

“You Can’t Lose in Jesus Christ – Figuring It All Out”

Psalm 68; Ephesians 2:8-10

May 24, 2020

It’s hard to believe I’ve been here at Cook’s Church now for just about 5 months. A large part of that, of course, is that about 3 months into my call here, COVID-19 shut down the world and we’ve been instructed not to hold worship services. And since most of y’all have not gotten a chance to know me, let me go ahead and explain something to you that you might not yet have realized. In the 90s, I held a LOT of different jobs. I was a radio account salesman, a night club manager, a restaurant chef, a Barista at Starbucks and, finally, a culinary school instructor.

In fact, I held so many jobs back then that I got in the habit of telling people I’d lived a colorful life but, believe me when I tell you, my 20s were certainly no “fun and games,” if you will. I was lost in the truest sense of the word. I was flailing about, trying to figure out who I was and what I was supposed to be doing in this thing called life and, quite honestly, I was doing a horrible job at it.

But, as I look back on it now, so much of that constant search for who I was and what I was supposed to be doing with my life was wasted effort. Now look, don’t get me wrong, there were some good times in there but so much of that ongoing struggle I see as needless and unnecessarily uncomfortable.

I’m here to tell you, I wouldn’t go back and relive my 20s for all the proverbial tea in China.

You see, like a lot of people in my generation, I was saddled with the overarching belief that it was incumbent upon the individual to quote-unquote “figure things out.” Of which the chief thing to be figured out was, of course, one’s own self. Somewhere along the way I became convinced that, through expressing my own individualism and freedom, that the answers to life’s biggest questions would somehow arise from the cloud of dust being kicked up by my ongoing efforts to survive and thrive.

That I ended up with such a worldview is not entirely a surprise. If anything, over the last 50 years as we’ve witnessed America moving to what scholars in the ivory tower are calling a “post-religious” America, more and more people have been consumed with and consumed by the incessant task of defining themselves.

In no unclear or uncertain terms, such needless baggage is the bitter fruit of existentialism.

Existentialism is a philosophy which arose in the middle part of the 19th century but its effect linger right into the present day.

I thought this definition I found on the internet was both good and succinct. **“a philosophical theory or approach which emphasizes the existence of the individual person as a free and responsible agent determining their own development through acts of the will.”**

Another great image to assist us conceive of what this means lands us in the middle of the ocean with no shoreline in sight. On the downside, we’ve got to figure out a way to save ourselves, to survive in a place devoid of any assistance. On the plus side is the awareness that, being all alone, you no can define everything by yourselves. To that end, in existentialist thought, ethics and morality are an open playing field in which one simply does not have to adhere to anyone else’s understanding of good and evil, right or wrong. Life is a blank sheet of paper for an individual to fill in as they so wish or desire.

Now look, it doesn’t take a genius to see how three full generations of “existentialized” thinkers is playing out in real time, does it? We live in a society in which the entire idea of the common good is collapsing. After all, when fewer and fewer people believe in God and are out in the world trying to define themselves at any costs, things are bound to get wonky. Take for example the knowledge that cheating in academics is at a staggering, all-time high. It only makes sense – if an individual gets to define their own morality, what’s a little cheating here and there?

But, closer to home, we see younger generations saddled with depression and anxiety disorders at a level never seen before. Figuring it all out, as it happens, it exhausting and soul-deflating stuff.

Younger generations, like me back in the 90s, are all struggling under the unbearable weight that they’ve got to figure themselves out, all by themselves. Figuring out everything from who they are from their sexuality and gender to their conceptions of right and wrong is entirely incumbent upon them, unassisted by anyone or anything else.

What looks at first glance to be wonderfully freeing, is actually the opposite. Friends, it’s a recipe for disaster. Worse, it doesn’t have to be that way at all.

We return now to a passage of Ephesians 2 which we've travelled with for a number of weeks as I've preached a sermon series entitled, "You Can't Lose in Jesus Christ." And I think there is perhaps no clearer way that we can see this no-lose proposition as we return to the last two verses we've been studying. Ephesians 2:8-10 reads, "For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them."

One of the things I really try to get my kids to understand is that art is a worthwhile process, even if you're not the most gifted artist in the world.

Y'all, no kidding, I spent years avoiding doing art because I knew that I was terrible at doing it. I mean I can remember middle-school art classes in which we'd be given something to draw or paint and, somehow, mine never quite turned out the way I imagined it in my head. There was one time, in a clay sculpting class I took as a Senior in High School where we were supposed to do a clay-based project based on a Greek God. I chose as my topic, Poseidon, God of the Sea. For weeks I shaped and dried and painted this piece of work which, curiously, turned out looking more like that poop emoji than the powerful god of the seas of ancient Greece.

It's only been within the last decade really that I could draw a distinction between my enjoyment of doing artistic projects and the aesthetic value of the final project.

