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NICE HOUSE, BUT IT'S NOT ENOUGH
John 1:3-4

When do you feel most alive? Mark Batterson, author and pastor of National Community Church in the D.C. area, tells a story about when he took his family on vacation to Florida and the horn on the van they rented got stuck. He tried everything he could think of to stop the thing but it just kept blaring. They got lots of unhappy looks as they drove to a dealership with the horn blasting the entire way. He says it was stressful, but memorable. They have forgotten a lot of what they did, but not that. And in the moment no one was disinterested or bored. They were all fully alive. We do a lot of things to feel more alive. I remembered a time when our family was on vacation in the Florida Keys many years ago, and we went for a ride on a banana boat, which is a long, narrow inflatable that's towed behind a power boat. It was a blast, jetting and bouncing along the water on that thing, especially as the boat driver did radical maneuvers to try to send us flying off into the water. We did it because it made us feel more alive. It's interesting that in a way there was stress involved there, the stress of not wanting to be thrown off. Curiously times when we feel most alive often involve some form of stress. Right, the kind I like is dealing with the stress of having to decide if I should get up from this lounge and swim in the pool, or swim in the pleasant ocean water, or maybe I should just close my eyes and take a nap.

People sometimes associate thrills with feeling alive, like surfing a great wave or riding a fast roller coaster. But as I reflect I know that some times when I have felt most alive have been sitting at the table in our dining room enjoying the love and laughter of our family. When in your life have you felt most alive? I fear that too often we never think about that. We don't think about what it means to be fully alive. Did you know that God wants you to be full of life? Jesus Christ came into this world, the event we celebrate at Christmas, so that you could truly live. We will see that as we consider the implications of John 1:3-4 today.

JESUS IS THE SOURCE OF LIFE

Verse 3 says of Jesus "through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made." In other words, if it exists Jesus made it. Without his work, nothing exists. Life itself is included in that. Acts 3:15 refers to Jesus as the "author of life." As you know I have written 2 novels and co-authored another. This is not something to boast about as these books have been about as widely read as the CIA's most highly classified documents. You could read them but then I'd

have to kill you. Nevertheless, I did write them. Were it not for me those books would not exist. This passage tells us that were it not for Jesus life would not exist. He is the source of it. No Rick, no books. No Jesus, no life.

Colossians 1:16 says of Jesus, “in him all things were created.” Verse 17 says, “He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.” Not only is he the source of life, but he is sustaining it right this minute. He holds it together. Should Jesus decide at any moment that life in general or a specific life should no longer exist, at that moment instantaneously said life would no longer exist. This means we should pay attention to what he says about life. If you wanted to know something about either *One More Tomorrow* or *Black Horse*, the books I have written, who would be the best and most accurate source of information? That would be me. So who would be the best source of information about life? That would be its author, Jesus.

However, John meant more than that Jesus is the source of our physical existence. You get the sense that John had something more than mere existence in mind when he said that the life Jesus brings is “the light of all mankind.” The mere fact that we cost is not the light of all humans. He was referring to a particular kind of life. Paul alluded to this idea in Colossians 3:4 when he wrote, “When Christ, who is your life, appears, you will also appear with him in glory.” Christ is your life. That again speaks of a kind of life and it says, as John said, this kind of life is experienced through Jesus.

Jesus explained a little more about this in John 10:10. In the context Jesus was contrasting himself with other wannabe religious leaders. He likened them to thieves because they sought only to take away the sheep to enrich themselves. In verse 10 he said, “The thief comes only to steal, kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.”

So there Jesus shined a spotlight on this idea of quality of life. He obviously did not come so that people could physically exist. They were already alive. He clearly meant he came so we could have a particular kind of life that people otherwise would not have. This life was a life to the full. Whatever that is, he is as necessary for it as he is necessary for life to exist at all. Just as without Jesus there would be no life at all, so without him there is no possibility of full life.

Note that there were then and are now people who claimed to offer the way to find this full life. There are religious leaders, philosophers, spiritual guides of all sorts who claim to show the way to the full life. Jesus said they are like thieves who steal, kill and destroy. Those people are not the authors of life itself. If we follow

them all that will happen is they will steal life from us. They will destroy the possibility of full life.

