

# SEARCHING FOR SIGNIFICANTS

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## A SERMON

DELIVERED ON THE SABBATH AFTERNOON OF MARCH 15TH, 2023 BY

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**R**enowned Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor in his book ‘A Secular Age’ defines our world as ‘The Age of Authenticity’. He says, “No one can tell you what you should make of your life! Any identity that comes from outside you squelches your originality and authenticity. You can’t “find yourself,” “realize your potential,” “release your true self” and so on, unless you reject every model of life that doesn’t come from within.” This way of thinking is all about finding your ‘authentic self’.

**L**isten to what Michael Freeley writes, “Being true to yourself means you don’t worry about pleasing other people; living by someone else’s standards or rules. You don’t care what people think of you. You live as your natural self. Without compromise. No one can tell you how to be true to yourself except you.” Do what just feels right! This way of thinking talks of being true to yourself, not allowing others to put their views or way of life on you. We are called to cast off what others expect, and instead look into ourself for answers, then express or live out whatever we find there.

**T**his seems like great advice, if it wasn’t for one thing. When I look inside myself I don’t always see good, wholesome, what I would call ‘Godly traits. Being true to myself often doesn’t lead to ‘happily ever after’. So at least for me, my authentic self is not always the best. When I look inside myself and follow my desires, bad things tend to happen. And ‘do what just feels right!’ Well, how I feel changes regularly.

Sometimes I feel happy, sometimes sad. Sometimes I wake up in the morning and just feel like something is wrong with the world. I go through the day almost expecting something terrible to happen. Sometimes I'm confident and feel I could take on the world. Other days I'm scared and have zero confidence, even in the things I know are solid in my life. My authentic self is a mess. It fluctuates and changes as erratically as the Vancouver weather. I don't need something that unsteady driving my life, I need something solid, unchanging, something good. It's good to want to be included. It's good to want to be loved. It's good to want to be seen. However, where we look for these things can have a big effect on our lives.

Let me tell you my story. When I was growing up I hated school. Not just because I was no good at it. Or because I was bullied constantly. Those were all factors, sure. But what I really hated was being told "You're no good!". Year after year my report card read, 'Could try harder' or 'Matthew just doesn't apply himself, he just doesn't try hard enough'. This was the song that played throughout my time at school. And as soon as I could, I left. I remember my parents being really worried about me. All I had really passed was Computer Science and Pottery! Pottery! I wasn't a highschool dropout, but I felt like it. I ended up getting a job at a company that printed law books and as part of the deal I had to go to Art College once a week. It was here that I discovered you could make pictures on a computer. And what's more I discovered I was good at it. This was the first time in a long time I felt some form of self worth. I could actually do something! That was 1989.

Two years later the movie 'Terminator 2: Judgment Day' opened in movie theaters and I was there opening weekend. This was one of the first uses of 3D computer animation in a movie and I was mesmerized. When I left the theater I knew that was what I wanted to do for the rest of my life. I wanted to be a 3D animator. The problem was however everything was being done in Hollywood, and I was in a little town just outside of London, England. However, that didn't stop me! I read everything I could find on how visual effects were made and got hold of a computer and the software, and I started to learn.

**B**y now I'd moved companies, in fact I was laid off twice, not good for your self esteem, but finally I was working at a video production company and I convinced my boss to invest in a 3D animation program. Over the next few months I slowly began to master the software and soon I started to get pretty good at it. And what was more important to me was my boss thought I was doing great! My self worth was growing. Every time things went well, I got more and more confident in myself. Over the course of the next 6 or 7 years I went from strength to strength. I worked on Commercials, TV Shows and Movies. I spent time on movie sets with famous movie stars and even lived at a movie studio for a while. My confidence was growing tremendously.

**H**owever it wouldn't be too wrong to say I was becoming obsessed with visual effects. For me it was all about proving to people that I wasn't useless. I wanted to show that everyone had been wrong about me. That I wasn't a waste of space, but a somebody! And not just anyone, I wanted to be "the best of the best", as Tom Cruise would say! However, all my significance was tied to what I did, and more importantly, how well I was doing. When everything was going well, I was happy and confident. However when things were going badly, my confidence would disappear and I would become depressed and agitated. Life was a rollercoaster ride.

**I**wonder how many of you have wrestled with these kinds of feelings? I looked within and just found a jumble of desires. I was trying to define my identity from what I did, trying to gain the approval of others so I didn't feel worthless. All that striving, all that work never really felt as if it was fulfilling me. I wouldn't be surprised if all of us didn't struggle with these kinds of feelings sometimes. What I needed was truth, I needed something solid to base my identity on. At some point or another I remember sitting down with my pastor and he read these words to me from 2 Corinthians in the Bible, For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died; and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised. (2 Corinthians 5:14–15).

