

# “Were You There When Jesus Taught You True Life”

Lesson on 1 John 3:16-18

**7** Therefore Jesus said again, “Very truly I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. **8** All who have come before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep have not listened to them. **9** I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. They will come in and go out, and find pasture. **10** The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full. **11** “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.

This morning, we’re going to start with the big ideas straight away.

1. Jesus’ purpose, his life and ministry, death and resurrection was so that you and I might live our best lives. (historical)

2. Salvation comes through following the moral example of Christ’s life and death. (theological)

3. And the evidence that we’re living our best lives is that we’re living it for others. (practical)

It’s important that whenever we crack open one of the Gospels, we read it with the appropriate historical backdrop. In the era of Jesus, Israel was a client state of the Roman Empire. Israel was ruled by a cruel and violent king named Herod who was a puppet of the Roman Republic. The people of Israel had the expectation that they eventually would be liberated by a true king, in the line of their ancestor, David,

anointed by God. They referred to this promised king as the Messiah and when the Messiah came, he would establish a new Kingdom of God through political and military might.

So when Jesus begins his ministry, speaking with authority, saying things like the Kingdom of Heaven is near, and performing signs and wonders people start getting the impression that he is indeed the promised Messiah.

So in this passage, Jesus is speaking to the Pharisees, a small but influential elite class of religious and political leaders. And as usual he uses metaphor and parable to describe the nature of the Kingdom of heaven.

In this text we have the thief, the shepherd (the gate), the sheep.

The thief  $\neq$  Satan but the current religious leaders and would-be messiahs. Jesus is criticizing them saying that they act like they want to lead the people but they are only there for personal gain. They are like a thief who only comes to steal and destroy.

The Shepherd = Jesus. BUT Jesus is making a statement about Kingship.

NT Wright -

“When we think of leaders, we think of people running big corporations - presidents and prime ministers. In the Bible the ideal king is pictured as a shepherd, perhaps modeled on the shepherd-boy David, who became the king after God’s own heart. In a world where they knew about the intimate contact and trust between shepherd and sheep, this was their preferred way of talking about kingship.”

It's not just a nice metaphor, Jesus is making a connection between Israel's expectation of the true Messiah and himself. The shepherd language can be traced back to a prophecy in Ezekiel 34 where God himself says he will be the shepherd of Israel.

I myself will search for my sheep  
I will rescue them from all the places where they were scattered  
I will bring them into their own land.  
I will pasture them on the mountains of Israel  
I will tend them in a good pasture,  
I will search for the lost and bring back the strays.  
I will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak,  
I will shepherd the flock with justice.

When you put it all together, it's not so subtle Jesus saying, "I am the Good Shepherd." He's making a statement about kingship.

The sheep = the people of Israel. More specifically, the sheep are the ones who will inherit the kingdom of heaven because they recognize the Kingship of Jesus. They will not be fooled by the religious leaders and false teachers. Jesus says that they know the voice of the true shepherd. And later in this same teaching, Jesus says there are other sheep that he will go after - we can assume this to mean, his kingdom extending to non-Jews, the gentiles...like you and me.

So if I were paraphrasing this statement of Jesus and strip away some of the imagery so it's a bit more clear it would be this:

The religious and political leaders are not to be trusted. They do everything for their own personal gain. But not me. The purpose of my life is so that my followers can live the best life possible. I am the true King of God's people and I willingly give up my life for their sake.

Again the main point: the purpose of Jesus' life and ministry was to give us abundant, full life. The best life possible.

That leaves me with two questions. 1. How does that work, exactly? And 2. What IS the abundant life. What does the best life look like.

During the 6 weeks of Lent we're examining the nature of Jesus death on the cross. We're asking questions like...why did Jesus have to die? How does that change things for me? How should I live in response? You might not have known this but there are several theories about how it all works. The point isn't to try to pick the best one, or the one that suits our existing theological sensibilities, but to learn from each and to broaden our understanding of the cross.

