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Purpose

Calvary Baptist Church of New Haven

January 13, 2019

**Scripture Reading:**

Ephesians 1:1-14

**Introduction:**

Last semester we launched our theme for the year, *Gemeinschaft*, to focus on what it means to be a church-*community* whose life is centered in and around Jesus Christ. During our Friday nights, the youth group has been exploring this theme through learning and practice. Yet I do confess that it has struggled to make its way over into our Sunday worship.

Last year in mid-July you might recall I preached a sermon on the brokenness of our community. The hope was that it would be a launching pad of sorts for a sermon series on the topic. But for a variety of reasons, some being serious and others less so, my sermons ended up focusing on other things instead. Here I’ll spare you the details and excuses. All that to say, this year as we begin I’d like for us to return to that – and hopefully make good on my promise.

To do so, over the next several weeks we’ll be walking through the book of Ephesians together, to consider the implications of the gospel in our own lives, and what it means for us and our church to be a part of God’s redemptive plan for the world. (A tall order I would appreciate your prayers in.) So, to get us going, this week I’d like to begin by talking about finding our *purpose* in Christ as we look at the opening chapter of Ephesians.

**Purpose Lost:**

In an article my former youth pastor wrote awhile back for a popular Christian magazine, he gives a sobering account of something he observed the greater part of his English ministry struggling with while doing ministry at Antioch (the name of my home church), and that is meaninglessness. He writes this:

I was serving as the full-time English ministry pastor at a Korean American Church

in the Chicago suburbs. The ministry was composed of about 70-80 youth and emerging adults, with a strong team of volunteers, and a supportive Korean ministry. As a Filipino American, I was shown an incredible amount of grace and given ample space to experiment without micromanagement. Everything seemed to be going well.

And yet, what I encountered in the lives of the people to whom I was ministering was a *haunting sense of meaninglessness*. The students were academically successful, socially integrated, and biblically informed, *yet plagued by the everyday experiences of emptiness*.

One college student described it to me this way: “When we are in church and I’m listening to the preaching, it’s like you are weaving a spell. I believe, and the world makes sense to me. But then I walk out the door of the church and it’s like the spell is broken.”

Sunday might be full of meaning and joy, but disenchantment, despair, and doubt reigned just outside the walls of the church.[[1]](#footnote-1)

This may resonate with some of you. We come to church, and we hear from God’s word. And just when it seems like things are finally beginning to make sense, we leave church and reenter our ordinary lives, only to experience time and time again the reemergence of doubt, emptiness, and despair. Why is that?

In our modern secular culture, we’ve imbibed into our beings and our worldviews a pithy saying once spoken by the ancient philosopher, Protagoras, that man is the measure of all things. It’s the notion that we can find meaning and happiness within ourselves, apart from God or others. Though we don’t necessarily phrase it this way anymore, it no doubt repeatedly manifests itself in popular media and in our modern social interactions through hollow aphorisms like “just be true to yourself”. Of course, the only problem with that is we are never sure that who we are is who we want to be, and thereby we can never be sure that what we think will fill the emptiness within our souls will actually do so. Which is why if you try to base your life’s purpose on the “just be true to yourself” principle, you’ll always end up right back where you started, feeling like your life is meaningless and empty, regardless of however many sermons you listen to or however many times you show up to bible study.

This also helps explain why so many of us are workaholics, trying to fill our emptiness with busyness. We go from one thing to the next, hoping that things like good grades, lucrative salaries, attractive bodies, trophy spouses, stellar careers, a boyfriend/girlfriend, and so forth will be able to give our lives some greater meaning, coherence, and purpose. But you really don’t have to live that long to figure out that none of these things are capable of doing that. If any of you in here today think otherwise – as lovingly as possible – I’d just want to point out that you’re either naïve, or you’re in denial.

Notice I have not introduced the bible at this point. What I’ve been trying to do thus far is first have us acknowledge that regardless of whether or not one is a believer all human beings carry an innate, unshakeable, and sharp awareness that life is unsustainable and not worth living unless there is something to live for. But we’ve seen that we can’t live for ourselves because our purpose in life is not intrinsic to who we are, nor can we live for material and earthly things outside of ourselves because they don’t fill the inner emptiness of our souls. So, whatever purpose you might have given yourself, which you are currently chasing after, at best it is really only a penultimate one.

So, if life can only be sustained by purpose, then the sort of purpose we need is one that is true and ultimate, because only in that sort of purpose will our lives find value, coherence, and meaning. In other words, we need to know the end for which we were created.

**Purpose Found:**

The Apostle Paul is keenly aware of this human tendency to look inwards, to draw into ourselves, which is why he begins his letter to the Ephesians in the way that he does: *Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him*.

Paul says we need to begin by stepping outside our personal spaces of self-absorption, and recognize a *relationship* we’ve lost sight of, that God is the Creator and you are his creature. That’s so important because if God is the Creator and you are his creature, then only he is capable of defining who you are and your purpose in life. The French theologian and mathematician, Blaise Pascal, puts it this way: “There is a God-shaped hole in the heart of each [human being] which cannot be satisfied but only by God the Creator, made known through Jesus Christ.” But what is the nature of that purpose, that is, the end for which we were created, made known to us by God through Jesus Christ?

