

## God's Masterpiece

November 16<sup>th</sup>, 2014

At some time in their lives, every human being who has ever walked the face of this planet will reflect on, and sometimes be haunted by questions like...

- Who am I? What is my unique identity? How do I determine my significance in this world? Why am I here?
- Back in 1988, a philosophy professor at Northeastern University named Dr. Hugh Moorhead, wrote a book called **"The Meaning of Life."**

Now, if you've been around the church for more than a few years, I'm sure you've heard me quote the book before...

- And you'll probably hear me quoting some part of it again... because the idea behind the book is just so interesting to me!
- In the book, the author asks 250 of the leading thinkers and writers of the 20th century to respond to the question... What is the meaning of life?

So, how would the brilliant minds of our day respond to the question of the meaning of life?

- Well, unfortunately, their answers turn out to be pretty depressing... because the majority of them honestly have no idea!
- **Isaac Asimov**, for example (who's a famous American author & bio-chemist) says, "*As far as I can see, there is no purpose.*"

**Albert Ellis**, one of the preeminent psychologists of the 20th century, said, "*Life has no intrinsic meaning.*"

- Here's one that I've read before: This one really lays it out. Poet & Philosopher, **Michael Anania**, wrote this:
- "*I don't want to retreat into the justly despised positivism,*" he says, "*but to question the meaning of life proposes its own answer. Life, if you think of it as an assertion of meaning and process, always exceeds assigned meaning. To offer a parody of technical language, the set of all meanings is included in life, which is an additional meaning, so expands the set by a hypo-*

*set, and so forth. So, any statement, any such question expands the frame exponentially. What I'm saying in nutshell is the meaning of life is meaning."*

Well, I hope that clears things up for you... because, to be honest, **I have no idea** what the guy just said!

- And, those are some of the great minds of our time! And at the end of all that, **Anania** simply concludes, *"the meaning of life is meaning!"*
- Is it any wonder that we're as lost as a society as we are? Is it any wonder **why suicide has become in our day** the number two killer of teenagers in our country?

That's unprecedented in the history of the world, but **it's what happens when we become un-tethered** from a sense of identity and purpose.

- Interestingly, Moorhead's book has already gone out of print, but there are words written by the apostle Paul 2,000 years ago...
- that speaks to not only *who we are...* but *why we're here*.

To the church at Ephesus, Paul writes this in **Ephesians 2:10...**

- He says, ***"For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do."***
- Guys... this is one of those familiar passages that we read through quickly.
- And yet I think it speaks more deeply into the human condition than we realize.

So, let's read these words together out loud, and as you do, just reflect on what it is that they're saying.

- *"For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do."*
- So much of what you need to know about yourself, your life... the *who* and the *what* and the *why*... it's all right there.

So... *Who are you?* Well, first of all, **you are designed by God!**

You're not some cosmic accident! You're **not just a product of your past or your circumstances**. It's just the opposite.

- No matter what the circumstances of your birth may have been, you've been given life... by the master of the universe!
- In fact, the NLT translates **Ephesians 2:20** like this... *"For we are God's masterpiece. He has created us anew in Christ Jesus, so we can do the good things he planned for us long ago."*

We just wrapped up a five-part series called, "The Master Teacher," where we focused on just how extraordinary Jesus is.

- Well, what Paul is saying here is that YOU are the Master Teacher's masterpiece!
- So, at the very least, you can walk out of here this morning knowing that, in God's eyes, **you're a "piece of work!"**

And because of that, I need to recognize that **my intrinsic worth** isn't related to what *I do*... but who He's made me to be.

- He created you... your **body**, your **temperament**, your **personality**, your **mind**, your sense of **humor**, & your **DNA!**
- All of these things were thoughtfully designed for you by God.

One day, the God who thought up the **Milky Way**, who thought up every **galaxy**...

- and every **star** and every **black hole** and **volcanoes** and **sunsets** and **oceans**...
- one day *that God* thought about **something else** He wanted to create... and that something was you!

Think about that... How did God feel when He thought about creating you? As He was creating you, what was going through His mind?

- Maybe you struggle to accept this... but, **God felt joy!**
- For Him, the universe wasn't complete till you came on the scene. Isn't that amazing?
- You didn't just happen by accident. You're here because God wanted precisely for there to be a "you."

The Psalmist marvels over this. This is what David says to God in **Psalm 139**.

