

Sermon preached on October 12, 2014 by Pastor Ben Kuerth on Philippians 3:7-14 at Victory of the Lamb.

Series: Stuck?

Today's Focus: Straining

"Pressure's Off, So Press On!"

Hi friends, welcome to all of you who are here with us today as well as all of you watching online.

You have anything that causes you to feel pressure? You have any sources of stress in your life? Raise your hand if there is stuff in life that causes you to feel pressure? Now if the person sitting next to you didn't raise their hand, chances are they're a robot or else they don't have a pulse and you might want to see if they're still alive! Because as human beings, pressure is something most of us have to deal with all the time, right?

We might talk about peer pressure—and what's that? It's when our friends, our peers, sometimes push us to do things we know are wrong, to make bad choices, or to do things that are ultimately harmful. It's tough to withstand that kind of pressure when it comes from our peers.

In the sports world you often hear about people "choking under pressure". If you perform under pressure, in our world we make you a hero. Choke under pressure though and we will throw you under the bus on social media faster than an angel can fly. Pressure be a difficult thing to deal with. There is almost nothing worse than feeling like you're stuck in a place where you're about to be crushed by pressure.

But pressure isn't limited to professional athletes playing in the big game or to CEOs making high stakes decisions. Everybody deals with pressure. There's super intense pressure these days to succeed in our highly competitive world, to get ahead, to perform, to measure up, to ace that test, to get that scholarship, to finish that project, to meet that deadline, to provide for your family, etc.

A lot of kids feel pressure to win their parent's approval even while those standards are sometimes impossibly steep. Yet steep standards don't automatically end as adults either, do they? A lot of adults, some of you, may feel intense pressure to live up to impossibly steep standards in a marriage or when dating—to keep up that appearance, to maintain that diet, or to lose that weight because you're constantly being compared to those photo-shopped, unrealistic images on the internet.

Pressure of all kinds can be crushing, right? And if we're honest, it can also be coercing, can't it? Motivating. Pressure, guilt, fear, are powerful motivators—albeit in the same way that I think a mountain lion chasing you would probably be a powerful motivator too, right? You better starting running. Why? Because you're about to become lunch. Friends, you have any pressure like this in life?

Believe it or not the Apostle Paul himself did at one time. And if not for the pressure releasing words of a pastor named Ananias (cf. Acts 22:12-16) and the gracious gift of baptism that washed his sins away, the pressure might have become even too much for Paul.

But Paul thankfully got to know Jesus Christ. And knowing Jesus literally changed his life so that even while he was physically stuck in prison, yet Paul in his soul was free to keep pressing on. So today we're getting into the heart of Paul's letter written from prison to the Philippians. And this is really at the heart of what we're trying to get at in this series and that's to figure out how to get unstuck in life and start moving forward in faith.

Today we're going to learn how to move past being squeezed by pressure and find true peace. My goal is to upgrade your soul from being guilt driven to being grace inspired and forgiven. And I say we're going to learn this...because what Paul shares with us today isn't something that just comes naturally. No it's actually contrary to all human reason and every religion invented by human beings that tells you "Here's what you must do". So we're going to learn something of a paradox and that's this: **Pressure's Off, So Press On!** Paul says,

⁷ But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. So Paul's saying, "There are things that I used to think were to my credit. There were things in the gains column of my life (like a profit and loss spreadsheet) that I was really proud of. I had accomplishments that I was fond of admiring like shiny trophies in a display case."

Well what kind of things Paul? What are you talking about? "I'm talking about my religious performance record. I was a very religious guy you see. I came from a religious family. High pressure. High performance. I used to think that God loved me because of how hard I worked to obey him. I used to think it was to my credit that I was more zealous in my religious activities than other people. I went around measuring my relationship with God on the basis of how much better a person I thought I was compared to other people. I pursued the righteousness of God on the basis of what I thought was my high level of achievement and I'm telling you, on paper, I got results."