JESUS GIVES US THE ELEMENTS OF OVERFLOWING LIFE

Why did Jesus create life in the first place? Ultimately we don't really know why. But we do know he didn't have to do it. No one said he had to create life or they would put out a warrant for his arrest. He did it because he wanted to. He wanted us to exist and he wanted us to have life. John 10:10 tells us he came into this world because he didn't just want us to exist; he wanted us to have life as he originally intended it, which is life to the full. The Greek word translated "full" meant to have a superabundance of something, to have a surplus, to be overflowing with it. Jesus came here so that we could have lives so full they overflow. He came because it was necessary in order for us to have overflowing lives. We are not going to have lives overflowing without him.

We all know it is possible to be alive, but to not have fullness of life. All of us have had the experience at some point of life being the farthest thing from full to the point of excess. We have also probably had moments when we felt truly alive. I love this time of year. I know there are people who feel like the Christmas season is just hectic and stressful and they don't enjoy it. But I love it. There are lights and decorations everywhere, there is a sense of anticipation in the air, it is almost magical. Last week Laurie and I were at a mall and the music they were playing was the *Hallelujah* chorus. How could you not love that? I love the whole scene. I revel in buying presents for my loved ones. I just feel more alive, more joyful, more excited. But Jesus' desire is for us to be alive not just in one season, but continually. His wish is not for you to trudge through a gray existence, merely surviving until you finally finish out your miserable days on the planet. It is for you to be overflowing with life.

But what is this fullness of life? What does it consist of and how does one obtain it? Those are crucial questions that we all ask, and your answers to them are absolutely critical. A common idea is that the full life is a life of material abundance. Have all the money you could ever need and life will be great. You can buy whatever you want, you never need to stress about money, you can have a great house to live in, take great vacations whenever you want, and maybe you won't have some boss telling you what to do. That would be the good life, right?

But in Luke 12:15 Jesus warned us about this. He said, "Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions." He said there are all kinds of ways to be greedy. Everyone condemns

the guy who is already wealthy but has an insatiable desire for more. No one likes Ebenezer Scrooge. But as soon as we think life does consist of having a certain possession or certain amount of possessions, we have fallen prey to a form of greed. It can happen in a lot of different ways.

We should know better. Every single one of us has had the experience of becoming convinced there is something we just have to have and becoming obsessed with obtaining it. As both of our kids are now grown, married and well into adulthood we are cheering them on as they contemplate real estate issues. It reminds me of when Laurie and I were in our early years as a married couple shackled with paying high rent and unable to seriously consider buying a house of our own. We were quite clear that a critical step in getting some hope of a financial foothold was buying a home. We weren't as bad as Ralphie in *A Christmas Story* when he was obsessed with a Red Ryder BB gun, but we seriously longed to be able to buy a home. After we had lived in this area for 11 years through the help of friends and family and through God's grace we were able to buy a house. What a joy it was when we were handed the keys to our new home and walked into it for the first time. We had lived for years in an older home and it was dark inside. Our new home was light, airy, and brand new. Everything worked the way it was supposed to. We were so excited. Finally the thing we had longed for had come about.

I am very thankful for our home. It has been a big benefit to us. But it hasn't given us fullness of life. We are now dismayed to discover that we have an older home. Our kitchen counters are classic 1990's chic. We have some electrical outlets that don't work. We have floors that are squeaking upstairs and floor coverings that are past their intended lifespan. In other words, we have stuff we have to fix just to keep the house up. The point here is that as nice as it is to own our home and as thankful as we are for it, it most definitely is not key to a full life.

Whatever that thing is that you think will give fullness of life, you can substitute it for the house. In the long run while it may make life easier, more comfortable, or briefly more fun, it will not make life full. We all know people who are wealthy or have the things we want and their lives are not full. If having those things does not produce fullness of life for all who have them, does that not suggest that they are not the key to overflowing life?

There are other approaches to fullness of life. Maybe it is success, fame or achievement that will do it. Or maybe it is adventure, thrills or pleasure. But again, we have all identified some of those things, experienced them, enjoyed them for a time, but then found ourselves curiously let down. I can point you to countless

successful and famous people who admit that fullness of life is not found in those things.

Back in 2000 Nicholas Cage and Tea Leoni starred in a movie called *The Family Man*. Cage played a highly successful workaholic Wall Street maven named Jack Campbell. He has no time for family or relationships, his life is all about the deal and making more money. But through the intervention of a guardian angel appropriately named Cash he is thrust into a whole new life. He wakes up to find himself married to a former girlfriend, Kate, and they have two kids. They are living a modest middle class suburban life. At first he is frantic to return to the wealth and power of his former life. But eventually he begins to experience the joy and power of loving a family. He realizes how much more wonderful and full that life is than his former life. The message of that movie gets us closer to fullness of life. It says that true fullness comes from loving other people and being loved.

