

SEQUOYAH HILLS PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“Inside Out: Your Best Life”

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Galatians 2:17-21

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I'm grateful to Ben, Mark, and Janna in continuing our series “Inside Out” these past three weeks, and grateful to be back with you. We near the end of this series during which we've been looking at some of the existential questions: who are we? Who are we made to be? And as you might have noticed, we've kind of been alternating between answers that encourage us (or should encourage us) and answers that convict us (or should convict us). We are made, we are created with and for a purpose by the Lord. But then we are also sinful, broken. Yet we are forgiven, defined by the grace of God in Christ. But even in that grace we can become hypocritical or legalistic.

Put it all together and we can end up feeling pulled in opposite directions, at once encouraged and affirmed in the love of God, yet also feeling browbeaten by awareness of our own failures. Came to a head in a passage like last week's, which Janna so powerfully preached on, from Romans 7. You could hear Paul's frustration between what he wanted to do, and yet felt bound to do what he did not want to do, until finally he exclaims, “Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!” (Romans 7:25).

It's in that frustration, that angst even, that we come another one of Paul's letters, one that speaks directly to who we truly and most fully are, and it's not an answer you might expect. Let's go to God's Word together.

Galatians 2:17-21

¹⁷ “But if, in seeking to be justified in Christ, we Jews find ourselves also among the sinners, doesn't that mean that Christ promotes sin? Absolutely not! ¹⁸ If I rebuild what I destroyed, then I really would be a lawbreaker.

¹⁹ “For through the law I died to the law so that I might live for God. ²⁰ I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. ²¹ I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!”

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me? God who claims us and sanctifies us, we pray for your presence with us this day. May your Word comfort those of us in need of your grace, and may your Word convict those of us who think we do not need it. And may we hear the assurance of your love and forgiveness and faithfulness, as well as of our complete

inability to earn it for ourselves. And for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

Around the country—around the world for that matter—thousands of people every year file into hotels and convention centers to hear someone share their personal wisdom and secrets to unlocking some kind of inner potential, usually for some kind of professional or financial success. What these thousands of people experience includes some combination of workshops, role playing exercises, maybe even hypnotism, all under the umbrella of an unabashed, charismatic speaker who presents himself—or herself, but it's usually a he—as the living embodiment of all the success that the attendees are looking for.

(I mean, for one, imagine the nerve of someone standing up in front of a group of people offering some kind of speech to motivate and bring about change in someone's life.)

But anecdotes are shared, stories of transformation that are brought about by people following the speaker's system or secret sauce to success. And then the attendees file out of the convention center with new inspiration, to be quickly greeted by the book displays full of titles like *Unleash the Potential Within* or *The Power of Positive Thinking* or *Your Best Life*, along with subscription offers and coaching opportunities to usher them into a new age of fully realizing their potential and fullest selves.

And that's just the tip of the iceberg. The so-called self-help industry is according to some estimates valued at around a \$14 billion a year. An enormous market, and the reason it is sustained year in and year out is because there appears to be an inexhaustible demand for anything leading you to realize who you are and to then actualize and maximize who you can most fully be.

It might not have been immediately clear, but that same impulse, that same insecurity is looming behind these words in Galatians.

You see the saints in Galatia had experienced the gospel. They had heard and received the good news of Jesus, of his death and resurrection, of grace and the forgiveness of sins. They had heard and received this.

But then a tragic thing happened. They went back on it. Or maybe I shouldn't say they went back on it, but they started adding to it, and in so doing, went back on the beautiful grace of the gospel. In response to the word of grace, to a message that there was *nothing* they could do to earn their way into God's favor, they started saying, well, but you really should do this, or you really should do that—namely living by aspects of Jewish law—and if you don't, then you're not really worthy of the grace of God. They were adding to the gospel of grace: saved and forgiven by grace *and*...something else, by doing this or that thing or living this or that way.

That's who Paul is writing to, and if you were to read the rest of the letter, Paul does not mince words. It's telling, I think, that the strongest words of correction that Paul ever uses aren't addressing people who were doing something wrong or weren't living right. They were for those who were seeking to add to the gospel by placing other claims and requirements upon their lives and others' and thinking that would save them, rather than grace.

That's where those words in vv. 17-18 are coming from. "But if, in our effort to be justified in Christ, we ourselves have been found to be sinners, is Christ then a servant of sin? Certainly not. But if I build up again the very things that I once tore down, then I demonstrate that I am a transgressor." That last part is really powerful. "If I build up again the very things that I once tore down, then I demonstrate that I am a transgressor." He's saying, if I build up a whole other system of law and requirements, being saved by works, by what we do or don't do, the entire apparatus that had been torn down by this declaration of grace in Christ, if I build *that* up again, it doesn't bring me into righteousness. It only again reveals that I am indeed unable to live up to it.

That's the folly of what the Galatian churches were doing. They were trying to build up their identity in Christ through what they did, through their own ability to live a holy or righteous life, as if to earn or deserve their way into the grace of God. But when they did so, they didn't reveal themselves to be anything other than falling short of the grace of God to begin with, which puts them right back where they started. And to that, Paul is saying with palpable frustration, "What are you doing?!"