Take, for example, one of my prized possessions. [Show Mug]

I made this mug at one of those pottery painting places that you'll find in strip malls. Lillian and I spent a few hours just painting to our heart's content. As we chose what exactly we would paint, I opted for a coffee mug, something that I use every morning as I sit and drink coffee and ponder the mysteries of God. Lillian, it should be noted, chose a unicorn that day.

It took some time and, I confess, it isn't perfect. It isn't quite the way I imagined it, but I love it nonetheless. Not only does it remind me of a nice day spent with my daughter, so too do I recall the joy I had in creating it.

Creation creates joy.

I begin with a story of art because I think it fitting. After establishing that, though Jesus Christ, we are saved by grace. A grace that is made known to us through our faith in Jesus Christ (which is also a gift, remember, you can't lose in Jesus Christ,) Paul answers for us the very questions we needlessly expend so much energy attempting to.

And he very much begins with a reference to art. We, Paul writes, are God's workmanship, that's the English translation. Here, the word in the Greek text very much conveys the meaning of an artistic project. Workmanship is the effort of a craftsman, someone highly trained to produce something of great worth.

What Paul is drawing our attention to is that we ourselves are, in a sense, the artistic creation of an omnipotent, loving God. Unlike me, who is limited in my ability, God is absolutely not. In his creation of us, God brings his perfect ability to bear.

And it isn't as though Paul fashions this concept of being created by God out of nothing. Remember, Paul himself was a devout Jew prior to becoming a Christian. As such a Jew, Paul was well-versed in what we'd call the Old Testament Scriptures. As you read Paul's letters, you realize that his world-view is entirely shaped by the Word of God. In fact, he frequently cites the Old Testament. 83 times in the course of Paul's letters, he directly cites it. If you consider Paul to be the author of Hebrews, that add another 84 Old Testament references.

So it's not surprising that, here in Ephesians, Paul looks back indirectly at the Old Testament and reckons us to be the creation of a loving God.

In the very first chapter of Genesis, we are given a look into God's creative act. Genesis 1:26-27 reads, "Then God said, *Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth. So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.*"

Of course, the creation of humans was the last of God's creative acts recorded in Genesis. And God looks upon us and all that He fashioned and declares it, 'good.'

But notice this – not only are we creations of an Almighty God, we ourselves are created in His image. We're not coffee mugs, if you will. We are instead, every one of us, reflections of the divine!

Every single one of us bears the very image of God in our being. That's something that isn't touched by the hand of time or the scorn of others. It is something completely and utterly woven into the very marrow of us. This, within theological circles, is known as the Imago Dei, the image bearing of God is a blessing beyond our daily remembrance, actually. But it's something the Scriptures remind us on several occasions.

Again, in the Psalms, we hear praise for God's handiwork in creating us. The Psalmist in 139 writes, *"For you formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother's womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; my soul knows it very well. My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth. Your eyes saw my unformed substance; in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them."*

Speaking to the prophet Jeremiah in 1:5, God says, *"Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you, and before you were born, I consecrated you."*

We are fashioned in the very likeness of a Good and Merciful God. We are wonderfully made! That's good news in a world which tells us we must define ourselves either through our achievements or our aesthetic adornments

There is something, deep down in every one of us something beautiful for no other reasons than that.

This is something so important for us to hear because sometimes our attempts to answer the question, "who am I?" lead us down the path of folly or misery.

In 2018, data indicates that we Americans spent over 17 billion, with a b, dollars on elective plastic surgeries. On top of that, according to The National Association of Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders, eating disorders claim a life every hour while no less 13% of women under the age of 50 have suffered from some form of those diseases in their lives.

But it needn't be this way. If, by the power of the Holy Spirit speaking in Scripture, we could remember whose creation we are and whose image we bear, we would see ourselves for what we are, beautiful, wonderfully made. By nature, we are God's handiwork.

Imagine now if when you ask yourself "who am I?" Instead of answering with your vocation or your individual character traits you instead simply answered, I am a wonderful, unique creation of an Almighty God and I bear His image in the world." Can you imagine the stress you would remove from your lives? Think about how free to truly live you'd be. You'd be unfettered by fears of inadequacy, unchained from unhealthy body images.

A few years back, I met a young woman through doing some counselling at the church I was serving who was in a time of great struggle. She'd had a difficult upbringing, divorced parents who remained at war with one another, oftentimes using their children as pawns within their battle with each other. As the result of that friction, she hadn't done very well in high school and had dropped out. Somewhere along the way, this young woman had gotten the idea that she was worthless and unattractive. She'd fashioned herself, in her own words, a "loser."

Nothing could've been further from the truth as her natural kindness and consideration for other people shone through her low self-image as did her intelligence.

Thankfully, she met some strong Christian women and she opened up enough to trust them and take guidance from them. They surrounded her with love and a kind of grace she'd never encountered before. They showed her with their words and with their actions that she was a child of God, created in His image, beautiful and priceless for no other reason than that. Nothing in her life that had happened nor would happen, could ever remove that blessing from her.

And, thanks be to God, it sunk in.

Her life changed. She re-enrolled in college and has now completed a Bachelor of Science in nursing. On top of that, a recent Facebook post announced she was engaged to a young man she'd met in school.