That is an important element, but it is not the complete answer. Here is why. There are some things we deeply need if life is to be really full. Without these there will always be a sense that something is missing and that there is something wrong inside us. That sense will gnaw at us and will never go away until we can fill those gaps. And even family, as important as it is, cannot give us some of the elements that are needed to have fullness of life.

What elements are critical to having a full life? A life that is full must have joy and peace in abundance. We have seen in the past 2 weeks that both of those are found in Jesus Christ. But there are some other elements that are essential for a full life. I identify 5 of them.

First is an answer for guilt.

HBO has a series called *True Detective*, which I admit I've never watched. But I recently read an article which included a profoundly important quote from the show. It has a character named Rustin Cohle, played by Matthew McConaughey, who is expert at interrogating and obtaining confessions from accused criminals. His method is rooted in his perspective on human nature. He says, "Look, everybody knows there is something wrong with them. They just don't know what it is. Everybody wants confession; they want some cathartic narrative for it. The guilty especially. And everybody's guilty."

There will be no peace in our hearts when we feel guilty, and as the fictional Detective Cohle says, everybody's guilty. I recall a time when I was driving and as I neared a big intersection the traffic signal turned yellow. I was close enough that

stopping would have required slamming on my brakes, so I proceeded through the intersection. But just as I was almost through I caught a flash of light out of the corner of my eye. To my dismay I realized the intersection had those red light cameras. I feared I had been caught on camera. For several weeks I had a small nagging thought that I was going to receive a citation in the mail and it was going to cost me. It didn't ruin my life, but I had a vague, background sense of unease. That sense of "I'm going to pay for this" does not make life full.

Now the good news is I never got a citation, and I am free of concern for it today. I feel a lot better. The issue here is that nagging, vague sense. That's what guilt is like. It weighs on us, and it drains life. So an answer to the problem of guilt is essential for a full life. This is why even loving relationships cannot be the complete answer, for they cannot absolve our guilt.

Second a full life requires a connection to God.

Colossians 1:16 said that all things were made by Jesus and for him. If that's true then we were created for God. We were made for his purposes and were intended to live in relationship to him. If this is true we will always have a sense of something being wrong until we are where we are in a relationship with God. We were made with a built in need for a connection to God, and until we have it we won't experience fullness of life.

A small difference between Laurie and me is that while if I don't eat for a long time it doesn't affect me much, but it affects Laurie big time. She has a fast metabolism and when her blood sugar levels get too low it is obvious. If she goes for too long without something to drink and eat, I can see it on her face. There is actually a familiar expression that she has that shouts that she needs something to eat or drink *now!* This demonstrates something true of all of us. Our bodies are made to have fuel at a pace that keeps blood sugar levels up adequately. If we don't have that we will quickly know something is wrong. Something like that is true of us regarding a connection with God. When it is missing it soon begins to tell. We know something is off. We can feel it. If we hope to have a truly full life it absolutely requires that connection to God.

Third a full life needs an answer to the problem of death.

This one needs little explanation. Death is our biggest enemy, and it dogs our every day of life. Recently we received news that Laurie's mother is dealing with a serious health concern. That night I woke up about 4 in the morning and couldn't get back to sleep. I wasn't fretting about that situation, but after some time I started thinking about it. It hit me that it is terrible for all of us that there are things we

absolutely do not control that could happen and take our lives. We are helpless to stop it. We may desperately not want it, but we can't do anything about it.

If our only answer for death is to live as healthy as possible and to put our hope in modern medicine, our lives will never be full. As we get older we will get increasingly panicky. We must have some peace about death.

Fourth a life must have meaning to be full.

The current narrative of our culture is that we are nothing but accidents, the result of the random interactions of chemical and physical forces. This means our lives truly have no meaning. They mean nothing more than the existence of a leaf on a tree. It dies in the fall and drops off the branch, is raked up and becomes a part of the mulch pile, and that's that.

The strange thing about our brains is that they scream against that idea. They persistently cry out that our lives mean something. We will never truly have a full life until we actually find some real meaning.

A recent survey reported that 86% of young people ages 16-24 understand that having a purpose in life is crucial to being an adult, but only 30% actually have such a purpose. Christine Whelan, a professor at the University of Wisconsin, commented on this saying, "This isn't good news. Coasting is existing, not thriving." There is a difference between existing and thriving. Thriving is having a full life, and key to it is knowing what the meaning of your life is.

