

“Pressure to Perform”

Luke 13:10-17

As we baptize Bristol Grand and promise to raise and nurture her and her brother in the Christian faith, I’m reminded of some lessons I learned at a young age and how those values have affected me as an adult.

In 1967 I was 8 years old which meant that was the summer I could try out for a Little League team for 8-to-12-year-olds. In Valley City there were 8 teams that would play each other throughout the summer and then an All-Star team would represent us each year at the Medina County fair.

Most 8-year-olds were designated to a farm team until they were good enough to play with the big boys. I was determined not to be one of those. My dad told me the best chance I had to make a team as an 8-year-old was as a second baseman who could catch ground balls. He hit me a lot of ground balls. At tryouts I caught every ground ball with a quick throw to first. I was a small strike zone for 12-year-old pitchers, and I was willing to be hit on inside pitches.

The Yankees picked me. The coach told me he was going to begin grooming me to be a pitcher. I had a growth spurt when I turned nine. At 11 and 12 I was pitching at the county fair, then for the Hot Stove team, then high school, then college, and I even pitched 2 seasons in North Dakota for one of the local town teams during my first call. I was also the head coach of the high school baseball team.

Whether I was playing baseball or football, especially in college, I trained and was coached to always give my best performance. I always strove for the approval of my dad, my grandpa, my coaches, and others.

The wisdom of my age and my experiences has taught me that you can't long for the approval of others and God at the same time. One always eclipses the other.

How many times do we forfeit freedom in what God is calling us to do because we're more aware of our performance and impressing others?

By the time we've figured out that it's not about our performance and impressing others, but about doing what God calls us to do, we've missed so many opportunities to serve. I know I have.

What is something God has given you to do? Are you not doing it because you're afraid you won't get the approval of others? Are you more concerned with your performance or God's presence in doing the work?

When I let myself think that my performance is the key to securing all I need in life, including God's favor, I set myself up for joyless doing.

Speaking of joyless doing, the Pharisee had their performance nailed down but were known as some of the most joyless, judgmental people in Jewish culture. Fear, not freedom was the Pharisee motto. Fear of not measuring up, fear of not doing it right, fear of performing poorly – the Pharisees made sure they instilled these fears in all who sought to understand the way to God through them. They were consumed with appearing righteous and eager to flaunt their perfect execution of the law. They had taken the law of God and added their own ideas, their own requirements.

So, when in our gospel text, Jesus was teaching in one of the synagogues on the Sabbath, he healed a woman who had been bent over for 18 years.

Luke 13:12-16 . . . ¹²When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, "Woman, you are set free from your ailment." ¹³When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God. ¹⁴But the leader of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had cured on the sabbath, kept saying to the crowd, "There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the sabbath day." ¹⁵But the Lord answered him and said, "You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water? ¹⁶And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the sabbath day?"

In other words, the Pharisees said what they believed were the right things, acted according to the rules, and appeared to honor God. They were religious but cared more about their performance than serving God's people. They were driven more by appearances than loving their people. Jesus knew he didn't have their hearts and calls them to their faces "hypocrites".

Without love, our acts of faith are but a production – a show. Deliverance, according to the Pharisees, came through following rules. Their striving was about themselves – not God. They had repackaged manmade rules as God's commands.

If we're honest, we all have a little bit of pharisee hidden away in our hearts. How often do we look to performance as our true hope?

- When we care more about our kids behaving a certain way in public
- When we care too much about what we're wearing or driving
- When we're eager to snap a pic of ourselves for social media
- When we don't let others into our struggles with sin
- When we lose and then lie that we won

When we work to preserve the picture of our performance, we miss the very point of the Gospel. Jesus offered deliverance through dependence on and faith in him. The Pharisees taught deliverance through dependence on perfection and performance. If you're weary and tired of managing your performance, you're in good company.

We have so called "Christian" churches today who expect their members to look a certain way, act in a specific manner, and perform to a certain standard in order to be a member. These churches get the most press, are most active on social media, and thereby have turned off a whole generation of millennials. They hear a gospel about striving in your own strength, about the need to climb the ladder to heaven, which is not good news at all.

Performing well, pleasing yourself, earning your way are all highly valued in our culture but they're not going to save us. That's the lie the enemy wants you to believe. That is the false gospel of this generation – that we can save ourselves through ourselves. That with enough practice, enough resources, and enough work, a perfectly executed version of your life is accessible.

Save yourself! The truth resides within ourselves. We can do this on our own. At this point in my life, I make this observation – being your own hero isn't freeing, it's exhausting.

Is discovering your own truth truly as freeing as we're led to believe? Is being the hero of your own story actually a relief? Is self-reliance truly satisfying? Can you be perfect enough to ensure happiness?

This constant obsession with appointing ourselves the heroes of our own lives is exhausting, and it's catching up with us. I see so many people in and out of the church practically hooked to our self-bettering resources intravenously, so dependent on the latest content in books and now on podcasts and webinars to help us think continually about ourselves.

Who am I? What's my purpose? How do I belong? Am I enough? Does anyone love me? There's nothing wrong with these questions. But the answers were never meant to be found within ourselves.

As followers of Jesus, we follow his example. At every turn, Jesus wanted only to do what the Father purposed for him to do. No more. No less.

Even as he faced brutal death on the cross, Jesus revealed his motivation in staying faithful to the work he'd been given. It was not in pursuit of showing himself worthy or becoming his best self. It was . . .

- To God's will and not his own. Luke 22:42 . . . ⁴²Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet not my will but yours be done.
- To Glorify God and not himself. John 17:1 . . . ¹After Jesus had spoken these words, he looked up to heaven and said, "Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you."

- That we might know that everything is from God. John 17:7 . . . ⁷Now they know that everything you have given me is from you.
- That we might know God's love. John 17:26 . . . ²⁶I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them."

This is an example that's hard to follow, especially for all of us who have been taught the hero narrative in our past. But we can do it and we are doing it whenever we respond to God's purpose for us. When Jesus' agenda of love, forgiveness, servanthood, and grace is our agenda.

Jesus' agenda was God's agenda. His only finish line was the one God ordained for him. Love, joy, and oneness defined the perfect unity between Jesus and the Father – no wonder Jesus was unstoppable and undeterred in carrying out the work God purposed for him.

Now we carry on that work God purposed for him as the church, as the body of Christ. We are invited into the perfect unity between God the Father and the Son. That was the plan all along. We are saved by God's grace through our faith in Jesus Christ. Through his death on the cross, Jesus reconciles us with God so that we don't have to carve the perfect path for ourselves through performing. Performance addicts like I was from a very young age know we don't have to earn our place in the kingdom with self-made perfection. That's what the death and resurrection of Christ did for us.

The pressures off friends. Get off the field, get off the stage, and rest. Then

May the peace of God . . .

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