First, it’s that you should be holy and blameless before him. From all of eternity, even before God laid the foundation of the world, he deemed that your life should take on this shape of holiness. Why? Well if you listened closely you’ll have noticed that he calls you to be holy and blameless so that you can be *before him*. In other words, you’re meant to be such things – holy and blameless – not for their own sake but for the sake of enjoying God through a life of eternal fellowship and communion with him, for God’s desire is to communicate such gifts to you.[[2]](#footnote-2) That’s the first component.

Contrary to your intuition, though, you did not earn it, or do anything to deserve it. It’s purely by God’s grace and mercy that he brings you into his presence and bestows upon you his blessings. You know it can’t be because of anything you did, or because you’re anything special, since Paul says God willed it even before your existence was a reality. *In love he predestined us for adoption as sons [and daughters] through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved.* So, God creates you for fellowship with him because his attitude towards you is one of love.[[3]](#footnote-3) And again, not because of who you are or what you did, but as Paul specifies because of who Christ is and because what Christ has done for you.

Before you even come into existence and draw first breath in your lungs, God is thinking of you from eternity, and he does so through the merits of his Son Jesus Christ, so that when God looks at you he sees his own Son, and loves you *in the way* and *to the degree* that he has loved the Son from all of eternity. In this, it becomes unquestionably clear that everything is by God’s gracious design. However, as Paul points out in v.7, we no longer live according to the purpose given to us by God because we sinned and turned against him. While sin leads to your ruin and fall, it also means you fundamentally lose your grip on reality. So, you lose sight of the fact that you are a mere creature, and that God is your Creator, the fashioner of your life and being. What ends up happening is we try take God’s place in our own lives.

To tie this back into what we said earlier, if your life’s ultimate meaning and purpose can only be determined by entering into and being in this relationship with the Creator, then your life’s aimlessness is merely the natural result of you opting out of that relationship. Unless God becomes the center of your life, you will spend the rest of your days unto eternity in confusion, despair, and emptiness, for only God can give you total meaning, joy, and satisfaction.

This is why the “just be true to yourself” principle is essentially baseless, not to mention idiotic, since what people are really saying by this is indulge your sins and worst passions, and build your identity around such things, things you think will give life but in actuality robs you of it. In Romans 1:22, Paul shows us what really happens when we choose to live like this: “Claiming to be wise, they became fools.”

The good news of the gospel is that Christ redeems humanity through the blood he sheds for us on the cross, so that we would not be left to our aimless wanderings in the dark. What God said he would do before the beginning of time, he does by entering into history some two thousand years ago in the person of Jesus Christ, to show us again what it means to live, to show us again what is worth living for. But more importantly, what is worth dying for.

Christ came to earth with a singular mission, to do the will of his Father. He never forgot who he was, and he never lost sight of the end, though he was tempted in every way like you and I. As he went about his human life, the Son never lost sight of his relationship with the Father. He did what you and I couldn’t, and because of that we are forgiven and are given new purpose. A purpose we can be sure meets the criteria of being true and ultimate because Christ is God; a purpose we can be sure meets the criteria of giving our lives meaning, coherence, and value because Christ is now alive, he rose from the grave.

**Purpose Shared:**

*In him we have redemption through his blood… making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.* What Paul reminds us of here is that though God has repurposed us in Christ, there’s still a long way for us to go since we remain in our sin, though to be sure we are no longer under its power as Paul tells us in Romans 6:14. So, as we are sanctified over the course of time, what happens is God gives us greater insight into what shape our purpose found in Christ should take for our own individual lives.

For those in Christ, our common purpose now is to love God and to love neighbor. Yet what that looks like is different for everyone, since it really depends on their gifts, their struggles, and their unique situations in life. Yet as we follow Christ in obedience he makes known to us his will so that we would know what it means to live for him by loving God and by loving our neighbor. What we can be sure of, though, is that God is now calling us to pull others out of their aimless wanderings, just as Christ pulled us out of our own. In this, God wants to give those who are lost something you, too, were once without, namely, the hope of the gospel. You see God is not only working to redeem you, but he is working to redeem the world, and he is inviting us to be a part of that, and that greater calling is to be realized in wherever you’re at in life – student, professor, lawyer, teacher, physician, etc.

This is why Jesus says if you lose your life for his sake you will find it, since there is no knowledge of the end for which you were created apart from him and the work he’s called you to do. And you won’t be satisfied apart from this. For when you lose your life for the sake of the gospel you find it, and in finding it what was lost is now restored: communion with God and thereby satisfaction for all your longing, emptiness, and unrest.

So, may you not leave this place trying to fill the God-shaped hole in your heart with trivial penultimate things that will undoubtedly leave you feeling empty again. Snap out of the illusion that you can find your purpose apart from Christ. He died and rose again so that you would no longer have to live in a reality of dysphoria.

**Conclusion:**

To sum, Paul is showing us that we cannot discover meaning and purpose for ourselves without looking to Christ, and he shows us that the end of our life is constituted in this threefold manner: to know God as our Creator, who alone defines our end; to realize that end on this side of eternity, which is communion with God and the enjoyment of his blessings, through the atoning work of his Son Jesus Christ; and to share the news of what God has done for us through Christ, so that others may also experience the joy and satisfaction of knowing him.

1. Justin A. Bailey, “In Search of Stronger Spells,” *Inheritance*, March 2017, 7-8. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Kathryn Tanner, *Jesus, Humanity, and the Trinity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 1-2. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. F.F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1984), 256. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)