like the rest of these folks. No, that would be contemptible. But he just remained true to God.

And it did make him conspicuous, yes. But he didn't seek it. It is significant that every great movement that has really made impact on this world has begun with a persecuted minority scorning the values of this world and living under stringent discipline.

Just that. Every religious movement runs through four phases. A man, a movement, a machine, and a monument.

When it gets around to the monument, God has to start over with another crowd somewhere else. This world has been moved by fools for Christ's sake who count not their lives dear. And in order to build a popular, prosperous, religious super-corporation today in the name of Christianity, we've thrown open the doors and let all the pagans in.

And in order to create an ecclesiastical empire, we burn a little incense to Caesar. But God's not interested in that. God is taking out a people for his name.

He's rallying a remnant. He's marshalling a master's minority. And his ministers and his missionaries and his martyrs are loved slaves of Jesus Christ who don't have to live.

They only have to be faithful. Some time ago I watched on television a sort of a presentation of the training of the seeing-eye dog. I've always had a profound admiration for those wonderful dogs that go with the blind folks up and down the streets.

And I don't understand to this day how they can think of as many things as they do and take in every situation, whether the roof's high enough and when to step off the street and the cars and everything else. But in this demonstration, here came this dog and his new master who was just about to graduate from their training. They were coming down a path.

And they had put a kitten out here lapping up milk out of a saucer on purpose by the side of the path. Well, now, what dog doesn't like to chase a cat but not that dog? That dog had learned his lesson. There wasn't a flicker of an eyelash.

And I said to myself, and I saw that, Lord, have mercy on us Christians. We claim to be following Jesus Christ and every time a chipmunk runs across our path we take off in all directions. God give us some Christians today who will say this one thing I do.

I'm sold out to Jesus Christ. I'm not taking off after every little side attraction that comes along my path. My friends, we're not here primarily to survive.

And even in this nuclear age, we're here to serve. And all that matters is whether Jesus Christ be magnified by life or by death. Paul said the only reason he had for surviving was to serve.

He said to abide in the flesh is more needful for you. I read some time ago of a Coast Guard crew that was called out on a stormy night to rescue the survivors of a sinking ship and they were nervous. And one of the fellows said, Captain, we'll never get back.

And the old captain said, We don't have to come back. We only have to go. Now that's the sort of thing that sent missionaries around this world in the name of Jesus Christ.

You don't have to come back. You only have to go. Faith is not belief in spite of evidence.

It is life in scorn of consequence. And that's altogether different. One of those paradoxes in the New Testament is where we read that a Christian has nothing and possesses all things.

That's a wonderful paradox. If you're a real Christian, the devil has a rough time striking a deal with you. He might say, I'll give you this and I'll give you that.

And you say, well, you can't. I've got everything. Then he says, well, I'll take this away and I'll take that away.

And you say, you can't. I don't have anything. That's the logic of the New Testament.

And if the devil says, I'll kill you, you will say, well, I'll be better off because to die is gain. To depart and be with Christ is far better. You can't head me off if you take off my head.

What are you going to do with a fellow like that? There isn't any way on earth to defeat a Christian. We give what we can't keep and gain what we can't lose. And there's only one thing that matters.

It's not your success and it's not even your survival. It's your stewardship. It is required in stewards that one be found faithful.

We read in Acts of those who have hazarded their lives. Acts 15, 26. Too many people today hoard their lives and save their lives.

A true Christian hazards his life. Some time ago, a missionary brother said to me, have you ever noticed in that verse where Jesus said, except the corn of wheat fall into the ground, the emphasis is not on falling into the ground. The next phrase is and die.

Accept it, die, it bringeth forth much fruit. Going to a mission field never made a missionary out of anybody. Going into a pastorate never made a preacher out of anybody.

You have to die. You have to die to yourself and die to fame and die to ambition and die to everything and rise to the glory of God. Now there are two ways of counting not life, dear.

Every few days one reads of our car full of maybe teenagers at the end of a wild drunken ride wrapped around a telephone pole in a horrible scramble mass of flesh and glass and steel. That's one way of living dangerously. That's one way of counting not life, dear.

But there's another way. Jim Elliot down in the jungles of Ecuador was another mangled sight when the savages got through with him. But his soul had gone marching home through gates of splendor.

Betty Howard Elliot, his wife who has written some of those wonderful books through gates of splendor, shadow of the Almighty, and who has gone back to those primitive conditions to witness to the same people who murdered her husband. I knew Betty Howard Elliot when she was going to a school in Florida. That girl had made up her mind early in this world to live for Jesus Christ.

She had a real determination. Above the average, you've got to have something besides a cotton string for a backbone if you're going to live for Jesus Christ. Now, Jim Elliot didn't count his life, dear, either.

That's the right way. And as you go out from here this very evening, you're going to do one of the two, I take it. And you know plenty of young folks, I'm sure, who are not counting their lives, very dear, the wrong way.

But you know some too, I hope, and I hope you're one of them who counts not your life dear. But notice the next two words. I count not my life dear to myself.

It's dear. It ought to be counted dear. It's so dear that Jesus Christ gave his life to buy it.

Your life's dear. But don't count it dear to yourself. That's what makes the difference.

Must you live? No. You don't have to live. You have only one obligation to magnify Jesus Christ whether by life or by death.

For whether we live, we live unto the Lord, or whether we die, we die unto the Lord. But whether we live or die, we are the Lord.

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