- **“For You created my inmost being; You knit me together in my mother’s womb. I praise You because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; Your works are wonderful, I know that full well.”**
- I look at creation... from the **mountains** to the **oceans** to the **deserts**... and I’m reminded of what a marvelously creative God... God is!

And that *as much thought* as went into creating the **white caps** on the tips of the waves...

- As much thought as went into the **immense Pine** trees lining countless mountain ridges...
- Far *more thought* went into creating you! Why?
- Because **you are God’s workmanship**, God’s masterpiece!
- And that’s why **to negatively compare yourself to anybody else** devalues the life God has given *not only* to you... but the world around you.

It is what is so remarkable about every human being. Everyone is God’s workmanship.

- While speaking to the newly freed Israelites a long, long time ago, **Moses reminds them** of their value to God.
- Remember... they’re essentially this tiny, **ragamuffin, disempowered** group of people... with no **influence** or **power** or **earthly importance**.
- And yet, this is what he says in **Deuteronomy 7:7**: **“The Lord did not set His affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the smallest of all peoples.”**

They had **no great army** to speak of... **no particular skill** that would make them stand out from the other peoples around them...

- they engaged in **no real commerce or trade** to speak of. So, **what did Israel do** to cause God to “*set His affection*” on them?
- Nothing at all! In fact, no sooner does God deliver them from the Egyptians do the Israelites start complaining... saying that it’d be better for them to go back to Egypt as slaves.

So, *why then* did God set His affection on them? He loved them! He chose & loved them... *because they're His!* They're His people!

- It's a great phrase to think about. God did not set His affection on you because you're so **clever** or **smart** or **successful**...
- But because, in spite of how you might see yourself... you are God's masterpiece. It's **just grace!**

I heard about a man who was always **trying to teach his little boy Isaac** about grace.

- He said that every once in a while, Isaac would do something wrong that he ought to be punished for.
- Usually, he'd punish him, but every once in a while, just to teach him, he'd say to Isaac,
- *"Now, I ought to punish you right now, but I'm not going to do it. I'm going to cut you some grace, Isaac."*
- And then, to teach him, he would ask him, *"Do you know why I'm going cut you some grace?"*
- And Isaac would say, *"No, Dad. Why?"* **And his dad would say, "No reason at all. Never a reason for grace."**

Then **one day when Isaac was six** years old, he did something really, really bad, and his dad furious at him!

- He was going to let him have it, and Isaac was scared!
- So, **Isaac looked up at his dad** and said to him, *"Dad, could you cut me some grace?"*
- And yet his **dad was real mad** and said, *"Isaac, give me one good reason why I ought to cut you some grace."*
- And Isaac looked up at him and said, *"Dad, there's never a reason for grace."*

You see, there's never a reason for grace. The Lord didn't set His affection on you because you're so **smart** or **successful** or even **good**.

- It's just who God is. He is a gracious God, and He loves to make His grace available to people.
- And maybe right now... **you realize that you just haven't been walking** down the path God created for you to walk.

Just know that whatever you've been doing... that **grace is available** if you just **come to Him** and confess and repent and say...

- "God, in my attitudes, in the way I've been expressing my sexuality, my anger, my arrogance, my judgmental spirit, God, I want acknowledge what I've done & receive your forgiveness."
- And while He **might not always clean up the messes** our sin creates, God will always forgive & embrace us...
- because, apart from the love He has for us, there's **never a reason** for grace.

He is a gracious God, and He set His affection on you... because you are His *masterpiece*... His *workmanship*!

- And because of this... you really can **stop comparing** your life, your gifts, your achievements, your body, your personality...
- To anybody else... and begin **really embracing** who you are... who God has made you to be...
- Because it was God who thought you up and God never makes mistakes.

**But then, Paul goes on...**

And he says that *not only* did God design you; *not only* were you made by God... but **you were also made to live & grow in Christ**.

- The language he uses here is that we were "**created in Christ Jesus.**"
- In fact, Paul uses the phrase "*in Christ*" more than 160 times.

You see, for Paul, the most amazing thing about Jesus is the incredible reality **that Jesus lives in us... so that we can live in Him!**

- That's where the real adventure with Him begins... **as God begins drawing us closer to Him** and the purposes for which He's created us.
- In **Colossians 1:27**, Paul says to the church at Colossae,
- "**God has chosen to make known the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.**"

I heard about a mom who took her little girl to the pediatrician's office because of a bad flue she had.