That's that impulse of constantly trying to earn your way or trying to deserve or achieve your way into some higher form of living, of identity. That's that same impulse driving this turn so many of us have toward improving ourselves, toward helping ourselves, toward those motivational speakers and conventions and "Your Best Life Now" sort of thing.

Now a quick disclaimer before I throw the baby out with the bath water. There is nothing wrong with trying to refine one's professional skills, or maybe live a little healthier, or maybe work with a bit more purpose or discipline, or even just to develop better relationships with friends, family, and coworkers. Nothing wrong with that. But all of those good and healthy aspects of seeking to do one's work, to live one's life, with excellence and integrity is not—is *not!*—what drives the \$14 billion self-help industry. There's something else underneath that.

Did you know that when it comes to the market for the self-help industry, studies show that it consists of 80% repeat customers? That's kind of funny when you think about it. "Here are the 10 secrets to success, and if you follow my system for wealth and happiness, you'll be set. But by the way, I'll be publishing a new book and hosting more conferences with more secrets to success next year for you to pay for." And folks keep doing it. Repeat customers.

And the point here isn't that if you've ever read a self-help book you should feel bad about yourself, or if you've never read a book like that that you're off the hook. The point is that there's this impulse within us, one that we see clearly in this particular arena of self-help stuff, to earn, to achieve, to lift ourselves up into some higher form of identity.

Sadly, there are even pockets of this in the church, dangerous pockets. There are those who in the name of God peddle in this kind of thought. Folks have different names for it: the so-called prosperity gospel, the health and wealth gospel, the message that God wants you to be healthy and wealthy, and if you just do this one thing or buy this one thing, then it'll happen for you. Be very careful about it, friends, because voices like this won't just come out and say, "I'm a prosperity gospel teacher," but it'll sound something like, "Keys to unlocking God's blessings in your life," or something like that.

It can sound innocuous, but it's a step on that same path that Galatians went down, of building back up that which will only bring you back down. It's a small sign that an obsession with maximizing yourself by your own self-actualization is futile effort, and it will only lead you to self-doubt, through all the ways you're not living up to whatever artificial standard these fully realized motivators claim to embody.

Why? Is it because they're all just snake oil peddlers trying to swindle you? Well, sure some of them are. But others do so with sincerity, and that's what can be so dangerous. It sounds okay. Is something lacking in your life? Is there something about yourself that you're not satisfied with? Well the answer is where? Within yourself. Just unlock these abilities, this potential within yourself, and you'll be well on your way.

We hear it all the time, even without realizing it. At home, you know while we've been together a good bit these past couple of weeks, the boys have become especially enthralled by the movie *The Lion King*. And it's a fine movie. I'm not calling for a Disney boycott or anything. But it is one of many examples of how we hear this message over and over, to the point that we can start believing it.

If you don't know the movie, the lion cub Simba witnesses his father Mufasa die—not knowing that he died at the hands of his villainous uncle Scar. (It's basically *Hamlet* with animals.) Simba runs away, thinking he was to blame. But then years later as an adult, he sees a vision of his father Mufasa, who tells him, "You have forgotten who you are, and so forgotten me. Look inside yourself, Simba. You are more than what you have become."

Did you catch that? Questions of identity, who are you? And where's the answer? "Look inside yourself. You are more than what you have become." Again, I'm not picking on Simba. He had a tough go of it. But this message is everywhere, and it pricks at this insecurity that at some

level we all have: who am I? Could I be more? And if I could be more, how do I become that way? And if we hear that enough, maybe we start wondering why we don't measure up or how we could become more. And like all those self-help customers, we never quite feel satisfied, so we keep coming back.

We are surrounded by it, poisoned by it, but there is an antidote. Paul writes, "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me." It's staggering what he's saying here. In response to the Galatians who had gone back to trying to earn their way into becoming more, more lovable, more righteous, more worthy and therefore more deserving of God's favor, Paul says, "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me."

Just saying that short-circuits the whole impulse of trying to make ourselves become more, of trying to find our true identity somehow within ourselves, and if we just meditate more, do more, become more, we'll find it. Because Paul is saying, no, I have been crucified with Christ, and my truest self, my best life is found not in myself, but in Christ who lives in me. And how does this Christ go about living? By giving himself up.

Friends, the invitation here is not to become some automaton for Jesus. (And truly, one way to misunderstand this is that we are called to be subsumed into Christ like some kind of spiritual collective.) But the invitation is instead to be free from all that which try to build up around ourselves, all that we try to build ourselves up to be, because that path is futile. We'll only build up what will be torn down, and we'll forever feel inadequate as a result. The invitation is to find that our truest selves are found when we stop trying to make ourselves more but rather dwell in the one who loved us and gave himself for us.

The great apologist C. S. Lewis wrote of this too: "Your real, new self (which is Christ's and also yours, and yours just because it is His) will not come as long as you are looking for it. It'll come when you are looking for Him.... Give up yourself, and you will find your real self. Lose your life and you will save it.... Look for yourself, and you find in the long run only hatred, loneliness, despair, rage, ruin, and decay. But look for Christ and you will find Him, and with Him everything else thrown in."

Friends, if you have doubted who you are, if you have hoped to become something more, don't fall for the trap of constantly trying to better yourself as a path to discovering your truest self. But rather "look for Christ, and you will find Him, and with Him everything else thrown in."

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.