

# How we are to live in 2006

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[ 0 : 00 ] Well, the first day of a new year is a grand moment. We're a year closer to the return of Christ, for which the New Testament teaches us eagerly to long.

And we're a year closer also to the day of judgment, which is a sobering thought, and yet a very stimulating one for Christian believers. But also on New Year's Day, and Willie has reminded us of this already, we have a sense of a blank sheet in front of us, a sense of new beginning and of new opportunity.

But the question is, how are we going to live during this coming year of 2006? By what principles are we going to make the larger and the smaller decisions of our lives?

Now, it's with this thought, the thought of how we are to live in 2006, that I've chosen this passage from Mark's Gospel. It's a very challenging passage.

It's a very radical passage about the inner motivation of the real Christian. And although it was read to us a few minutes ago, I want to read a part of it again, so that we can feel the weight and the force of Christ's words afresh.

[ 1 : 13 ] So perhaps you turn with me to Mark chapter 8, verse 34. It's on page 844 in the Big Blue Bibles. So Mark chapter 8, verse 34.

And Jesus called to him the crowd with his disciples and said to them, If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.

For whoever would save his life will lose it. But whoever loses his life for my sake and the Gospels will save it. For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his life?

For what can a man give in return for his life? For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of Man also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.

Well, now a few things by way of introduction first. Let's notice first that this message here is addressed to everybody, the whole world, and not just to some inner circle of favored friends.

[ 2 : 27 ] Look at the words that Jesus uses. Verse 34, if anyone, anyone. Verse 35, whoever. Verse 36, a man.

That's any man. Verse 37, again, a man. Verse 38, whoever. And the beginning of verse 34 confirms this impression that Jesus is speaking to anybody and everybody.

Because as verse 34 starts, Jesus calls the crowd to him along with his chosen disciples with whom he's already been speaking. So this is a message here in these few verses, 34 to 38, for everybody, not only for the committed follower, but for anyone who has ears to hear.

And that means that nobody in this building this morning is exempt. So that's the first thing. It's a message for everybody. Then secondly, is this message about our past or is it about our future?

Well, clearly it's about our future. This challenging message is about the way that you and I are going to live the rest of our lives. As Jesus lifts up his voice and addresses these crowds, he's not concerned with what they've done yesterday or last week or last year.

[ 3 : 43 ] He's interested in what they're going to do with their lives tomorrow and next week and how they will be living in 10 years' time. Can you imagine yourself in 10 years' time?

How will you be living then? So this message is about our future, whether we're old and we have only a few years to go or whether we're young and we still have another 70 or 80 years to live.

Now, thirdly, by way of introduction, let's notice what prompts Jesus to speak like this. The verses immediately beforehand have been showing how Peter, his good friend Simon Peter, gets one thing very right and then immediately gets another thing very wrong.

The thing that Peter gets right is in verse 29 because he answers Jesus' question, Who do you say that I am? By replying, You are the Christ. Full marks.

Dead right. It's the first time that anyone has dared to say that kind of thing in Mark's gospel. The first time he's been directly identified as the Christ by one of his followers.

[ 4 : 48 ] But then in verse 31, Jesus begins to teach them what kind of things the Christ is going to have to undergo. Suffering. Rejection.

Death. And then resurrection. And here's where Peter gets it so wrong. Because in verse 32, he takes Jesus to one side and he begins to tick him off.

Teacher, are you mad? What daft idea is this? Don't you know your Jewish theology? The Christ is the conqueror, not the conquered one. What kind of defeatist talk is this about suffering and rejection and death?

At which point Jesus amazingly says to Peter, the thoughts that you are expressing are the thoughts of Satan.

He says, get behind me, Satan. Satan, the father of lies. The initiator of all temptations. So what Peter is saying at this point is not merely wrong.

[ 5 : 46 ] It is devilish. He's suggesting that Jesus can be the Christ without the suffering. Without the dying. But let's notice the critically important word in verse 31.

He began to teach them that the son of man must. That's the word. Must. Suffer. Must be rejected. Must be killed.

It was the only way in which Jesus' mission of rescue could be accomplished. So Peter was all wrong in thinking that suffering and death could be avoided by Jesus.

He came to understand later, of course. But at this early stage, he was still thinking the thoughts of men and of Satan. Now, all this helps us to understand why Jesus says what he does say in verses 34 to 38.

He's just confronted Peter. And he said to him in no uncertain terms that his own suffering and death are unavoidable. And then he turns to the whole crowd. And he says to all of them, and if any of you wants to follow me, you've got to tread the same path.

[ 6 : 51 ] And that is the path of suffering and dying. Because the path taken by the leader is inevitably going to be the path taken by the follower. And let's notice that same little word in verse 34.

It doesn't actually use it in the ESV, the English Standard Version, but it does in the New International. If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.