**T**hese words revolutionized my thinking. All the time my self-worth had been based solely on my work, and my self esteem on what people thought about me. And as I said earlier, in the good times everything was great, but when things went sideways, self confidence went south. But things were about to change. Robert McGee in his book 'The Search for Significance' says, "If we base our worth solely on the truths of God's Word, then our behaviour will often reflect His love, grace and power. But if we base our worth on our abilities or the fickle approval of others, then our behaviour will reflect the insecurity, fear, and anger that comes from such instability." Basically he's saying my self worth was based on my performance plus what others thought of me, and that was how I'd been living my life. What I needed to do was to stop basing my self-worth on my performance, and my perception of what others thought of me. Instead I needed to understand what God's word said about me.

**O**ver the course of a few months I began to understand more about God's promises and what He'd done already for me. Basically, I began to replace lies with truth. For instance, in my old way of thinking I'd come to believe that if I meet certain standards I would feel good about myself. The problem with this way of thinking is you live with a constant fear of failure. You are either driven to always succeed, or you manipulate others to make sure you always feel you're successful. Or worse still you withdraw completely to avoid any risk of failure.

**A**nother example was the need to always feel approved and accepted by others. This is what I would call 'The fear of man'. It is the fear of being rejected. The way you avoid this is to become a people pleaser. You will do anything to please others so they like you, and you also become very sensitive to any form of criticism. But God has a better way for us to live. In the book of Romans we read, "...since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God..." (Romans 5:1)

**B**ut what does this mean? 'Since we've been justified by faith'? It means we understand we've lived our lives separate from God, in rebellion to Him. It means we've accepted that we deserve punishment for living this way, but we believe that God sent His only Son, Jesus Christ, to pay for our sin, taking the punishment in our place. It means if we trust in Christ's work for us, God declares us 'not guilty' and sees us as 'righteous'. We are therefore 'Justified'. So when the Bible says, "...since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God...", It means we can have peace not through 'what we do' but based 'on what Christ has done for us'.

**B**ut along with this the Bible also says, Once you were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, but now He has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through (Colossians 1:21–22). This means that although I was once hostile to God, and living in rebellion, I am now forgiven and my relationship with my God is restored. I am totally accepted and loved by Him. Therefore I don't need to please others or seek their approval. God loves and accepts me just as I am.

**O**nce I began to understand this everything started to change. I was no longer so driven to work like crazy. I still loved what I did, but it didn't define me anymore. And I no longer craved the approval of others. My self worth now came from what God's word said about me. That I was forgiven and loved, even with all my faults and failures. And that God knew me and chose me even though I wasn't perfect. This started to give my life meaning and purpose. The old way of thinking didn't completely go away. I still find my self-worth is sometimes based on how my day has gone. And if I'm not careful I still crave the approval of others. In fact I may even go home tonight and wonder how this talk went, and what you all thought of me. But when those fears come knocking I will run back to God and remind myself of His truths. That I am 'Justified', free from guilt and shame. And that I'm 'Reconciled', forgiven and accepted by God. I no longer need to live 'my authentic self' because I know I am God's. And my identity and significance are now based on what God says, not what I see within. And as a bi-product my life is no longer a roller coaster. It has its ups and downs for sure. Every now and then I hit a speed bump. And yes, the world still somewhat influences my thinking, but God's word pulls stronger. His truth now defines me.

**I** love how Tim Keller puts it, "...our real problem is that every one of us is building our identity on something besides Jesus." (Timothy Keller, Jesus the King). This is a great reminder, helping me stay on track.

**S**o as I begin to wrap things up, let me remind you of some of God's promises. First, some classics! "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." (John 3:16). This is important to anyone who hasn't put their faith in Christ yet. If we put our faith in Christ's work on the cross, believing he died in our place, for our sins (or rebellion) we will be saved. Elsewhere the Bible reminds us how much God loves us, for "...while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." (Roman 5:8). He doesn't wait for us to get our lives straightened out, instead He says "come to me now." "Come to me with all your problems and issues." "I love you just as you are." And what's amazing is that the book of Psalms tells us... "...as far as the east is from the west, so far does He remove our transgressions from us." (Psalms 103:12). This speaks of our sins (or transgressions) being removed so far from God that He no longer sees them, all our sins, no matter how bad they are, God will forgive.

**A**nd once you have put your trust in Christ, there are some amazing promises for you. Listen to this, "The LORD himself goes before you and will be with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you." (Deuteronomy 31:10). God is always with us leading the way. He is always with you, and will never leave you alone. And because of that, there's no need to fear the future. Or this promise, "...call upon me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you..." (Psalms 50:15). When things get tough, and life begins to get you down, you can call on God for help and He will be there for you. One more, "...He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus." (Philippians 1:6).

**T**his one has been such a comfort to me. We all mess up sometimes, break those promises we say we never would. But God is not like us. He promises that once we put our trust in Him, once we believe what Christ did on the cross we are safe forever. And because of that God Himself that carries us through to the end. It's not down to us to remain in His saving grace. We are not holding onto Him, rather he is holding onto us. So now we live with confidence. Not because of what we've done, but because of what He has done for us. Now we can live with joy. Because our greatest problem has been taken care of. Christ died for our sins, and now we can be forgiven, accepted and loved. And finally we can live with hope. Knowing God continues to refine, strengthen and grow us.