- Apparently, this doctor is really good with kids... so he's always trying to have fun with them, and he's doing that with her.
- He checks out her ears and says to her, "*I wonder if I'll find **Big Bird** in there.*" She says, "No."
- He checks out her nose. "*I wonder if **Cookie Monster** is in there.*" She says, "No."

He gets his stethoscope out to check out her heart. "*I wonder if **Barney** is in your heart.*"

- She says, "***No, Jesus is in my heart. Barney's on my underwear.***"
- It's not complicated doctor... Jesus is in my heart... Barney is on my underwear!

Throughout Paul's writings in the New Testament... we see this theme come up over and over again: How we can be & live... in Christ!

- Even the person who knows you best... can't know all about how you're thinking...
- But Jesus can! And that's why He can be closer to you than anybody else.

**Jesus is dwelling within you through His Spirit**, and once you invite Him in, He will never ever leave you.

- It's **not that He can't leave you!** It's not like we've got Him caged up inside us! He's God!
- But, as our Heavenly Dad, **He's simply made a promise** that He'll never ever leave us or forsake us.

He has set His affection on you, and **He is constantly at work** to lead you into deeper and deeper intimacy with Him.

- He is constantly **at work in you to grow you into that person** that truly **understands who you are and why you're here.**
- So often, we restrict **this business of spiritual formation** or spiritual growth to isolated activities.
- Rather than a daily lifestyle or rhythm that centers our entire lives around His life and presence in us.

But in one way or another, God is always at work in us... always forming us... always shaping us...

- In such a way **that we would know, at a deeper & deeper level**, who we are as God's unique masterpieces...
- And the unique purpose for which He's placed us in this world.

You see, **God is committed to your growth**. God knows exactly what **you need** to grow...

- what **relationships**, what **problems**, what **experiences**, what **circumstances**.
- God knows just what will help every human being on earth grow, and **His desire is for it never to become routine**,
- **never to be dull**, and it will **never look the same** as anybody else.

You think about how differently God treats all of His children. God had **Abraham** make a journey;

- He had **Elijah** take a nap, **Joshua** take a lap, **Adam** take the rap.
- God gave **Moses** a 40-year time out; He gave **David** a harp and a dance.
- He gave **Paul** a pen and a scroll. He wrestled with **Jacob**, argued with **Job**, whispered to **Elijah**, warned **Cain**, and comforted **Hagar**.
- He gave **Aaron** an altar, **Miriam** a song, **Gideon** a fleece, **Peter** a new name, **Elisha** a fresh mantle.

Jesus was stern with the **rich, young ruler**, tender with the **woman** caught in adultery, challenging with the **disciples**,

- blistering with the **scribes**, gentle with the **children**, gracious with the **thief** on the cross, and so on!
- God **never grows two people** the same way. God is a **hand-crafter**, not a mass-producer!
- And just like all those people, as His masterpiece, God is hand crafting you!

And remember... though He's existed from all eternity, God has never done this before... because **you're an entirely unique piece of work**.

- He'll *form you* and *grow you* in a way that doesn't look quite exactly the same as anybody else.
- So, don't compare yourself to anybody else. One person may be an amazing extrovert... the **life of the party**.
- And the way God may have to **develop a discipline of solitude and quiet reflection**, for example...
- will likely be different from a person who's a **total introvert**.

The way God forges *real spiritual growth* in an independent, highly self-disciplined and self-driven person...

- will likely be different from a person who's **a bit disorganized** and needs a lot of **relational accountability** to get things done.
- The *way God grows a person* who has grown up in a legalistic environment with a **high-pressured approach to spirituality**...
- Is going to be different than someone who grew up in a very **liberal, fairly non-religious home**.

So, don't expect too many formulas. As you center your life around Jesus, just ask God...

- *God, what are you doing to cause growth in my life right now? Is there anything you need me to be doing as I build my life around worshipping you?"*
- But then... **because** you ARE God's workmanship... and **because** you ARE in Christ and Christ IS growing you up...
- Then **you CAN know** that He's also inviting you to participate with what He's already doing in touching the lives of those around you.

You see, beyond simply "BEING" in Christ... "being" His child... and living in intimacy with Him...