"I finished top of my class in Pharisee school. While some of my peers were out partying, I was studying the Bible. I memorized verses. I didn't have Martin Luther's catechism but if I did I'd have memorized all 6 chief parts plus the what-does-this-means. I was driven in my pursuit of keeping the law...and not just the 10 commandments but all those man-made laws we Pharisees came up just with for extra credit. Today I'd probably be labeled a religious fanatic but I even thought I was serving God by persecuting Christians and throwing them in prison. I actually thought this would secure for myself God's favor by making God happy. I felt the pressure to perform and I thought this would bring me peace." *⁷ But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ.*

Now friends, before we go on, I want to talk about the pressure of being a perfectionist. Any of you know a perfectionist? Are any of you a perfectionist? I like to say that I'm a recovering one. In other words for a long time in my life I would almost be consumed by my drive for perfection. In everything. And it's not the pursuit of perfection that was the problem but the idea that I found my sense of sense worth in being more perfect than others. So if it took me 2 hours to study for a test to get a 95, I'd spend 5 hours to get a 100. If I had a poor basketball game where I shot 1-10, I'd go to the gym late at night after the game and shoot another 1,000 shots. And then there were the piano lessons as a kid where I'd try and make excuses for not going to a lesson because I could not stand to sit there and play a single

wrong note. The pressure to perform at times weighed me down like a backpack full of bricks because I used to think who I am is how well I perform. Now that's not a healthy thing at all, especially when it carries over into one's relationship with God.

And you know why? Because if you think your relationship with God is based on your performance or pursuit of perfection, it will lead you to either a foolish pride ("Look at me and what I do compared to you.") or to eventual despair ("Look who I've got fooled because they look at me and think, 'There's a good person if I ever saw one'... but I know I can't fool God. I'll never be good enough").

⁷ But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. ⁸ 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 ⁹ 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.

This, my friends is one of the most powerful passages in the Bible. Here's our pressure relief valve. Paul takes us to the very heart of Christianity and what makes it different from every religious system based on pressure. If you've got your Bible open today you might want to highlight it, circle it, underline it. You're going to want to come back to this again and again. Here's why.



Now I haven't said a word about it up to this point, but how many of you have noticed the graphic we designed for this series? {pic} It's a cute little turtle, right? Poor little guy. It looks like he's working so hard, moving those little legs but just can't get unstuck. He looks so sad and frustrate even though it looks like you could just go over to him, give him a little nudge, "Boop", and push him back over. Doesn't look so hard, right? Except he can't get unstuck on his own no matter how hard he tries. Paul says this is what all religious activity is like apart from knowing Jesus Christ who takes the pressure off. It's all futile effort. Actually he says it's worse than that. It's worthless. It's filthy. He calls it garbage.

I've never done it, but if you were to go rummaging through a dumpster, I'm sure you'd find a whole lot of really gross stuff in there. Rotting food, dirty diapers, used Kleenexes. And I'll just stop there. Ugh. Garbage. But you might find some things that at first glance maybe seem to have some value yet too. Like maybe a nice looking leather couch that you could still sit it...except upon closer inspection the cushions are worn and there's a strange, foul odor coming from it. Or a piece of carpet that could still serve to cover a floor except that it's got a few stains and some mold starting to grow underneath. Well this is kind of what it's like for Paul to go back through his life. Like diving in a dumpster. Some of the things he once saw as good things in life he now sees only as garbage.

Now that's not to say that weren't some truly good things in his life or in your life too for that matter, blessings of God's grace that he's allowed you to enjoy even when you didn't deserve them. God is that gracious and kind to us all that he often allows us to taste many good and pleasant things in life. But what do you see when you rummage through the dumpster of your past? If you're like me you see a lot of ugly regrets. There are mistakes, there are failures. Foolish pride. There are hurts and I'm not just

talking about what other have done to me, but what I've done to others. Words I cannot take back. Things I've done that I cannot undo. This was certainly also the case for Paul. How about for you? What haunts you? What garbage is in your dumpster?

And what do you do when you can't right all those wrongs, when you can't rewind your life story, when you can't possibly go back or pay back everything and everyone? Paul had murder on his conscience. You think he would've liked to go back and undo the stoning of Stephen? Why what despair he would've had to feel if his relationship with God was dependent on him doing some sort of penance!