Finally a life must be full of love to be full.

This is no secret. We all know that a life without love is unbearable. It is literally hell on earth. The only thing that can truly heal our souls and fill them with joy and peace is love.

Jesus Christ claimed that he is the only who can provide all those things. We cannot find them, at least not all of them, anywhere else. Jesus came to bring us forgiveness, to finally relieve our guilt. He came to connect us to God so that we could live as his children, safe and secure in their heavenly Father. He has given us the gift of eternal life so that we need have no fear of death. He has given us eternally significant meaning for our lives that transcends every circumstance we may face. And he has given us unconditional love, as well as called us to love others just as he has loved us. He has made possible a life filled with love.

There is no possession, no wealth, no achievement, no status, no fame, no thrill, no experience that can relieve your guilt, connect you to God, give you eternal life, establish true meaning for your life and fill your life with love. If any of those things is missing, your life will not be full. You will feel the ache of something crucial being absent and you will long for it and search for it. But in the places we usually look we will never find it. Only Jesus can provide all of the elements of a genuinely full to overflowing life.

APPLICATION

Who wants to be fully alive? All of us do. No one wants to live a dull, gray existence that mostly is endured, coasting along with a soul that barely registers any signs of life, a heart that only faintly beats. We want to be pulsating with life, reveling in it, all of it, highs and lows.

To be fully alive is to be throbbing with life when you wake up on Monday morning in late January when the days are cold and dark, when your back hurts and you're fighting a cold and you are beginning another week of work that you are kind of dreading. How can we be fully alive even on those days?

LIVE IN THE REALITY OF GRACE

One of the struggles that saps the life right out of most of us is that we have a tape that constantly runs through our brains saying, "I'm not good enough." Most of us have a recording that keeps telling us we don't measure up. We don't measure up to what others expect of us and we certainly don't meet God's expectations.

That message weighs us down. Unfortunately the particular message telling us we don't measure up is especially powerful because it is true. We don't measure up. Generally we don't have to look far to see lots of evidence of our failures, with the result that the guilt just buries us. We strive to prove that somehow we are good enough, but the recording just keeps repeating and inside we can't deny it.

Jesus did not come into this world and die on a cross so that he could then pile on. His purpose was not to kick you when you're down and say, "That's right. You suck. You aren't good enough. You'd better try harder, though it won't do you any good at all, because you'll just mess up like you always do." That's what we tend to hear, but that's not what he came to say to us.

What he did was die for us so that we could be forgiven. He says, "No, you aren't good enough, but I am. I will be good for you." He says that we are forgiven and loved and nothing can ever change that. He came, he said, to bring rest to your

soul. He came to set us free from that awful recording's message, and to tell us our guilt is gone, that it is as far from us as the east is from the west. As we live out that truth we will be set free to live in a whole new way.

WALK CONTINUALLY CONNECTED TO GOD

You have a relationship with God through Jesus Christ. That's what you were created for. So live with him continually. I have a couple of suggestions that will help you do that. First, every day, multiple times a day, thank God for loving you unconditionally and tell him you love him. It takes very little time to tell him you love him, but it returns your heart to the real focus of life.

Expect him to be with you and to be at work in your life and world. The 17th century saint Francois Fenelon prayed, "God, help me to see you everywhere." He wrote, "When you seek God's will alone, you find it everywhere." Seek God's will in everything. Love him. Trust him. Rest in his love and look for him in everything in your life. He will be there.

REJOICE IN HOPE

Never stop remembering and thanking him for the truth that the greatest and most fearsome enemy you will face in your entire life has been defeated by Jesus Christ. Death is no longer master over you, for you have eternal life.

PURSUE THE MEANING IN EVERYTHING

God has called you to be a reflection of his character, to not only bear but to display his image. We are on the earth to declare his praise not only to other people but to all of creation. We are to live showing what God is like. That is a meaning that has eternal significance. It is a meaning that can strengthen you when life is at its worst.

Nothing in your life is meaningless. Not one single thing. Everything you do, even the mundane tasks of life, is bursting with meaning. One day recently I was making up our bed. Laurie had gone to pick up Ella to take care of her for the day and I wanted to get the bed made before she got back home. It occurred to me that there are few more trivial and futile tasks than making a bed. I make it up in the morning, and that evening we undo the whole thing and mess it back up. If I leave the bed unmade what difference will it make in this world? Absolutely zero. It means nothing. Except it makes my wife feel just a little bit happier because her world is a bit more orderly and has a touch more beauty. An unmade bed isn't cataclysmic, but it isn't the most lovely thing you'll see all day either. So making

up the bed is a way I can serve my wife. In so doing I am reflecting God's love. I am honoring him, and in that little task I am doing something eternally significant.