- You were created to **make a difference**... to **be a blessing** to the world around you.
- Every great masterpiece is somewhere "out there" on display... being a blessing to those around them.
- ***"For we are God's workmanship," Paul says, "created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do."***

Now, this **doesn't mean** that we were created to be a bunch of worker bees for God.

- But rather, it speaks to the fact that we were all **created for a purpose**... each of us with a **unique destiny**.
- There's a reason why every human being on earth has dreams.
- There is a reason why almost every human being who walks the planet **at least starts out wanting to have a positive impact** on people around them.
- It's reflective... it's a signal, as to why you were created, why God made you.

You see... God **didn't just plan you**... He did that! But then **He also planned good works**,

- the positive impact you'll have as you **love on** and **care for** and **bring blessing** to His people and His world.
- As His master workmen, we should ask Him... *"God, what is You have for me to do? God, who do You want me to bless?"*

*"God, how do You want my life to ripple out and influence somebody else?"*

- God's intent is that your life be an adventure in **ripple-making**.
- It's what He said to Abraham so long ago in **Genesis 12**; *"I will bless you... so that all the families on earth will be blessed through you."*

Back when I was a little kid, we'd go to Van Saun Park in River Edge from time to time to visit their little zoo or just play in the playground.

- And once in a while, we'd go and feed the ducks... and, when the bread ran out, I'd always throw rocks out into the lake to see how many times it'd bounce.
- Of course, every now and then I'd get impatient with those little flat rocks...
- and I've grab hold of the biggest rock I could find and just lob the thing in the water.

I loved it... 'cause you could see the ripples go out almost to the middle of the small lake, which was pretty cool for a pretty small guy!

- You see, in one way or another... **we all want our lives** to cause ripples in the world around us.

- We want our lives to **make a difference** in the lives of other people... we want to *not only live in God's blessing*...
- but "BE" a blessing to our neighbors and coworkers and friends and family... as well as those we've never even met before.

But here's the thing. Because of the issues & stuff in our own lives... because life can leave us feeling a *bit empty* or a *bit crazy*...

- we can easily find our attention focused only on ourselves.
- And **when the purpose of our life shifts** to satisfying our own needs or wants...
- as much as we might hope that **that would fill our own empty well** inside, the truth is, it will always leave us feeling even emptier than before.

But when I let go of my own life and say, "*God, how do You want to use me to help that person and that person and that person and that person...*"

- when I **let go of living simply to feel my own comforts and needs**, I'm the one who gets filled up.
- **ILL:** I SO wanted to sleep on the plane coming home from Turkey... but I was supposed to pray for a Jewish man was sitting next to me.

**I went to the mall** to get something... but I was supposed to pray for a Turkish guy working in one of the stores.

- **I went to Barnes and Noble** to relax... but I was supposed to speak with and encourage a young man from Kenya.
- We have to say to God, "*Alright, God, I'm signing up for this adventure. Wherever You want me to go, whatever You want me to do, whoever You want me to talk to, I will say yes.*"

Of course, a prayer like that might seem like a dangerous thing to ask for. But, **where in the Bible** does God ever give anybody an **easy** job?

- Seriously? Where in the Bible does God come to call somebody to something completely safe and comfortable?
- **Even the Promised Land**... the land flowing with milk and honey... **was filled with giants!**

When has God ever called anyone in Scripture and said, “Ok, here’s what I want you to do,

- Moses, or David, or Esther, or Ruth, or anybody,” and have that person say, “*No problem, God... I can have that taken care of in a few minutes?*”
- It never happens! And, believe me... nobody ever responds that way. So, how DO people respond? “*I’m scared to death!*”

God says... “Go **face Pharaoh**. Go **protect My people**. Go **take that land**. Go **fight Goliath**.”

- And then they respond, “*Who am I? I can’t do this.*” And then, God says, “*Don’t worry... I’ll be with you.*”
- Did you ever notice that there’s no verse in the New Testament that says, “*And then the disciples were bored.*”

And yet, boredom has become so commonplace in our culture... because without a sense of purpose and meaning,

- We’re end up dependent on external stimuli & all kinds of instantly available entertainment to fill up our day.
- And when that doesn’t satisfy, we grow **tired & bored**... which, over time, can lead to **frustration & despair**.

It’s the fruit that comes from a life with no greater meaning and purpose than one’s own safety, entertainment, comfort, and success.

