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“FULL OR EMPTY”

- Week 6 -

SCRIPTURE

Matthew 16:24-25 NLT

**24Then Jesus said to his disciples, “If any of you wants to be my follower, you must give up your own way, take up your cross, and follow me. 25If you try to hang on to your life, you will lose it. But if you give up your life for my sake, you will save it.**

MESSAGE

*The final line of The Wesley Covenant Prayer that we will look at talks about being emptied out before God. This is an opportunity for you to be real and authentic and transparent before your congregation. Pray over this one deeply, asking God to show you the way in which you are to be vulnerable to your people. This is a tough thing for us to do as pastors… but risk it, it’s worth it.*

Well, ladies and gentlemen, we are in the last week of our series, called, “Covenant,” where we have been looking at what it means to surrender our lives to God, to give up control, and to trust God with the outcomes of whatever we’re facing.

Hopefully over the last 6 weeks, you’ve been following along with the messages, the small group material, and the prayer.

*[Share where they can find these resources.]*

*<Tailor the following accordingly if you are not using this series for Lent.>*

One of the reasons we’ve been doing this series is because we are in the season of Lent, (“Lent” being the 6 weeks leading up to Easter, not the stuff in your belly button.) This season has traditionally been used as a way to prepare our hearts for the celebration of Easter. So it has a lot of self-reflection, self-sacrifice, and a little spiritual housecleaning, to prep for the joy of the resurrection of our Savior. That’s why you see people sacrificing things, giving things up. It’s all in preparation for a remembrance of why we’re here in the first place… what Jesus Christ did for us on Easter.

So, this week is our last week to do that… to get our hearts ready for Easter. And so we’re wrapping up “Covenant” this week with one final look at the prayer we’ve been using to help us understand surrendering our hearts to God.

If you’re just joining us, it’s called “The Covenant Prayer,” written by a man named John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement in the 1700s. And like I say every week, it’s beautiful, and it’s challenging. It’s not an easy prayer to pray. But it perfectly outlines what it means to give God control of our lives.

We’ve been breaking it down line by line each week. Let me catch you up.

We started week 1 saying:

**I am no longer my own but thine.**

Meaning, we’re giving our lives to God completely… trusting God with the outcome.

**Put me to what thou wilt,**

**rank me with whom thou wilt.**

Saying, whatever our station in life, whatever job we have, we’re going to be okay with that.

**Put me to doing, put me to suffering.**

Saying, “God, we recognize that tough times are just part of life,

and when those come, we’re relinquishing control to you.”

**Let me be employed for thee,**

**or laid aside for thee.**

Saying, “God, I’ll fulfill my purpose in life,

but remind me to take times to rest in you.”

And last week:

**Let me be exalted for thee,**

**or brought low for thee.**

Saying, “God when there are times where I’m recognized for following you, great.

But in all of my life, let me be humble.”

Well, today we’re kinda putting the next two lines together:

**Let me have all things,**

**let me have nothing.**

**Let me be full,**

**let me be empty.**

And it’s lines like this that really make this a tough prayer to pray. And you’re probably thinking, “Why would we pray for suffering? Why would we pray to be laid aside? Why would we pray to be brought low, or to have nothing, or to be empty?”

Well, remember what we said from the beginning: When we pray this prayer, we aren’t *asking* God to make these things happen to us. That’s not how God works. Rather, we’re just saying that when they do, we’re still going to trust God with the outcome. So, if we’re going to give God control of our *entire* lives, we have to let God have the ups *and* downs, the good *and* the bad. Which is why I love this prayer… it contains both.

Now, the line we’re looking at today falls into that same category…

**Let me be full, let me be empty.**

So, what does it mean to be empty?

*<If this week of the series does not coincide with Palm Sunday, you can skip the connection to Palm Sunday and simply talk about the scripture as a time when Jesus was trying to get the disciples to understand what it meant to be a follower of his.>*

*Well, today is a special day in the Christian Calendar, what we traditionally call Palm Sunday, which is always the Sunday right before Easter. It commemorates a story about Jesus when he and his followers march triumphantly into Jerusalem the week before he would be killed. It’s called Palm Sunday because all his followers are waving palm branches and singing songs in celebration of this man, they think is going to be their next earthly king.*

*But Jesus isn’t a huge fan of all this, because he knows he isn’t an earthly King who will rule Israel. Rather, he’s a heavenly King, king of all kings, who will rule forever. And at one point, right before this palm parade, he’s trying to tell his disciples this very thing, and they’re just not getting it.*

In fact, to try to get through to them, Jesus starts predicting his own death, and they’re just not getting it. But as he’s doing this, he’s says something that I think can help us understand today’s line of The Covenant Prayer:

He says, (paraphrased,) “We have to go to Jerusalem. I will be killed, but I’ll rise again on the third day.” And his main man, Peter, who we’ve talked about goes, “This will never happen to you.”