2. Salvation comes through following the moral example of Christ's life and death.

That best life possible, that abundant life Jesus talked about is available to us by following the example of Jesus' life. This is called the moral example or moral influence theory. The moral influence theory suggests the work of salvation isn't confined to the event of Jesus' crucifixion. Salvation is also found in the words he spoke, the things he taught and the way he lived. It might be helpful to think of Jesus' death as the catalyst of that work of restoration. And as we model our lives after Jesus, aided by the Holy Spirit, salvation becomes available to us.

You may be ready to punch some holes in this theory and that's fine, but I'm not going after that today. That sounds like a good thing to do

with your small group or with a close friend or with Pastor Lisa any time Monday-Friday from 9-4 p.m.

There are two things that I really appreciate about this theory.

The first is that it assumes that the work of salvation begins now. Eternal life starts now or starts when I begin to engage as a citizen of the Kingdom of Heaven.

I think for much of my life, I understood salvation to generally be about going to heaven when I die. If I believe in Jesus then no matter my lot in life, I will inherit eternity and live in unimaginable joy and peace.

But why should living my best life start when I'm dead? Why can't my best life start now? Couldn't restoration start now? Isn't it possible that Jesus is already at work, giving me that abundant life - making me more like himself? Is the Holy Spirit in me waiting for my heart to stop beating to get to work? I like to imagine that the abundant life of Jesus includes redeeming whatever time I have left on this earth.

Eternal life starts now! Or, maybe I should say you already have access to God's plan of redemption.

The other aspect of the moral example atonement theory is that we get to be an active participants in the work of salvation. We have been conscripted into the mission of Jesus to fix what sin and evil have broken in our world.

Some of you remember Pastor Scott who was pastor here before Lisa. Pastor Scott closed nearly every worship service with the same

benediction or a variation of it. Do you remember it? It went something like this:

We're being sent out together under the influence of the Spirit for the healing of the world in Jesus' name and we won't settle for anything less. And then we'd all say, "Amen." Which meant that we all agreed with that sending.

How did you think that healing of the world was going to happen? Simply because we said it? No, of course not. This church seems to understand that God's restoration comes to the world when we go and follow the teachings and example of Jesus. We're a part of that process. We're active participants.

Sometimes the work of restoration falls fully on the abundant grace of God who may rescue any of us at the moment before destruction. But Christians will always be active participants in God's redemptive work. There is no version of the scriptures that eschews the moral responsibility of Christ's followers toward the poor, needy, sick, and hungry in favor of simply saving lost souls through faith alone.

I want to back up just a second to remind you that this isn't the final word on the way salvation works. This is an atonement theory exploring the nature of Jesus' death and in this case life and how that leads to salvation. Let's take the best of what each theory has to offer so we may broaden and deepen our faith.

So what exactly IS this abundant life that Jesus says he's come to give us? I understand that it's tied to God's redemption story, but how do I participate in living my best life?

This past year has been a really good year. We've gotten into the habit of saying "yes" to almost every opportunity that comes our way. Bowling with friends? Yes! Host weekly pizza parties? Yes! Serve at the church outreach event? Yes! Play in the charity golf scramble? Yes! Concert in the city? Yes! Join a new book club? Yes! Late-night video games with my nephew? Yes! Donate to a new charity? Yes! Birthday party for a 1 year old? Ugh....yes, even that. (I do draw the line at baby shower.)

This is a good life. A great life, even. But the best life isn't just saying yes to everything. The best life is living one for others.

3. And the evidence that we're living our best life is when we live it for others.

Jesus says that the good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. In many Eastern sheepfolds, the shepherd lies down at night in the gateway to stop the sheep from getting out and to stop predators getting in. It is precisely by laying down - figurative and literally that Jesus gives us abundant life. If we follow moral influence to its conclusion, then we must do the same for one another.

John - the guy who wrote this gospel, came to this same conclusion. He wrote in one of his letters - the passage the Lisa read to us earlier -

**16** This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters.

Is it any surprise that LOVE is once again the answer? The abundant life is one that is lived for other people and the evidence is the love that is shared.