Our clothes dryer recently quit functioning, so we bought a new one. At least we thought we did. We bought one on November 18. We still don't have it. The store we bought it from set a delivery date. They would come some time between 8 in the morning and 12. I have a little problem with that to begin with. How would that work if we did things that way? Come to our worship service, it begins some time between 8 and 12. Do television networks work that way? Watch our new crime drama, NCIS: SVU, which will be on Monday nights some time between 8 and 11. But we accepted it. Only they never showed up. They didn't call to tell us they weren't coming either. This was frustrating. But they were apologetic and set another appointment a few days later, this time between 12 and 4 PM. The night before the delivery we got 4 automated calls from them informing us they would deliver our dryer the next day. Once again they didn't show up and they didn't bother to call. They made yet another appointment to deliver the dryer. Again they called us 4 times to tell us they were coming. To our surprise 10 minutes before the end of the scheduled 4 hour time slot they actually arrived. They didn't have the connections for the gas hookup, but that didn't matter because the dryer was damaged so they couldn't hook it up anyway. I'm not going to give you the name of the store because I don't want to be vindictive, but I will tell you that at this point I don't think this was the best buy we could have made. After all, we've paid for a dryer, spent a lot of time waiting around for them, but still don't have one. Our clothes are getting a little dirty. During this odyssey we have had multiple opportunities to deal with customer service (and I use the term loosely) representatives from the store. At one point when I had already expended my quota of patience for 2016, the woman I was dealing with began explaining their delivery system. I told her, "I don't need to know this. I just want to know what you're going to do." What I wanted to do was let her have a verbal shotgun blast from both barrels. But before I opened my mouth I remembered that my life has meaning. The way I dealt with this woman had eternal meaning. I could fulfill the purpose of my existence not by venting my frustration and impatience on a rather unhelpful customer service person, but by treating her with patience, respect and kindness, even when her company was utterly undeserving of it.

When we live out our meaning it fills everything we do. I come here on Sundays and preach my little sermons to our little handful of people, and its effect on the world is so small it is not measurable. It appears that if I didn't do that it would make the world no different at all. Yet I can know that being faithful to do what God has given me to do and to do it with all my heart, is actually eternally

significant. I may not see that significance, but neither did Job when he stayed faithful to God. And his life was enormously significant. So is ours.

LEARN TO LOVE ALWAYS

I have already mentioned that we need to continually live in the reality of God's love for us. But if we wish to have a full life we must understand that God does not want us to be a stagnant pond of love. We are not to have love flow into our lives and stop right there. If we are going to have full lives we must become rivers of love. We must let God's love flow through us to other people.

Everyone salutes that idea. Who would be against love? No one will ever boo the message that we should love others. However, we need to think clearly about what love means. At its core love is sacrifice. It is most clearly on display at the cross, where Jesus was so intent on our good that he died for us in the most painful way imaginable. Love is saying, "I want good for you. I want that to the extent that you experiencing good is more important to me than me experiencing good." In other words, if we are to love others we must give up serving ourselves and serve them.

Jesus made this point in Matthew 16:25 when he said, "For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it." In other words, when you make life about yourself, all you do is lose life. The only way to really gain life is to give up self and serve Jesus by giving to other people.

Fullness of life is not found in receiving from other people. Our hearts, distorted by our own fallenness continually shout at us that it is. But fullness comes from giving and serving. It comes from loving others. Picture the child who at Christmas is obsessed with things he wants to receive. One of 2 things will happen. He won't get what he wants, thus will be disconsolate. Or he may get what he wants, will briefly enjoy it, then lose interest in it. Contrast that with the person who is excited about giving gifts. That person will draw great joy.

Over the years as I have dealt with married people who have sought counseling help from me I have observed that always at the heart of all of their problems is a commitment to self. They are unhappy because they want something and don't feel they are getting it. So they manipulate, they get angry, they withdraw, they nag, they argue, all in the effort to get what they want. They are not experiencing fullness of life, and they never will. The only way to have full life is to find rest and sufficiency in God's limitless love for us, then quit trying to get something for self and do everything in our power to love and give to others.