So there is no real discipleship without the suffering or the dying. So, friends, let's brace ourselves to look more closely at verses 34 to 38.

And I've got just two headings under this overall question of the principles, what principles we're going to live our lives under in the year 2006. So here's the first thing.

The true disciple embraces the death of self. Embraces the death of self. Verse 34. If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself.

[ 7 : 51 ] Now, let's be very clear about what Jesus means here. He's not talking about a person denying himself something. Now, you or I might deny ourselves a chocolate biscuit, for example, or a packet of cigarettes.

Or you might say, I was walking down Socky Hall Street one very cold afternoon, and I passed that coffee shop, and I looked longingly inside, but I denied myself a coffee and a Danish pastry.

No, Jesus is not talking about denying oneself something. He's talking about denying oneself.

The thing being denied is not a chocolate biscuit or a Danish pastry. It is the self. He is talking about self-renunciation. Friends, this is the most radical demand.

Nothing in the world prepares us for it, because the world consistently teaches us the opposite. The world trains us to enthrone the self, to please the self, to be true to the self, to gratify the self, to indulge the self, to fulfill the self, to accede to the self's every demand.

[ 9 : 08 ] But Jesus is calling us to renounce and deny the self, because if the self sits upon the throne of our heart, it is a usurper.

Only God, only the Lord Jesus, are worthy to occupy the throne of the human heart, because we cannot serve the Lord and the self at the same time.

Now, the way Jesus has framed this teaching suggests that it's primarily aimed at the person who is not yet a disciple. Verse 34, If anyone out there in the crowd would come after me, he must deny himself.

Well, yes, of course this applies to the person who is not yet a follower of Christ. But equally, it applies to the person who is already a Christian. This principle of self-renunciation is not just some initial stage of the Christian life.

It is also an ongoing characteristic of Christian discipleship. It's not something that a new Christian does for just a few months and then stops doing.

[10:11] It's something which an ongoing disciple continues to do. So the real disciple continues to renounce self. The self is not put to death with a single blow at the beginning of the Christian life.

Not at all. The self daily reasserts its claims. It daily clamors for attention and gratification. And therefore, it has to be denied and renounced again and again and again.

And this is one reason why it is so hard to keep going as a disciple of Christ for 40 or 50 or 60 years. The self clamors as much to be pampered when you're 70 as when you're 25.

Isn't that right? My older friends. But the true disciple again and again renounces it. Let's look at the next phrase in verse 34 because it helps to clarify the situation.

If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. Now, we sometimes hear people saying, poor so-and-so, what a cross she has to bear.

[11:21] And when we ask what is meant by that, it often proves that her problem is a cantankerous old auntie or some other irksome irritation. But that is not at all what Jesus is talking about here.

Think of it. Not long after he spoke these words, he was one Friday morning literally picking up his own cross beam and carrying it to a spot outside Jerusalem so as to be nailed to it.

He's talking about dying here. He's just said in verse 31 that he is going to have to be killed. And now he's saying that his followers must renounce their own right to life if need be.

And that if the only way to be true to Jesus is to accept martyrdom, then so be it. We mustn't forget that in the majority of countries, over the majority of the last 20 centuries, Christians have been martyred and in a number of countries, they still are being regularly martyred.

Living in this country, in the UK, as we do at the moment, free from serious persecution is a blessed relief. But it's something of an exception when you think of the worldwide context.

[12:33] In the context of the first century AD and in many countries since then, Jesus' words are literally a challenge to followers to be prepared for martyrdom.

And just to give one fairly recent example, in Germany in the 1930s and the 1940s, there was a small but very courageous band of Christian people who were prepared publicly to resist Hitler and his dogmas and were prepared to speak out against him.

One of those men was a leading intellectual and pastor called Dietrich Bonhoeffer. And Bonhoeffer once wrote, When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.

And Bonhoeffer himself was executed by the Nazis in April 1945 in prison, just a few weeks before the war in Europe came to an end.

Now for us, in this country and in this period of history, physical martyrdom like that is a very remote possibility. But Jesus' challenge to take up the cross is still very much applicable to the way we regard our own individual lives.

[13:44] Think of your life. Whose is it? Our energy. Our days. Our hours. Our years. I remember an incident when I was 19 years old.

I was a university student and I was just beginning to get going as a Christian. And I had a very good friend who was a young clergyman about 10 years older than myself. And he was a man who played an important part in helping me to take my first steps as a young Christian.

He had to goad me and cajole me, I remember, as well as encourage me, because I was a slow starter and a pretty reluctant one. But one day this friend of mine said to me quite out of the blue, Edward, you must die.

Just like that. It was a formative moment for me. I can still picture the scene, the room that we were in. I was washing a shirt in a sink by hand.

I didn't know how to use a washing machine. I still don't, actually, as it happens. But as I was doing this, he said to me, Edward, you must die.