You see, when this young woman woke up from the soul-crushing delusion that she was defined by her parent's relationship or by things she'd done or failed to do, she was lost. Finding herself instead to be a creation of God, beloved by Him, she found the self-respect necessary to truly thrive in life.

But that's only half of the good news. Not only do we know who and what we are through the Word of God, we also recognize that we do indeed have an ultimate purpose. Paul tells us that we were created "for good works" and again, this links back to our original creation.

Reading again from Genesis 1, *"And God blessed them. And God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.'"*

Within the creative act, God also defined our purpose. We are to be stewards of His creation. We are given dominion over everything that lives and breathes on this big blue marble called Earth.

As we continue to read Scripture, we gain even greater clarity on this matter. What is revealed particularly in the New Testament is that, in our creation, God has endowed you and I with spiritual gifts meant to be employed in His service. As we seek to be stewards of creation so too are we to care for the people of this world.

Romans 12:6-8 – *"Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; if service, in our serving; the one who teaches, in his teaching; the one who exhorts, in his exhortation; the one who contributes, in generosity; the one who leads, with zeal; the one who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness."*

1 Peter 4:10-11 – *"As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace: whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God; whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies—in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him belong glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen."*

1 Corinthians 12:7 – *"To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good."*

Just as we were given a purpose in the original creation, so too have we been given a purpose in Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. To that end, God has blessed us all with these amazing abilities. And it's only when we align those gifts with what God would have us do in this world, that we truly live the lives that God intends for us.

Now, don't get me wrong, we must work. That's Biblical too, I might add and perhaps a sermon for another Sunday. But to work in the world is meant to provide for ourselves and our family. *Our most important work is done building up the Kingdom of God here on Earth which comes as we seek to help others in word and in deed.*

It's difficult these days to see my father struggle with advancing dementia because the course of that disease is slowly erasing some of his gifts. I'll never forget growing up and learning from my Dad some important lessons which remain with me to this very day.

One of those prized lessons was to take interest in other people, no matter who they were or what they did. My Dad was just at home talking with Marketing Directors of large companies as he was with the checkout person at a grocery store. It didn't matter who you were, Dad wanted to know more about you.

I learned that from him, no doubt. But, as I languished in my 20s, I had absolutely no idea what to use that ability for. As I said, I tried a lot of different jobs trying to figure it out.

It was only when I started teaching culinary skills at the Community Culinary School of Charlotte, that I began to get an inkling. You see, the Community Culinary School took as students only people who were struggling with some significant life obstacles, homelessness, recovering addicts, the underemployed. We worked to provide the first year of a typical culinary school to provide some vocational stability.

It was in that job that I discovered I had talents that I was unaware of. First of all, I could teach which, heretofore, I was unaware of. But on top of that, I found that God had enabled me to talk about faith in God in a way designed to help other people.

I'll never forget one day driving to my job and realizing that, likely for the first time since childhood, I was happy. Truly, deliriously, unabashedly happy. And it hadn't taken any effort on my part.

But my experience isn't by any means unique.

There's an old Chinese proverb that says, *"If you want happiness for an hour, take a nap. If you want happiness for a day, go fishing. If you want happiness for a year, inherit a fortune. If you want happiness for a lifetime, help somebody."*

As we reflect on Jesus Christ, we realize that God chose to help humanity. In a time in which the image of God had been completely warped by human sin, God in Christ chose to take flesh live and die for us and for our salvation. God helped us do what we simply could not do for ourselves.

So, is it any wonder that God calls us to do these “good works” Paul writes about here in Ephesians 2? By no means. For what we find is that when we act in a Christ-like fashion, we ourselves are happiest.

Again, science shows this to be true in an empirical fashion. Study after study confirms that the most contented people are those most invested in, you guessed it, helping other people. There is a satisfaction which arises within us which is unmatched by anything else in all of creation. And it only makes sense when you align that with God’s Word. Created in God’s image to do His work in the world is exactly what Paul gets at in Ephesians 2.

You see, these great mysteries of life, “who am I?” and “what am I here to do?” aren’t, in the end, so mysterious after all. At least not in Christ.

For we are who God made us – beautiful creatures designed to serve Him with our special gifts through helping others.

And, once again, I hope we see – you can’t lose in Jesus Christ.

Quotes and Scriptures

Introduction

Existentialism – “a philosophical theory or approach which emphasizes the existence of the individual person as a free and responsible agent determining their own development through acts of the will.”

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God’s Handiwork/Imago Dei

Genesis 1:26-27 – “Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth. So, God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.”

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Jeremiah 1:5 – ““Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you, and before you were born, I consecrated you;”

Data Points

17 Billion spent on elective plastic surgeries in 2018.

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Created for Good Works

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Romans 12:6-8 – “Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; if service, in our serving; the one who teaches, in his teaching; the one who exhorts, in his exhortation; the one who contributes, in generosity; the one who leads, with zeal; the one who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness.”

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