12th Century French philosopher and theologian Peter Abelard is credited with popularizing the moral influence atonement theory. He wrote:

“Our redemption through the suffering of Christ is that deeper love within us which not only frees us from slavery to sin, but also secures for us the true liberty of the children of God, in order that we might do all things out of love rather than out of fear - love for him that has shown us such grace that no greater can be found.”

Abundant life has GOT to mean more than abundance of money or stuff or vacations or good health. In fact, there are multitudes of people who lived their whole life following Jesus and never had any of those things but still lived their best life. And they did it because they found love. And when your life is lived for love, your life is lived for others.

In Philippians 2, Paul says (and I'm paraphrasing here) if you have gotten anything out of your relationship with Jesus, then don't live life for yourself. In humility live for one another.

I recently finished a book called *The Second Mountain* by David Brooks, an author and commentator who writes for the NYT and appears on TV shows like Meet The Press and PBS Newshour. In the book he suggests that the American dream is hyper-individualistic which leads to a life lived for climbing the first mountain. The first mountain is career achievement, individual wealth, power and influence, and personal enrichment. Many people conquer the first mountain and find that it is kind of empty and unfulfilling. For some it's made worse by some catastrophic failure or personal loss or failing health and so out of the valley of life's disappointments we begin to climb the second mountain. The second



mountain is characterized by commitment to family, faith, and community. The kind of life where you live for the sake of others rather than yourself. Conquering the second mountain then is when we're really living our best life.

That should sound awfully familiar to those of us who have grown up with the teachings and example of Jesus.

Brooks himself only became a believer in the last decade or so and in his book he describes the things that helped him find faith - he called them ramps. He wrote:

"The final ramp is the sheer shock of it. Religion is a never-ending surprise. You never quite get comfortable with the idea that creation is alive, and that there is such a thing as universal love. And the biggest shock of all is the way some believers love.

The natural impulse in life is to move upward, to grow in wealth, power, success, standing. And yet all around the world you see people going downward. They are making themselves servants. They are on their knees, washing the feet of the needy, so to speak, putting themselves in situations where they are not the center. They are offering forgiveness when it makes no sense, practicing a radical kindness that takes your breath away."

The mark of abundant life is love for others. Jesus came so that we might see it, experience it, be saved by it, and in turn practice it for the sake of our world and the mission to restore all things back to God.

As I was preparing this message, I had the sudden feeling like I'm sounding like a broken record. It just seems like whenever I preach it's a foregone conclusion that I'm going to make an appeal to you all to love one another. I think it's because I find myself woefully inadequate of selfless love and I need and want the reminder as much as possible.

The other day Michele was telling me about a friend who was struggling with a loss in the family. She wanted to send her some money to help her - to give her some support. And she asked me what I thought about that. She wasn't asking permission but we regularly talk about our finances and she wanted my input. I responded with. "No, I don't want to do that." And then I proceeded to be annoyed and resentful that we would practice generosity to someone in need.

We did agree to send a gift but I keep thinking back on that exchange. What happened to me there? Why was I so reluctant at that moment to show compassion? We had the money...we budget money for this kind of thing. The truth is that I'm selfish. And even though I've bought into the abundant life of Jesus, the old me still shows up fighting against it. So I guess I'll just keep preaching it, because it's a lesson I will always need to learn.

The season of Lent is an invitation to confess our own shortcomings before God and receive his forgiveness. So if you're like me in any way, and want to claim your own lack of love for others, then let's together read this prayer.

L: Let us come before the Lord to make our confession:

**C: God of Life – you formed us in your image and breathed into us the breath of life. We confess we that we have failed to live as people formed in your image. We have failed to love our neighbors as ourselves. We have turned a deaf ear to the cries of the needy. We have rebelled against your love. And yet, we believe that you save us from our wayward selves through the death and resurrection of Jesus. And you set us free to live and love in the way of Jesus. Thank you for redeeming us for a new life, in Jesus' name. Amen.**

L: Hear the good news: God sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. In the name of Jesus Christ our sins are forgiven!