[14:49] And I was appalled because I knew immediately what my friend meant. I knew this Bible passage and I knew that my friend was referring to it. And I was appalled because at the age of 19, I wanted my life.

It wasn't that I had any great ambitions to be a big this or a big that. Not at all. But as a young man, I wanted to be the captain of my own ship. I wanted to set my own agenda and make my decisions. And I was being asked, not by my clergyman friend, but by the Lord himself, to die. The Lord was asking me to take up my cross and head for the gallows to renounce any right that I imagined I might have had to be the captain of my life.

Now, I'm not talking about becoming a minister or being ordained. That is a minor and incidental thing. This passage is about being a Christian. Any and every Christian is called upon to accept the principle of dying to the rule of self, of renouncing the captaincy of the ship.

Now, let me ask, have you done that? And if you've done it in the past, are you still doing it now? And will you do it again tomorrow and next year, next decade?

[16:12] If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me. So there's the first thing.

The true disciple embraces the death of self. Now, second, from verse 35. The true disciple loses his life for Christ and for the gospel.

Let me read that verse again, 35. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it.

Now, really, this verse is picking up and developing the theme of the previous verse, but it's adding an unexpected twist. Because Jesus is telling us here that the direction and energy of our life is going to end us up in the opposite place from where we might have expected.

Look with me at verse 35. You'd expect the truth to be that the person who concentrates on self-preservation is the person who ends up with their life safe and sound and intact.

[17:19] But Jesus says that the truth is the opposite. Namely, the person who works hard at self-preservation is actually the person who ends up with nothing. Whoever wants to save his life, he says, will lose it.

Now, how does a person who is deeply committed to self-preservation live? What will be his or her goals?

Well, the big thing, I guess, will be the accumulation of personal security. The perception will be, I feel very frail. Of course, that's a true perception.

But then the person goes on to say, because I'm frail, I need to shore myself up with various things that will guarantee my security. I must underpin my life against the possible disasters that might overtake me.

So I'll carefully work at building up my financial security, my domestic security in terms of a nice, comfortable home, and the security of friends who will help me out, especially on a rainy day, and the security of a certain standing in society where I'm respected and trusted and can count upon people being nice to me.

[18:31] Now, aren't all of us deeply tempted to shore up our lives in that kind of way?

Self-preservation is a deeply rooted natural human instinct.

But what sort of resources do we naturally look to to shore up our lives? The answer is the resources provided by the world. Money. Insurance policies.

Bricks and mortar. Investments. Health insurance. Keep fit programs. Atkins diets. Lifestyle gurus. Now, friends, don't misunderstand me.

I'm not suggesting that we shouldn't go to doctors when we're unwell, or that we shouldn't have investments and houses and bank accounts. We need all such things, and these things are a good provision from God himself.

But in verse 35, Jesus is asking us what we are really living for. Therefore, is self-preservation our big motive, the desire to live as long as possible and as comfortably as possible?

[19:36] Or, well, what's the alternative? Halfway through verse 35, whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it.

Remember what Willie was saying at the beginning? The words of the Lord can be trusted.

Whoever loses his life for the sake of the gospel and of the Lord will save it. So this other person, this second person, has renounced self-preservation as the main spring of his life.

What he really wants, more than anything, is to live for Jesus and for the gospel. So while his neighbor is spending his energy on thinking about money and comfort and pleasure, this man daydreams as he washes the pots in the sink, as he drives off to work, as he mows the lawn.

Then he daydreams about how he can get his church working flat out for the gospel, how he can love and support his minister and Christian friends, how he can get money raised to support gospel work at home and abroad, how he can learn to explain the gospel himself to his friends and neighbors and family, how he can support and enthuse the children's and young people's leaders in his own church.

So his concerns at bottom are how to get people, more people, on board for heaven and how he can love and serve Jesus with every ounce of his energy.

[ 20 : 58 ] That's his concern. While his neighbor's concerns are about the bank balance and the new settee. And let me ask, which half of verse 35 applies to each of us?

Each of us must look at verse 35 and say, only one half of this verse applies to me. Which is it, if I'm honest?

If it's the first half, we need to get on our knees and beg the Lord to have mercy on us and to change our hearts. Because whoever wants to save his life will lose it in the end.

We can trust the Lord to mean what he says. In verse 35, Jesus is contrasting the now of this life with the then of the day of judgment.

Whoever wants to save his life now will lose it at the day of judgment. But whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel now in this life, that is the person whose life will be saved at the last day.

[ 22 : 04 ] So what is it that is going to motivate people like you and me, who have such a deep natural instinct for self-preservation? What is going to change us from people whose big desire is to serve ourselves and preserve ourselves into people whose great aim is to serve the Lord Jesus and the gospel?

How can we, if you like, move from the first half of verse 35 to the second half of verse 35? Isn't the answer that we need to think again and again and again about Jesus and about all that he has done for us?

