

“The Pilgrim’s Freedom from the Burden of Performance”  
Galatians 3:1-3  
Covenant Church  
May 31, 2026

## Introduction

### **Arouse Attention:**

For all the glitz and glamour, the life of a professional actor, singer, or athlete is actually pretty demanding. Life orbits around sharpening your skill: workouts, diet, studying, and performing/competing can leave little time or energy for much else.

### **Surface FCF**

Yet this constant push can wear a person down. The grind to scrape their way to the top, or off the bottom, can destroy even the best.

### **Connect to Audience**

Does that sound familiar? You and I may not be professional athletes or performers, but we certainly feel the pressure to live like it!

### **Introduce Topic/Scripture**

As we close out our Way-finding series, we’re going to uncover how a Pilgrim is actually free from the burden of performance that seems to saturate the world we journey through....a pilgrim is free from the burden of performance.

**Transition:** In order to do that, we’re going to cover three points: Performance Begins, Performance Debunked, and Performance Received. Performance Begins, Performance Debunked, and Performance Received.

Let’s begin at the dawn of history and uncover what we’re truly made for.

### **Point 1: Performance Begins**

Genesis 1 and 2 describe the world God made for us to live in. He made a world where there was complete harmony. Humanity dwelt perfectly with God, one another, our own selves, and all of creation. God created the perfect place for humanity to truly thrive. This was true abundance of life. Think about it: Perfect communion between God and his children. Our hearts filled with his love. Our days spent caught up in his joy. Resting in all he is.

Then, Genesis 3 describes how the Fall of mankind cast us out of our perfect environment, alienation from our God, and brought brokenness to the very depths of our being. In an instant all that was perfect was wrecked. Abundance of life, once plentiful, now evades people and the story of human history is one long tragedy of people trying to find abundant life again.

Our hearts crave Eden, the place of God’s presence, for that is the place for which we were made, and we spend our lives looking for it with relentless pursuit. Augustine, that famous ancient church father from North Africa, puts it, “You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.”

We turn all manner of ways looking for this abundant life; and, one of the most prominent is through what we're calling "performance." Let's define it: Performance is striving to find abundant life by meeting arbitrary standards." "striving to find abundant life by meeting arbitrary standards."

Now, meeting standards is not wrong. In fact, it is good for us to meet standards.

It's good when we meet the standards for safety, licenses, or certifications.

The problem comes when we use those standards to deliver that which they cannot give.

When we strive to find the abundant life by meeting arbitrary standards, all the sudden we end up, as our series has said, weary.

For example...

A math test can tell us something about our grasp of certain material.  
A messy house can tell us if we've had too much going on to clean up.  
A performance review can give us information about how well we're carrying out our responsibilities.

BUT, these things cannot give us the abundant life we crave because they were not designed to.

There will always be math you don't understand.  
There will always be messes that need cleaned up.  
There will always be ways to grow in the execution of your role.

To ask these standards to deliver the abundant life to you is to lay on them a burden that they will fail to bear.

So, where does this leave us? Weary.

As our definition this morning indicated, we're left striving in this weariness. Listen to Psalm 127:2 (NIV):

"In vain you rise early and stay up late, toiling for food to eat—for [it is God who] grants sleep to those he loves."

**Personal Illustration:**

Striving for abundance of life marked a good deal of my twenties. In college I was a part of growing, "successful" ministry on campus. There was a lot of energy and excitement there. In the midst of all that excitement and energy, God called me to join that ministry as staff.

As I began my first years of ministry I thought only success and growth lay in my path.

God had other plans.

I was sent to labor in a area of campus where people weren't near as hungry for God as I expected. When I was a student I was under the impression that prayer + the right ingredients = ministry growth. What I experienced was quite different.

No matter what I tried, no matter how hard I prayed, numerical growth evaded me and I took it hard.

It was during these same years God brought the topic of performance to my mind through a book called, *The Search for Significance*. As I studied this book, the Word of God, and my circumstances, I slowly began to see how much I was looking for the abundant life in my performance in ministry. Listen to a journal entry from those early days...

I think the reason I am frustrated by ministry is that I didn't have anything very validating happen to me today. Yesterday, I had a lot of good conversations and I presented the gospel several times. Today, I didn't have awesome conversations. I am so frustrated by the lack of people wanting to come to small group and get involved. I think I am looking for a certain number of people to get involved to validate me. I wanted a large turnout so that I would have something to show myself for my work... (Sept 16, 2015)

**Transition:** Does this sound familiar? Could it be that I was reading out of your journal too?

## **Point 2:** Performance Debunked

Where does this obsession with performance come from? Who gave us the idea we could find abundant life by meeting arbitrary standards?