Imagine if your relationship with God depended on trying to do enough daily penance or behavior modification before he forgives you? That would be like trying to move forward in life by choosing to go through quicksand. You know how well that works, right? In quicksand the harder you strive the more you start to sink. Friends, some of you are spending too much time and energy in the quicksand of your own striving and not enough time at the foot of the cross. It's time to get unstuck. Paul says again,

I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ⁹ 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. 10 I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, 11 and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead. Friends, this is Christianity. This is what makes our faith unique. It's the gospel—the good news that our relationship with God doesn't depend on what we do. It depends on what Jesus Christ, God's Son, has done for us. It's not about your past performance, it's about His. It's not about hauling your own righteousness before God and saying, "Here you go." It's about holding out your hands as a beggar and saying, "Thank you, Jesus, for yours."

I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ⁹ 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 get this? Christ's record of perfect obedience is credited into the gain column of your life's account simply by trusting Him who died and rose for you. And of Him the Scriptures say, "A bruised reed he will not break and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out" (Isaiah 42:3). So even if you come to him with a tiny flicker of faith, like a melting candle burning just a tiny wick, Jesus will assuredly forgive your sins and gently fan into flames your faith. If you come with but a broken heart that says, "I have nothing good to offer you. I have only the garbage of my sins. I am completely stuck. Nothing in my hand I bring. Simply to your cross I cling," God will forgive you fully and freely by grace for he already has through his Son.

Friends, Jesus has taken the pressure off so you can take your striving, and take your worrying, and take your fear and lay it at the foot of the cross where the guilt of all your sins was paid in full to give you peace. Pressure's off. Through your baptism you were clothed with Christ so God sees now sees you as he sees his Son. Through Holy Communion Jesus continually assures you of his forgiveness because he knows how often you need it. Why should any of us find it odd that God would have multiple ways to tell us and show us that he loves us knowing how prone we are to feeling the crushing burden of pressure? Friends, the pressure's off!

And so now, when you know that the pressure's off, that you have peace through Jesus...get this...now you can actually, press on! ¹² *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.* ¹³ *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,* ¹⁴ *I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.*

How does this work? You see once you know that you're at rest and forgiven, then you're going to have motion again toward the goal of crossing the finish line into heaven. I told you it's a paradox! But this is what makes Christianity so special and unique. Once you know you're free because of Jesus, you can't help but want to follow him where he leads. Once you know it's all about what Jesus has done, then you're free to say, "What can I do?" Not because you have to anymore, as if you're being chased by the mountain lion of guilt and fear, but because you *get to* and you *want to*. It's about forgetting what is behind, and straining toward what is ahead.

And this is what transformed me from a perfectionist who always felt the crushing burden of failure and the pressure of work into a mission pastor who's not afraid to fall flat on my face while working hard for Jesus because at the end of the day no matter what...I'm a baptized child of God who lives and breathes and will one day die in grace covered with the righteousness of my Savior. So I think we can all start taking ourselves less seriously sometimes and start taking God more seriously.

Because rather than making people lazy, grace actually supplies our energy! Instead of pressure, it inspires and supplies our passion. I mean here's Paul in prison. He looks mighty stuck. Yet he says, "I'm going to keep pressing on. I'm going to keep forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead. Pressure's off, so press on!" Amen.

Let's pray: "Lord Jesus, you are my righteousness, I am your sin. You have taken upon yourself what is mine and given me what is yours. You have become what you were not so that I might become what I was not." Amen. – Martin Luther

My Next Steps:

Connect: Why are we so good at guilt? So much of how we think, how we react, what we do every day is motivated by a desire to make up for all the ways we've messed up with our children, our spouse, etc.

Aha: Guilt and shame over past actions keep us from moving forward in a healthy way and from fulfilling our call to be salt and light in this world. God longs to free us from these chains so that we can be used by him to free others.

Treasure: *Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead,* ¹⁴ *I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 3:13b-14).*

Challenge: Identify the areas of guilt and shame in your life. What keeps you from believing that you are forgiven and free?