The Bible teaches us that at some point, a very long time ago, God the Father took the initiative, took the decision to send his son. Remember, his only son, the son that he loved so much.

He sent the initiative to send him into the world because from God's point of view, there was this heartbreaking problem. The Lord God had created something utterly lovely, Adam and Eve, and the countless generations that were to be descended from them.

These people, this man, Adam, and this woman were made in God's image. They reflected his own glorious being. God created the man from the dust and the woman from the man, and the two of them together reflected the radiance of God's own character.

[ 23 : 31 ] He made them, the Lord God made them, so as to love them and to be loved by them in return. But the devil tempted them to forsake their allegiance to God and to rebel against him.

This was so much worse than the breakdown of a marriage. This was the breakdown of the cosmic relationship that lies at the heart of the world. And do you remember how sometime later, in Noah's generation, we read that when God looked down upon the earth and saw how great man's wickedness had become, it grieved him that he had made the human race, and his heart was filled with pain.

And God would have been perfectly within his rights at that point if he had simply brought the whole human race to a sudden end. But he didn't. He was determined that ultimately his project, his purpose to love mankind and to be loved by mankind would not fail.

It is this burning love for the human race that lies right at the heart of the gospel. But only God knew how much it was going to cost him and his son if in the end he was going to have a people to love and to be loved by.

The only way that God could achieve this was for him to send his son on a great rescue mission.

And the only way in which this rescue mission could succeed was at the cost of his son's life.

[ 24 : 59 ] There was no other way. The son of man said Jesus must suffer and be rejected and be killed. And so Jesus eventually came.

He knew the score from the beginning. He taught his disciples from early on that he was going to have to suffer and die. But as we've seen from Peter's reaction, they didn't understand him and couldn't accept it.

But he was resolved. He was determined to go through with it. He knew that only if his life was laid down could the lives of others be eternally saved.

And so he set his face towards Jerusalem. He went voluntarily to his death. And it was death on a cross. The most humiliating death that anybody could be subjected to. It wasn't merely the worst kind of torture that the Roman Empire was able to devise. The cross was also the symbol of the divine curse. And as Jesus hung there on the cross, he was tormented by the forces of hell.

[ 26 : 07 ] In the words of Paul the apostle, God made him sin who had no sin.

God made him to be sin for us. Think of it. The perfect son of God became sin. He didn't wear our sins lightly. As you or I might wear a jacket or a coat half off our shoulders.

No. He became sin. As Martin Luther put it, the greatest sinner ever. And God forsook him. As he hung on the cross.

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? God was not there. There was no voice of reassurance or comfort. Nothing to soothe or to encourage him. God had poured out his anger against human sin onto Jesus.

And he was now absent. Jesus was anathema. Condemned. Ruined. The wages of sin is death.

[ 27 : 13 ] Jesus hung on the cross as the last Adam. Experiencing the penalty with which God had long ago threatened the first Adam. The day you eat of it, you will surely die.

Now Jesus went through all this. Not only so as to be obedient to his father. But because he loves you and me so greatly. So when he says in our verse 35.

Whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel. He is asking us to be towards him as he has been towards us. He was willing to lose his life for us.

And he asks us to respond in the same way. In our culture today, it's most unlikely to involve actual martyrdom. But it will certainly involve renouncing self.

And renouncing that self-preservation instinct. Friends, will you do that? Will we do this? Will the Tron Church in future be a church known above all else for its passionate, almost reckless love for the Lord and commitment to him?

[ 28 : 31 ] Now somebody may be thinking, but I just daren't give up the self-preservation instinct. What if I were to lose my security and my comfortable niche in society?

It just seems so risky, renouncing self and living all out for Jesus. But friends, this verse 35 teaches us to view the way we live our life now in the light of the day of judgment.

Yes, it will be costly. It will be risky to renounce self and live for Jesus. But isn't the cost of not renouncing self far greater? Look at the first half of the verse again.

Whoever wants to save his life will lose it in the end. Which is better? A few years of comfort and earthly security, followed by eternal loss.

Or a few years of risk and self-renunciation and pain, a kind of death, but followed by eternal joy.

Let's love Jesus and live for him in 2006 and give ourselves afresh to the work of the gospel and be unashamed of him and of his words in this adulterous and sinful generation.

[ 29 : 45 ] And let's be encouraged that he means what he says when he says this, whoever wants to save his life will lose it. But whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it.

Let's bow our heads and pray. We thank you, dear Lord Jesus, that the words you say you will indeed keep and will prove to be true.

We thank you for this great challenge and we ask that you will stir each one of us to love you, to be prepared to deny ourselves, to take up our cross and to follow you, knowing that as we lay down our lives for you, we will indeed at the day of judgment be saved.

And we ask this to your glory and honor. Amen.