

Whenever people talk about life or living, they often mean something more than just being physically alive. They very often include in that how they live, what kind of life that they are living, and at the same time what kind of life that they consider to be good. People often will say things like "I want to live my life" or "I just want to live." And what they mean by that is that they don't want to be stuck in something. They don't want to be caught in a life that they consider to be narrow or unfulfilling or restrictive in any way. Someone might say, for example, "I want to live, so I don't want a job that's dull or boring. When you love what you do, you never work a day in your life, right? That's the kind of job that I want for myself." Or someone might say, "I want to live, so I don't want to be average or mediocre. I want to stand out. I want to be a leader. I want to be ahead of the crowd. I want people to notice me. That's what I want." Or someone might even say, "I want to live, so I don't want to live in the same place my whole life. There's a great big world out there for me to go after. I don't want to be stuck here, wasting away my life." Anything which holds me back, anything which holds me down is bad. I don't want to just exist day to day. I want to really live!

But behind all of this, Christians, is a desire to be free, to be free of all kinds of restraints, to be free of anything which holds us down or holds us back. Along with this desire to be free is a belief that it will make me happy at the same time. If I want to truly live my life, then I need to be able to do whatever I want to do. This dead-end job doesn't make me happy. It's too boring. It's not very fulfilling. Being average doesn't make me happy. I want people to pay attention to me. Staying in one place doesn't make me happy. I need to move around. I need to see the world. If I want to be truly happy, then I need to be truly free. Then and only then will I be truly alive.

Now, I know that these examples that I've used so far are really not all that bad. Wanting a good job, striving for excellence, or even wanting to see the world and to take advantage of opportunities can be good things, absolutely. But they are small examples of something that happens all the time in our culture: this restlessness, this desire to be free, free of all kinds of restraints, thinking that happiness comes from doing whatever I want. If I just do this or that whenever I want to do it, then I will be truly happy, and that's all that matters. This attitude fills our society, Christians. It's literally everywhere. You see it in movies. You even see it in advertisements. I've seen it advertised on billboards for colleges as you go down the interstate. It's literally everywhere. But we have to be careful with it, because this idea may sound good to us, but it can end up hurting us instead. It promises happiness, but it leads to our destruction. Because the world promises these things, Christians, but it is a thief. As Jesus says in verse 10 of our reading: "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy." Instead of making us happy, it only steals lives instead.

This is clearest whenever we realize that this very idea is what leads so many people in our world today to turn away from God. A lot of people out there, Christians, consider Christianity to be something restrictive, to be something which traps, which prohibits, which keeps us from really enjoying ourselves. Being a Christian means you can't have any fun. You're not able to do whatever you want to do, and if you can't do whatever you want to do, then you can't possibly be happy. "So don't tell me what to do!" the world says. "I'm going to do it anyway. I'm going to live my life the way that I want to live it, and I'm not going to care what God has to say about it. That's what will truly make me happy." But this idea is a thief, Christians, one which comes only to kill and steal and destroy.

Take, for example, this idea leading many people to treat marriage as something restrictive. I don't want to live with the same person my whole life! That seems too restrictive. That seems unsatisfying. It's holding me back. It's this idea that leads people to get a divorce after twenty-some years of marriage, or leading people to look for affairs in order to spice things up. Then I can really truly feel like I'm alive! But far more common these days, Christians, is that this idea leads many to not get married at all. They either sleep around or they just live together forever. "Why should I be tied down?" they say. "That seems too restrictive. That's holding me back. This is what makes me happy. So why can't I do it?"

But this idea is a thief, Christians, one that can only destroy. Because not only does it wreck lives through disease, it also destroys the lives of other people. Treating someone else as something to be used and then just discarded when all the fun is gone. It's no coincidence that the people who live this way, if they ever do get married, find it hard to stay married afterwards. And that's to say nothing of the children who are caught in the crossfire of this way of thinking. Christians, this promises happiness, but it can only steal lives instead.

Or this idea can also lead some to drugs and alcohol abuse, thinking that that's what's going to finally make them happy. Something to ease the pain, something to make it easier to get through the day. Why shouldn't I use something that makes me feel good? Who are you to say that I can't? You see it in the push across this country to decriminalize drugs of every kind. How many times in this state has there been a vote to legalize marijuana? It has happened all the time. People think, "This is what makes me happy, so why can't I live this way?"

But this is also a thief, Christians, one which can only destroy. Because how many lives have been completely ruined by drugs? So they can't even live a normal life anymore. They can't even hold a job anymore. How many families have been torn apart by alcohol? It even leaves people addicted to these things without giving them the same satisfaction that they once felt. They just become a husk of what they once were. So yes, this promises happiness, but it only steals lives instead.

Or one more example. We see this idea also in the push in this country for transgenderism. People saying that I shouldn't be bound by who I am physically. Why should I be held back by these things? Why can't I be who I am? If I can't express myself the way that I want to do it, then I can't be happy. People, unfortunately, who have given into this deception will often say that they did it because they just wanted to be themselves. They just wanted to express themselves, free from all restraints, free from anything which was holding them back. "This is what makes me happy," they say. "So why can't I do it?"

But this is also a thief, Christians, one which can only destroy. Because what you never hear about in the news is how many people end up regretting these things, making these life-altering, permanent changes. And a very large percentage of them even end up taking their own lives in despair. It promises happiness, but it only steals lives instead.

But that's the trouble with the world's promises, Christians. It promises us so much. It promises us happiness, it promises us contentment, it promises us joy, but it delivers on none of those things. It is an empty promise which can never bring peace. But Jesus brings life, Christians! As he says again in verse 10: "I came that they may have life and have it abundantly." Abundant life!

Not just something which only seems to make us happy. Not just something which only promises, only to take it away. But truly abundant life found in Jesus Christ. Because Jesus has not come to destroy us. Jesus has not come to keep us away from really enjoying life. Jesus has come to lift us up, to make us like himself in every way. Because in Jesus is abundant life, a life which the world can never have, a life which the world can never give.

In Jesus we have a life which gives us true peace. Jesus says in John 14: "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid." This peace which Jesus brings, Christians, is a peace which lives even in the midst of trouble, a peace which lives even in the midst of sorrow. It is a peace knowing that Jesus is alive and that we will live with him too. It is a peace knowing that this short time of suffering that we go through will give way to a joy which will never come to an end. That is the peace which Jesus brings to us today.

And in Jesus we have a life that gives us true contentment. Paul says in Philippians 4: "Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me." We find this contentment in Jesus Christ. Contentment that we find no matter what situation we're in. It is knowing that we don't have to be troubled because we have Jesus through it all, and he will never leave us nor forsake us. He will strengthen us, no matter what we're going through. We don't have to worry about tomorrow, because we have the greatest thing of all in Jesus Christ, our Lord. That is the contentment that Jesus brings.

But above all, Christians, in Jesus we have a life which will never come to an end. Jesus says, John chapter 11: "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die." In him is a truly abundant life, a life which not even death can take away. Once this earthly life comes to an end, Christians, our life has just begun in Jesus. That is the joy which we have in him! We have this abundant life which goes on forever, and this is what he brings us today. And it can be ours in him.

So Christians, let us not seek after all the empty promises of this world. They will come to nothing. They are only thieves which can destroy. But let us come to Jesus, because in him is life, an abundant life which will never come to an end. He will give us true peace, true contentment with him in heaven forever.

Let us pray. Lord Jesus Christ, who has come to give us life abundantly, turn our hearts always towards you so that we would know your peace. Shut our ears to the world's promises, and lead us to always listen to your voice, because in your words we will find life; for you live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.