

Wanted: Dead AND Alive

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Sermon Audio file

Scripture Text: Romans 6:1-11

If you caught what you think is a typo in the title of today's sermon, you are either an astute observer of cultural references and knew that this one was off just a bit, or you are a proofreader. Or you're both.

"Wanted: Dead or Alive" is a uniquely American idiom we're all aware of, weaned (as many of us were) on television westerns and the occasional western movie that has popped up persistently on the silver screen in the past 30 years. The 1990s alone included memorable movies such as Unforgiven, The Quick and the Dead, Tombstone, Dances with Wolves, 3:10 to Yuma, Wyatt Earp, and Wild Bill. And fans of 1980s music will remember Bon Jovi's Top 10 rock ballad "Wanted Dead or Alive," later featured in television shows including The Sopranos and Deadliest Catch.

In the early days of television, Steve McQueen was the star of "Wanted: Dead or Alive," a show that ran for three years, 1958-1961. It was a breakout role for McQueen, who jumped from television to feature-length films. In this western, one of many in those days, McQueen played Josh Randall, a Confederate veteran and bounty hunter.

Josh Randall carried a shortened Winchester Model 1892 rifle called the "Mare's Leg," and while riding on his horse, Ringo, he could draw and fire his rifle with blazing speed. But he had a soft spot. He not only caught bad guys dead or alive, but he often turned over his earnings to the needy and advocated for his prisoners if he believed they had been falsely accused.

Today, those post-Civil War posters featuring an early photograph of a rough-looking hombre, and the words "Wanted: Dead or Alive" in 48pt Playbill type have been replaced by the FBI's Ten Most Wanted Fugitives list. The gallery of villains on the list has included men charged with first-degree murder, kidnapping, rape, and murder-for-hire plots. Women have not been immune from the "Most Wanted" poster, including one wanted in connection with conspiracy to commit wire fraud, conspiracy to commit money laundering, and conspiracy to commit securities fraud.

No mention is made of wanting these miscreants "dead or alive," and in fact, citizens are warned not to interact with them at all. However, anonymous tips as to their whereabouts are gratefully appreciated.

The apostle Paul has a similar poster on display here in Romans 6. We are wanted people! For the early church, this was often true in a literal sense. Many early believers were followed, harassed, imprisoned, and executed. Some of their adventures are recorded in the book of Acts and in the occasional references made by Paul in his letters. If you identified as a "follower of the Way" in those days, you could become a wanted man or woman. Risky business, for sure.

But the author of our text also says that we're wanted in another sense, a figurative and spiritual one. God wants us, and in so many ways. God wants us to walk in the Spirit, to be unceasing in our prayer life, to be holy, and to cherish in our daily lives all the fruit of the Spirit.

Paul, however, focuses on one aspect of the "wanted" nature of our lives as followers of Jesus. He explains that we are wanted ... dead ... and alive. Then he explains what he means.

He doesn't say we're wanted dead or alive. The root of this distinction is embedded in Paul's great metaphor articulated here in Romans, chapters 5-8, that begins with the crucifixion of Jesus and ends with his resurrection — and a burial in between. Paul says that when Jesus was crucified, it's like we were crucified with him. Thus, we're dead.

But, when Jesus was raised from the dead, we were raised with him. So, we're also alive! Dead (to sin and our old fallen, human nature) and alive to new life in Christ! Dead and alive! In between, there's a burial, the symbol of which is Christian baptism. We go down into the waters of death and come out again revived in new resurrection life!

"So what?" you may ask. Well, the "so what" is found in verse 11: "So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus." In the ebb and flow of our daily lives, we must "consider" ourselves to be "dead ... and ... alive."

This is a truth that we must reaffirm every day. In 1 Corinthians 15:31, the apostle Paul says, "I die every day! That is ... certain, brothers and sisters." He meant this literally and figuratively. It must never be forgotten. It is the crux or heart of how to walk in the Spirit and be a follower of Jesus. Who is the Lord Jesus looking for? He's looking for disciples who are dead and alive.

Paul tells us we're dead. It's startling news. We don't like to talk about death, especially our own. We might say something silly like, "I wouldn't be caught dead wearing bell bottoms," but the truth is, we don't want to be caught dead at all. Ricky Gervais, a comedian often dealing in raw and caustic humor, apparently isn't too concerned about his death: "The best thing about being dead is that you don't know about it. It's like being stupid — it's only painful for others."

We often have warped and conflicting emotions about death. Margaret Stohl, author of Beautiful

Creatures, which became a 2013 film, says, “When you’re alive, you don’t dwell on how you’re going to spend your time once you’re dead. You just figure you’re gone, and the rest will pretty much take care of itself. Or you think you’re not really going to die. You’re going to be the first person in the history of the world who doesn’t have to. Maybe that’s a lie our brains tell us to keep us from going crazy while we’re alive.”

So true. We think we’re going to be the first person to live forever! This is especially true of the young. But Paul says we’re already dead — to sin, to self, and to death itself. We just need to act like it.

