

Sermon preached by Pastor Ben Kuerth on May 7, 2017 at Victory of the Lamb on Philippians 3.

**Series: Empty**

**Today's Focus: Empty Life**

**“Christ's Performance Fills Life With Purpose”**

There once was a man who pursued with all his heart whatever he thought might make him happy and fulfilled. He tried throwing lavish parties—incredible cookouts with friends where they enjoyed the best steaks and beverages money could buy. But all that didn't fill him up. He tried pursuing sexual pleasure—not just getting married—but bringing into his bed a different woman almost every night. But that didn't fill him up either. So he tried a different approach. He figured if a Hugh Hefner lifestyle didn't do the trick he'd try and find happiness by pouring himself into work—maybe even accomplishing some things that would help other people.

So he went to work at building parks and gardens and a community center and things like that to benefit the community like a noble humanitarian. By the time he was done he had many accolades on his LinkedIn page, tremendous building projects and other such praiseworthy accomplishments on his resume, along with every pleasure one could seek. And yet there was something still missing. He didn't find that any of these pursuits had actually filled the empty spaces in his soul. He wasn't satisfied. Here's what King Solomon said in the Bible about 3,000 years ago: **So I hated life, because the work that is done under the sun was grievous to me. All of it is meaningless, a chasing after the wind** (Ecclesiastes 2:17).

Yikes, sounds pretty gloomy, doesn't it? But friends, can you sometimes relate? Solomon was talking about life under the sun after all, life here on earth. You ever wake up in the morning (or maybe...in the middle of the night) thinking, “My work is grievous to me!”? Or do you have any empty spaces in your life that you've been trying to fill your own way?

In our series so far we've been seeing, somewhat counter-intuitively, how the empty tomb of Jesus actually fills those empty spaces in our souls. And today again we're going to see how this is wonderfully true especially when it comes to our core identity—who we really are, and how that relates to our purpose in life—what we get to do in all our different callings. And what we're going to find is that Christ's performance fills life, your life, with purpose!

When you hear the word performance what comes to mind though? What feelings creep in? For me the first thing is pressure. Better be a good sermon today. Better make sure everyone in the church is getting along or at least that they're pleased with me as their pastor. Better make sure I find a way to save enough money for retirement. Better make sure my kids turn out to be respectable adults. Better not blow it as a husband. Performance is a pressure packed word. And our world is full of pressure, isn't it?

Where do you feel the pressure in your life? What I want to help you see today is that pressure is often what we put on ourselves when we try and prop up our identity with the law instead of with the gospel. Another way to think of it is that pressure is what we put on ourselves when we confuse what we do with who we are in Christ.

To help you understand what I'm getting at, we're going to turn to the Bible. Philippians chapter 3. Here's the setting real quickly. Philippians was written by a guy named Paul. He wasn't always a Christian, but when he's writing Philippians he actually finds himself in jail for not only being a Christian but for preaching about Jesus Christ. And contrary to what you might think...he's *full*...not of anger or resentment or regrets. He's full of joy! Counter-intuitive, right? Stay with me and I believe you will find the same thing today when you understand how Christ's performance fills your life with purpose.

**Further, my brothers and sisters, rejoice in the Lord! It is no trouble for me to write the same things to you again, and it is a safeguard for you. <sup>2</sup>Watch out for those dogs, those evildoers, those mutilators of the flesh. <sup>3</sup>For it is we who are the circumcision, we who serve God by his Spirit, who boast in Christ Jesus, and who put no confidence in the flesh— <sup>4</sup>though I myself have reasons for such confidence.**

**If someone else thinks they have reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: <sup>5</sup>circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; <sup>6</sup>as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness based on the law, faultless.**

Now I realize that what Paul says here might sound a little foreign to you, alright...maybe a lot! But what he's saying is actually as relevant as ever. He's talking about core identity issues. He's talking like this because some people were consumed with propping up their identity with the law instead of with the gospel and those folks were trying to get other people to do the same. And what Paul is saying is that he knows how that game is played. He used to locate his core identity in how well he performed compared to his peers too. He used to prop up his identity by finding pride in what he did compared to others.