- But, once they begin to catch on to the adventure of doing what it is God created them to do...
- **When they latch on to the God-inspired meaning** life is supposed to have, they’re awakened to the significance their live can really have.

Mike Breaux speaks about the phrase we use so often these days when talking about the mundane: “*What’s up?*” “*Same old, same old.*”

- Day after day after day... You wake up at the **same old time**, get out of the same **old bed**, go into the same **old bathroom**,
- look into the same **old mirror**, shave the same **old face**, take the same **old shower**, **dry off** with the same **old towel**,

- **walk** into the same **old kitchen**, **pour** the same **old cereal** into the same **old bowl**, **kiss** the same **old husband** on the same **old cheek!** Then you...

Get in the same **old car**, drive off to the same **old job**, sit in the same **old chair**, listen to the same **old boss criticize** in the **same old way**.

- So, we get frustrated in the same **old way**, clock out at the same **old time**, get back in the same **old car**,
- down the same **old road** into the same **old house** through the same **old door**, eat the same **old dinner**,
- fall asleep in the same **old chair** watching the same **old news**, get up, get in the same **old bed**, ask your wife the same **old question**,
- get the same **old answer**, roll over, go back to sleep. And that's it from one day to the next day to the next day."
- But, God didn't create us for the "*same old, same old.*"

A few years ago, **I took my mom** with me to **Abaco Island in the Bahamas** where I was invited to speak to a church. Rough life!

- They provided a great house for us to stay at right by the beach. In fact, the beach is considered one of the best in the world.
- Well, my mom walked on to that beach skeptical. She never goes into the ocean... not above her ankles.
- But, the water was SO clear... and **the sand was SO clean...** and it was so void of fish (she hates fish)... that she went right in!

I never saw anything like it before. My whole life, my mom would take a half-hour to make her way into a 4' pool!

- Of course, she's not alone. One of the ways you can divide human beings up is **how they get into a pool**.
- Some people take the **incremental approach**. You start with one toe. "*Oooh, that's cold!*"
- And then you go to the ankle, and it takes about 20 minutes to get all the way in, and you're miserable the whole time.

You can do it that way. But, then there's "the other way." Do you know what **the alternative to the incremental approach** is?

- **The Cannonball!** The Cannonball is designed to create maximum impact.
- And when you do the cannonball, the **ripples go all the way to the edge of the pool**.
- And if there were no edges, the ripples would just keep going and going.

Now, that's God's plan for your life. You were "*created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.*"

- Where is there a **hurt**? Where is there a **need**? Where is there a **dream**? Where is there someone **who needs a prayer**?
- Where is the **Holy Spirit prompting me**? Where is there a God-sized **possibility**?

Listen... circumstances may keep you from getting **promotions** or **possessions** or **recognition**...

- but no circumstance can keep you from **making ripples** that touch the lives of other people.
- Would you make that your prayer: "*God, would You let Your life in my life have a ripple effect on somebody else's life?*"

What could God do through a **mosaic of masterpieces** who chose to bless the world around them?

- What would happen if, as individuals within this congregation, we all shared that same cry to be a difference-maker.
- I mean, what if "*love God, love people, & serve the world around us*" was as important to each of us as "**stay healthy, get ahead, & have fun,**" which is kind of the default slogan of our society?

Listen... some **financial journal** can list the 100 richest people on earth, and **Sports Illustrated** can try to rank the 100 greatest athletes in the world.

- But, **only God knows where the ripples are ultimately coming from** that are touching life after life.
- It has nothing to do with **money** or **prominence** or **education** or **title**. It's just the work of the Spirit through a humble human life.

Maybe one of the great ripple-makers in the kingdom is sitting in this room. Maybe they're sitting right next to you. Maybe it's you.

- You see, it's part of why God made you... to live in intimacy with Him...
- **and then to allow that life and intimacy to ripple out** to the world around you.

We can't ever forget that **one blessed life blessing other lives** in the power of the Spirit can send ripples in the world around us!

- As people designed by God to know Him and make Him known, just imagine the impact we can have as we commit to **loving God, loving people, and blessing the world around us.**

So, as you go out from here this morning, will you make the decision to reflect this week on **who you are as God's workmanship...**

- And the possibilities of a life partnered with Jesus to love and bless those around you?
- ***"For you are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for you to do!"***