To be clear, the death to which he’s referring is a vicarious death. We are dead because we have died in Christ. “I have been crucified with Christ,” he tells his Galatian readers (2:19). When Christ died, he conquered sin, self, and the devil. Even humans’ most feared enemy, death, was vanquished: “Death has been swallowed up in victory. Where, O death is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?” (1 Cor. 15:54-55).

So, Paul argues, we should start acting like we are dead to sin, and not alive to it. We should remember that sinful practices and habits no longer have a hold over us. We should not forget that Christ has broken the chains that bound us to our former life. We are dead to that past. It is gone.

And in Christ, we are also dead to self, or what the KJV calls the “old man.” Call it that fallen part of our human nature, if you will. “We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin” (v. 6). We no longer need to act like the old version of ourselves. We have evolved; we have grown; we have matured. We are, in other words, a “new creation” in Christ (see 2 Cor. 5:17).

Sounds a lot like “mind over matter” nonsense. No ... it sounds more like discipline. “Therefore, do not let sin exercise dominion in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions.” In Christ, you have regained the proper balance. Your body obeys you, not the other way around. Starve the flesh and feed the Spirit. This is truly liberating news!

This is not an either/or situation. Dead to sin, and (not or) alive to God. Paul writes elsewhere, “God, who is rich in mercy ... even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ” (Ephesians 2:4-5). And again, this time to the Colossian church, “When you were dead in trespasses ... God made you alive together with him.” Clearly, this is an important dichotomy in Paul’s theology. But there’s a problem. Unfortunately, if we’re not alive to God, we may be dead to sin, but we’re dead in another way. We’re also spiritually dead if we are not alive to God.

“I see dead people,” whispered Haley Joel Osment’s character in M. Night Shyamalan’s 1999 hit *The Sixth Sense*, thus enshrining his place in cinematic history and lore. It’s not too hard to diagnose a body that has been decomposing for a few days. And it is likewise not hard to spot people who are Christians by birth, profession, denominational affiliation, church membership or checking a survey box for the religion that best describes them — but not spiritually alive by any meaningful measurement or assessment.

Dead Christians are often the walking embodiment of negativity. They seem to be against change and opposed to many positive things. It’s easier for a camel to slip through the eye of a needle than for negative people to slip a positive thought past the teeth and gums of their mouths.

Spiritually dead Christians have zero interest in helping others. In that sense, they’re narcissistic, and in the ancient mythology of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, Narcissus dies — slowly of malnutrition — after he realizes the one person in the world he loves cannot love him back. Yes, no one would mistake dead Christians for Red Cross volunteers or for Meals on Wheels drivers.

Dead Christians, or any dead person, don’t react to external stimuli. They just don’t seem responsive to the spiritual side of their nature. No one would think of them as “alive in the Spirit.” Vital functions appear to have ceased.

Dead Christians seem to just go through the motions, like the routine of a rat in a rut. They live their lives by checking off the boxes, doing just what is required and nothing more. They embody what Henry David Thoreau described as “lives of quiet desperation.”

Finally, spiritually dead people seem to resent the obligations of the spiritual life. Theirs is a childish and immature approach to the Christian life. When kids are asked to do chores or help around the house, they often respond, “Do I have to?” They are also very good at pitching their voices at the “whine” setting. They have little appreciation for the joy and privilege of serving the Lord.

One can flip or reverse the symptoms of dead Christians to discover what it means to be alive in Christ: Alive-in-Christ Christians are generally positive, and unafraid of change. In that sense, many would say they’re progressive and dynamic, not static. Rather than loving themselves, they love others. Rather than promoting self-interest, they lift the concerns of others. They are energized by the Great Commission and seek to fulfil their mission, seeing it as a God-provided opportunity to serve both God and others.

Alive-in-Christ persons are highly sensitive to their spiritual nature and are intentional about study and

prayer time. They talk to God and spend time listening. Alive-in-Christ persons, like Jesus himself, don't hold grudges and are hard to offend. Alive-in-Christ Christians are people of hope, faith, and love. Alive-in-Christ Christians are people of utter integrity — people with whom you'd trust your life, or the lives of your children.

Alive-in-Christ persons, like the apostle James, when facing "trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy, because" they "know that the testing of ... faith produces endurance; and [they] let endurance have its full effect, so that [they] may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing" (James 1:2-4). In other words, they're mature; they're willing to do the heavy lifting and do it without whining.

The Old West could be a confusing place to live in the last half of the 19th century. Many towns didn't have the law to protect them, and life could be brutal and harsh. Just read some of the novels of Willa Cather or Zane Grey. Thousands of people died in the harsh conditions of the western frontier and the criminal element was always present — gangs like Jesse James, the Dalton Brothers and the Clantons, to name a few.

These infamous outlaws were often wanted "Dead or Alive!" And many were brought to justice — some dead, some alive.

Life can be confusing and harsh for us as well. But the good news is that God is on the lookout for us - we are wanted by God - not like the fictional Matt Dillon chasing an outlaw. But rather, like the gentle shepherd seeking a lost lamb, or like a compassionate divine being wanting us dead and alive - dead to sin, but alive in Christ.