I want to argue that the problem isn't primarily emotional, or volitional, or rooted in your family of origin. It's not primarily institutional. The problem is primarily...firstly, spiritual.

The New Testament letter of Galatians gives us some insight into how one group of Christians was battling a similar struggle. The Galatians were not looking to their work, like I do/did, for the abundant life. Their struggle was that they were looking for the abundant life through the addition of rule keeping to their Christian faith. Christ paid for their sins, but their ongoing responsibility was to "be perfected" by keeping the laws from the Old Testament. They believed Abundant Life = Jesus + My Effort

It was as if Christ paid their entrance fee to the race, but they had to run and finish it by keeping Jewish Law.

Listen to Paul in Galatians 3:1-3 (NIV)

You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? Before your very eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed as crucified. I would like to learn just one thing from you: Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the law, or by believing what you heard? Are you so foolish? After beginning by means of the Spirit, are you now trying to finish by means of the flesh?

Paul says they were acting as if they had been bewitched or hypnotized. One commentator put it this way, "Their new behavior was so strange, so at odds with the

liberating message which they had previously accepted, that it had appeared as if someone had put a spell on them.” (Bruce, 148)

We can see how this Jesus + My Effort falls apart. No amount of keeping the Jewish Law would finish their spiritual growth. That is a misuse of the Old Testament Law.

The Old Testament Law tells God’s people how to live the abundant life. It was never meant as a standard they had to meet to earn it.

Using the law to earn righteousness would be like you and I constructing a Lego set and claiming that we’re now bonafide design engineers. Following clear instructions does not qualify you...They just tells you how to do something.

When the Galatians tried to earn their spiritual growth by keeping Old Testament law, only weighty disappointment would result. This is exactly what we’re talking about today: a burden of performance.

Just as the Galatians were believing that the Abundant Life = Jesus + My Effort, our struggle with performance comes from that same lie, an evil spiritual lie.

If the false gospel in Galatians was Abundant Life = Jesus + My Effort to Keep the Mosaic Law

Then the false gospel of performance is Abundant Life = Jesus + My Effort to Earn

I think there are four things we try to earn and add to Jesus.

1. Pleasure: We strive to perform to procure worldly treasure: status, wealth, power
2. Security: We strive to perform to protect and provide for ourselves
3. Respect: We strive to perform to be good enough to others
4. Self-Esteem: We strive to perform to pay for our failures, or perceived failures

If I look back at myself 11 years ago, I can see that I was someone who was perfectly happy to believe in Jesus for my salvation, but didn’t believe that he was the source of my abundant life — I needed to add something to it.

For me it was self-esteem. I thought that I needed positive feedback in ministry in order to feel good about myself. If I just worked and prayed hard then I could cover my deficiencies with ministry success...and all those failures I had accumulated would be gone — I could be happy with me.

My problem, and the problem of every person laboring under the burden of performance, is that I believed little things I could earn would bring me abundant life. But I was made for Eden, to be with God.

Psalms 63:1 (ESV) speaks the cry of our hearts:

O God, you are my God; earnestly I seek you;  
my soul thirsts for you;  
my flesh faints for you,  
as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.

So, like the man and woman of Eden, we can buy into a lie that brings us nothing but bitter fruit. And the lie is this: Abundant life can't simply be = Jesus.

I must earn something to add to it. Abundant life has to be = Jesus + My Effort.

But that is far from what Jesus says.

We hear Jesus say things like John 10:10, "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly." (ESV)

and John 14:6a (ESV) "I am the way, and the truth, and the life."

and John 11:25 (NLT) "I am the resurrection and the life. Anyone who believes in me will live, even after dying."

and Mathew 11:28 (ESV): "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest."

and John 17:3 (NIV) "Now this is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent."

Scripture is clear, Christ gives abundance of life now. Abundance of life is freely offered, no strings attached, no performance necessary.

**Transition:** If what I am saying is true, then those four things I mentioned (pleasure, security, respect, and self-esteem) must be given to us by Christ. We don't have to earn them. We receive the performance of another. Let's see how the Bible addresses that.

### **Point 3: Performance Received**

First, Do you strive to perform to procure worldly treasures: status, wealth, power? Do you find the lie that Jesus + Pleasure brings the abundant life?