And Jesus says, “Dude, you’re still not getting it…”

**24Then Jesus said to his disciples, “If any of you wants to be my follower, you must give up your own way, take up your cross, and follow me. 25If you try to hang on to your life, you will lose it. But if you give up your life for my sake, you will save it.**

**-Matthew 16:24-25**

Has anyone taken this time to do some spring cleaning this year? Every spring, I do a wardrobe assessment: if I haven’t worn it for an entire year, it gets donated. (And yet, that Bears t-shirt from 1994 still somehow manages to stay in the drawer.) But when you start to clear out the clutter, get rid of the old stuff you don’t need anymore, your space is more organized and easier to manage, and you have room for all the awesome new stuff you get (like a 2020 Bears jersey).

What Jesus is saying here is that to be a true follower of Christ, to have the space in your heart to be filled up with all the amazing benefits he can give, we have to do some spiritual spring cleaning, some spiritual emptying out to make room before we can be filled up.

So, this line from our prayer, and the idea of being empty or hollowing ourselves out, isn’t necessarily a bad thing. It’s just a reminder to do some spiritual spring cleaning. Because, if we’re getting rid of the stuff that stands in the way of our relationship with God, God can then take that space and fill it up with His stuff… like peace, hope, love.

That’s what Lent and this week is all about… Getting rid of the things that stand in the way of our relationship with God, so that space can then be filled up with all that spiritual goodness.

*<Here is your opportunity to be vulnerable with your congregation. Don’t share a story where you are the hero. Share a story where you felt empty, maybe even one where you failed. This was mine…>*

*I wanna share a story about this prayer, why this particular line of this prayer is so meaningful to me, and the reason I wanted to do this series in the first place. If you were with The Connection when we were meeting monthly and traveling around to other churches in between, you may have heard me tell this story… so bear with me. But there are lots who haven’t, so I wanna share it again. Because it’s why I love this prayer, why this line is so meaningful to me, and I wanted to a whole series on this prayer to begin with.*

*While I was on Sabbatical a few years ago, before I started working on this church plant, I was traveling the country talking to pastors and church planters, learning from their wisdom and experience. One morning, I found myself in Charleston, South Carolina, and went to a place called Sullivan Island Beach to watch the sun rise. I was feeling incredibly overwhelmed and anxious at the monumental task of starting a church from scratch and decided to try to center myself, calm my thoughts, with some prayer. I tried a few that didn’t work. And then decided to try reciting The Covenant Prayer. I got through the first parts okay, but then got to the line we’re looking at today. “Let me be full. Let me be…” and I couldn’t bring myself to say the word, “empty.” I was already feeling overwhelmed and anxious, why would I pray to be “empty” when starting this church? No, I wanted to be full. I wanted the “all things.” I wanted the “exalted.” I didn’t want to pray the other sides of these lines. And it hit me. I was afraid. I was afraid of failing. I was afraid of being “laid aside.” I was afraid of being empty. And rather than fight it, I just sat there, letting myself feel the fear, feel the emptiness. And then… as tears filled my eyes, the sun peeked over the horizon, filling the sky with light, illuminating the clouds and the waves. It was as if God was saying, “There are going to be times of emptiness… but if you let me, I will fill you back up.” And then I just sat in the warmth of the early morning September sun.*

Sometimes we need to be emptied, hollowed out, so we can be filled up with the things of God.

What does it mean to be empty?

Well, “empty” can mean a lot of things. Maybe you’re already feeling empty? Feeling exhausted. You’ve been pouring ourself out and pouring ourself out, into work, into relationships, into parenting or school or life… and you feel empty, like you have nothing more to give. Maybe you feel hollow, like you’re at the bottom of your emotional barrel, because of the loss of a loved one or a relationship or any sort of disappointment. Or maybe for you, you need to do the spiritual spring cleaning we’ve been talking about today, ridding yourself of something that is standing in the way of your relationship with God. And so, emptying yourself means letting go of that anchor that weighs you down, and asking God to take it from you.

Whatever it is, give it over to God, so that he can fill you up with the fullness of life that he promises when we surrender our lives to him.

<Close this message with a time of silent prayer, maybe accompanied by music, instructing your people to consider what it means for them to be emptied out. What in their lives needs a little spiritual spring cleaning. Then close with The Covenant Prayer one last time.>

Let’s pray.

**I am no longer my own but thine.**

**Put me to what thou wilt,**

**rank me with whom thou wilt.**

**Put me to doing, put me to suffering.**

**Let me be employed for thee,**

**or laid aside for thee.**

**Let me be exalted for thee,**

**or brought low for thee.**

**Let me have all things,**

**let me have nothing.**

**Let me be full,**

**let me be empty.**

**I freely and humbly yield all things**

**to thy pleasure and thy disposal.**

**And now, sweet Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,**

**I am thine and thou art mine.**

**And may this covenant made on Earth,**

**be ratified in heaven.**

**So be it.**