So he lets us in on just how well he knows this game can be played. Who was he? He was a Jew—one of the chosen people (implied: better than others). Beyond that he was from the tribe of Benjamin who stayed loyal to King David long ago. He was from no sell-out tribe. And he was highly educated—no intellectual slouch, a true Hebrew who still could speak the Hebrew language. Yet he also worked extremely hard in school—no slacker like some others. He was a Pharisee and as everybody knows...the Pharisees paid extra careful attention to keeping all God's laws and all their extra man-made traditions too. So morally, no one's life was more squeaky clean than his. And as far as zeal for God...Paul had actually been convinced that he was doing God a favor by becoming the first archenemy of the early Christian church. So Paul is acknowledging that his core identity used to be propped up by what he thought was his awesome performance. He thought God loved him because he was a morally upright, religious Pharisee, better than most. In other words, he was trying to find his identity in law based works instead of through the gospel of God's grace. His confidence as he says was **"in the flesh."**

Do you know why this matters to you and me? Because this is a losing strategy for life! And a joyless, empty one too. And yet because we can so easily fall into this futile game. We can fall into the trap of propping up our core identity with the law instead of the gospel. How can this happen? It happens when you confuse what you do with who you are for one thing. When you look to your career or your accomplishments or your status compared to your peers to find your sense of happiness or fulfillment. "Who am I? I'm a successful businessman. Who am I? I'm a talented musician. Who am I? I'm a super pastor." That sort of thing.

It happens when you care so much about what other people think of you that you're constantly trying to please everybody or make everybody else happy in order to win their approval. It happens when you rest your parenting on whether your kids turn out the way you hope or not or whether other people approve of the decisions you're making or not. "Who am I? I'm a terrific parent. We buy organic foods, our kids always eat their vegetables, little Johnny is on the honor roll, and we don't let them play any video games in our house (at least that's what we want you to think)." That sort of thing. It happens when you take something that is really a privilege that you *get* to do but you begin to feel such a heavy sense of burden or obligation that you begin to resent that you *have* to do it.

But you keep doing it because you want to feel like a success not only in the eyes of others but even sometime in the eyes of God. And so even going to church or volunteering in ministry can become a twisted way in which we try and prop up our identity with the law instead of with the gospel because, "Doggone it, we're supposed to be here, this stuff needs to get done, and we're not like those lazy bones so-called Christians who are taking it easy this morning."

Except, friends, do you see...this is a losing game, isn't it? And it ends up being a joyless, empty one too. It's pure, empty pride to even imagine that you can bring your accomplishments before God and find them acceptable in his sight anyway. To take our performance at life and try and pass it off before God as pleasing in his sight—that would be like diving in the dumpster to dig out some useless garbage, cleaning it up a bit, and trying to sell it on Ebay as if it were new. God's not fooled. But there's good news... Paul says,

**<sup>7</sup> But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. <sup>8</sup> What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ <sup>9</sup> and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith. <sup>10</sup> I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, <sup>11</sup> and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead.**

This is one of my favorite paragraphs in the whole Bible! In other words, if you want to rediscover joy, if you want to know how to attain fulfillment in this life and have hope for the next...don't try and prop up your identity with the law. Find it in the gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ! Trade it that old trash of your performance (both the good and the bad) for the true and lasting treasure of Christ's perfect performance in your place. Listen again to what Paul says about everything he used to use to prop up his identity with the law: **I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ <sup>9</sup> and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith.** You can trade in the old trash of your flawed obedience, your flawed performance, your imperfect parenting, your pressure motivated attempts to measure up, and even what you thought were maybe your religious accomplishments and worldly successes....and you can simply trade them in for true treasure. The treasure of Christ's perfect righteousness which brings along with it forgiveness for all your sins. It's the true treasure that can

reorient not only how you view your past but also give you joy that will sustain you into the future as you rethink what you get to do in life in all your different callings. Christ's performance fills life with purpose.

Here's how this works. No matter how hard you work at it—whether it's work or school or parenting or whatever, even if its religion, sooner or later you will fall short. You will fail. And if you're honest, usually sooner than you'd like to admit. You will find yourself feeling empty. But the good news is that Jesus Christ never failed and as proof of his success, his tomb was empty. Embracing our humanity, Jesus accomplished perfectly everything that God demands that every single one of us do. And it is his perfect record of obedience to God, his righteousness, that is credited to every single believer. Perfect righteousness.