Thousands of years ago the author of Ecclesiastes gave an insight into his day and it proves true today, "Whoever loves money never has enough; whoever loves wealth is never satisfied with their income. This too is meaningless." (Ecc 5:10 NIV)

Chasing income, wealth, power, pleasure is ultimately meaningless as a way to have the abundant life! Things, experiences, status, and power cannot fill the God-shaped hole in our hearts.

But Jesus can. Jesus has been given to us and is our treasure. Jesus has been given to us and is our treasure.

So, that pleasure you long for is already yours. God himself is given totally to you.

Secondly, do you strive to perform to protect and provide for yourself or the ones you love? Do you find the lie that Jesus + Security brings the abundant life?

Does your heart say, "I can be at ease when I...pay off this debt...own this specific car...have these things...can give my family this experience?"

Being debt-free, having a car, things, or certain experiences are not bad at all; they're gifts from God! But, they cannot bring us abundant life, so why do we think that performing for them will?

It is actually the kingly rule of Jesus that provides all I need and protects me. The kingly rule of Jesus provides all I need and protects me.

Psalm 23:1 (NLT) "The LORD is my shepherd; I have all that I need."

Mat 6:31-33 (NLT)

"So don't worry about these things, saying, 'What will we eat? What will we drink? What will we wear?' These things dominate the thoughts of unbelievers, but your heavenly Father already knows all your needs. Seek the Kingdom of God above all else, and live righteously, and he will give you everything you need."

So, that security you long for is already yours. You don't have to earn it. Jesus, even in this very moment, is providing for and protecting you.

Thirdly, do you strive to perform to be good enough to others? Are you tempted by the lie that Jesus + Respect brings the abundant life?

You may ask, "Am I contributing? Do people value me? Am I wanted here?"  
Do these sound familiar?

Do these questions push you to labor and perform? If so, remember this: Jesus lived the perfect life for you. Jesus lived the perfect life for you.

Jesus Christ came to earth and lived the ideal, the perfect human life. He perfectly trusted God, perfectly obeyed God, loved his neighbors perfectly. All of it. 100%

And the beautiful truth is that when we place our faith in Jesus, God takes his perfect record and puts it on our ledger. Romans 3:22 (NIV) reminds us that, "This righteousness (this sheer perfection) is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe."

So that "good enough" you long for is already yours. Friend, you can rest from your striving.

Lastly, do you strive to perform to pay for or cover your failures, like I did? Do you find the lie that Jesus + Self-Esteem brings the abundant life?

Now, there's nothing wrong with having healthy self-esteem, but there is a subtle twisting that says, "I must make up for my failures in order to feel good about myself."

That's bankrupt living. You cannot. What is done, is done. The truth of the matter is that you and I have failed, miserably at times, and no amount of effort can make up for it.

It's like finding yourself in a hole with a shovel and expecting more digging to actually bring you up and out. You need someone to lift you out.

And that is exactly where Jesus meets us. The death of Jesus as our substitute paid for all our failures. The death of Jesus as our substitute paid for all our failures.

Perhaps you're familiar with the story: Jesus, after living the perfect life was betrayed by his closest friend and delivered over to die in order to prevent a riot.

The Bible tells us that in that death, "God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood — to be received by faith." (Rom 3:25 NIV)

The truth is we have failed.

But God was not content to let his beloved son and daughter pay for their sins themselves. So he paid the cost for our sins though dying in our place on the cross. That's what the Bible means when it calls Jesus as sacrifice of atonement.

Just as I told you Jesus perfection was put in our ledger, so our failures were put in his. He suffered as if he had committed all the sins we have. He suffered and died in our place. He paid the price. It's over.

Hear Psalm 103:11-12 (NLT)

For [God's] unending love toward those who fear him  
is as great as the height of the heavens above the earth.  
He has removed our sins as far from us  
as the east is from the west.

So, that self-esteem you long for, is already yours. Your failures are gone. When you trust Jesus you no longer have to perform for self-esteem.

## **Conclusion**

The gospel of performance is a bitter lie. Abundant Life is not found in Jesus + My Effort.

No amount of performance to earn Respect, Self-Esteem, Security, or Worldly Treasures can bring us back to Eden, back home to God.

But Jesus alone can. The true gospel is simply Abundant Life = Jesus

This message marks the end of our Way-Finding Series and as June begins tomorrow, I wonder, how will this summer be different for you? I want to ask, What have you been trying to earn? Where are you wearied, friend?

As we close, I want to invite you to subtract. If you've been living the Jesus + My Effort life chasing the abundant life, will you lay that effort down this morning? Will you cease striving and let him be your abundant life?

What do you need to subtract, what do you need to surrender to God?