He achieved it. You and I receive it, as Paul says, **“on the basis of faith.”** Trust in Jesus and you will receive true treasure—perfect righteousness in the sight of God. And you know what that means? Friends, the pressure's off! The pressure to perform is no longer there because that's what Jesus Christ achieved when he lived a flawless life as our substitute and exchanged it on the cross for our sins. So you don't have to earn God's approval by what you do. You already have it because of what Jesus Christ has done for you!

Previously Paul felt tremendous pressure—as a result always ping ponging back and forth between pride and despair (some of you know this familiar pattern well)—the pressure to perform well in order to receive affirmation and approval. But then when he discovered that in Jesus Christ, he already had all this in the sight of God...he was no longer motivated by the law, but by the gospel. Delight replaced duty. Purpose replaced pressure. Motivated by God's grace, he was free to start pressing on towards eternity with a sense of purpose that touched every aspect of his earthly life and relationships.

So let me try and bring this home. Have you seen any of the Toy Story movies? They're fantastic. There's a little boy named Andy. He's got a bunch of toys. When he's not around they come alive and play. Their greatest dream is really just to be appreciated and played with by a kid who loves them for who they are.

Two of the main toy characters are Buzz Lightyear the space ranger and Woody the cowboy except that each of them often questions their identity, whether Andy even cares about them anymore, and if they serve any purpose. In one of the movies they're in danger from a kid named Sid, and Buzz Lightyear who is about to be blown up laments, “I'm not a space ranger. I'm just a toy. A stupid, little, insignificant toy.” But then Woody begins to explain what it means to be one of Andy's toys. He says, “Whoa. Hey. Wait a minute. Being a toy is a lot better than being a space ranger... Look, over there in that house is a kid who thinks you are the greatest. And it's not because you're a space ranger, pal. It's because you're a toy. You are *his* toy.”



Buzz then looks down at his foot where he sees the name “ANDY” covered in grime and dirt. He touches the name. And so knowing now who he is, Buzz is able to do what he must. Buzz and Woody are able to escape Sid's clutches and make it safely back to Andy.

What changed? They rediscovered their core identity! Friends, don't confuse what you do in life with who you are by God's grace. Buzz felt disappointed and empty because he thought of himself primarily as a space ranger. But he found a new determination and reason to live when he remembered that his primary identity was simply Andy's toy.

So friends, who are you? Who are you really? *You are God's child!* Even if you don't remember it, when you were baptized, God permanently etched his name on you! So you belong to him and he loves you. He loves you no matter what. You can try and cover up that beautiful name by sort of painting over it with your own performance attempts. You can try and smear it with the dirt of sin, the pursuits of your own self-satisfaction, or the garbage of your own righteousness, but that can't change the fact that your baptism is when everything that Christ accomplished through his perfect life, his cross, and his empty tomb became yours. The one true God placed his name on you and this truth you can always reclaim! That's what repentance is. Reclaiming your true identity as God's child and letting Christ's performance fill your life with purpose.

So every time you wash your hands, every time you take a shower or go out in the rain (which has been a lot lately) you can "touch your name" as you remember your true identity as a baptized child of God. Because just like the toys would often forget the name on their boot, we often forget to whom we belong.

Maybe you wanted to be a space ranger and you're not. That's ok. Your career path didn't turn out the way you wanted. Maybe you wish you had worked a little harder in school. Maybe you wish you hadn't pursued all those other things that are part of your life story to this day. Maybe there are a few chapters you wish you could rewrite. That's ok because remember what it means to be a child of God. We have a Father in heaven who loves us unconditionally, accepts us wholeheartedly, promises to never let us go, and will not rest until Jesus our Savior finally returns to transform even our lowly bodies into something more glorious than we could ever imagine. And because you don't have to prop up your identity with the law anymore, that means you are now free in Christ to press on towards eternity.

**<sup>12</sup>Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. <sup>13</sup>Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, <sup>14</sup>I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.**

Friends, spend some time this week reading all of Philippians chapter 3. Remember your baptism and bask in what it means to be God's child. Maybe even watch the Toy Story movies and rejoice in what it means that God has permanently placed his name on you. You will find that Christ's performance fills your life with purpose and with joy! Amen.