

“Moving Forward”

Ephesians 2: 1-10

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Missionary David Livingstone was asked near the end of his life where he was planning to go next. He said, I will go anywhere, as long as I am moving forward. Livingstone would have believed that moving forward was to move with Jesus, his life leader. In this teachable moment, I believe Livingstone was basically stating that when one allows Jesus to take the lead of their life, then one is moving forward and not distracted.

The joy of being free: When I was a child, I recall my father telling us that the best day of his life was when all his teeth were pulled out. Often when I meet a new hygienist or dentist, I would tell them that story. Invariably those in the dental profession are shocked after I say it. One would think that getting married, or having one’s first child would be a more acceptable answer to one’s best day of their life. You see, dad was finally liberated from the serious dental pain he had experienced for years as a child and young adult. He could now move forward with his life. Our Spiritual lives could be viewed in a similar way. Are we moving forward or are we held back by concerns and goals that are more about other things than about the things of God?

Spirituality can be defined as the inner values and meaning in life to which people live by every day. When we are a Christian, our goal is to form our inner values and meaning in life more and more in line with Christ. In this journey, we work to building our relationship with Christ and thereby experience more of Christ's love, forgiveness and joy! We understand in our journey of Spiritual formation that our identity is not our successes or failures; our wealth; or how much influence and friends we have. Rather, our identity is rooted in the knowledge that we are loved children of God and nothing in life or death can separate us from his love! This gives us the freedom to be who we are, not motivated primarily by what is happening to us by outside circumstances and by others’ expectations. Rather, our true identity comes from the heart – from God’s grace implanted within us!

²⁴⁻²⁵ **Then Jesus went to work on his disciples. “Anyone who intends to come with me has to let me lead. You're not in the driver's seat; I am. Don't run from suffering; embrace it. Follow me and I'll show you how. Self-help is no help at all. Self-sacrifice is the way, my way, to finding yourself, your true self. (Matthew 16: 24, 25 The Message)**

Paying attention: Paul, the author of Ephesians, is speaking to the people in Ephesus. Today, through the Holy Spirit, these words are also speaking to us! The following is our reading for today (Ephesians 2: 1-10) as found in “The Message” by Eugene Peterson. Paul comes on strong to get our attention:

2¹⁻⁶ It wasn't so long ago that you were mired in that old stagnant life of sin. Swept along by the whims of the culture one can easily buy into individualism and consumerism. Question: How are you being spiritually formed? The culture will form us if we are not intentional about being formed. **You let the world, which doesn't know the first thing about living, tell you how to live.** Parents will want their children to learn good life practices. For example, they insist that children eat their vegetables and brush their teeth! Parents often do their best to expose their children to good education so they will do well in society. Yet, somehow exposure to God's love and God's grace is so often not viewed as vital. **You filled your lungs with polluted unbelief** (beliefs such as - I am a self-made man. I can do it on my own), **and then exhaled disobedience** Theologian and author Eugene Peterson speaks about a false morality where we do good works to think we are good enough in our own eyes and in the perception of others. This kind of action becomes a substitute for God's Grace. Like eating candy and not being hungry for a real meal. We know the candy does not sustain us. What Paul is saying is that Jesus wants us to have the real meal (not the cheap substitute). The real meal is doing good works out of a developing relationship with Christ. In other words, doing good works as a response to Christ's love formed in us. Spiritual formation is vital! Then we are moving forward in life. **We all did it, all of us doing what we felt like doing, when we felt like doing it, all of us in the same boat. It's a wonder God didn't lose his temper and do away with the whole lot of us. Instead, immense in mercy and with an incredible love, he embraced us. He took our sin-dead lives and made us alive in Christ** (to be alive is to live in God's love, to love others- even our enemies- as he had loved us). **He did all this on his own, with no help from us! Then he picked us up and set us down in highest heaven in company with Jesus, our Messiah ("I will not rest until I rest in thee" -quote by Augustine).**

"Jesus Christ is not valued at all until He is valued above all". – Augustine

7-10 Now God has us where he wants us, with all the time in this world and the next to shower grace and kindness (unconditional love) upon us in Christ Jesus. Saving is all his idea, and all his work. All we do is trust him enough to let him do it (there is a freedom in surrender). **It's God's gift from start to finish** (this is not of our own doing, it is a gift from God! Ephesians 2:8) **We don't play the major role. If we did, we'd probably go around bragging that we'd done the whole thing** (Story of cutting a piece of wood with a handsaw - "Let the saw do the cutting.")! **No, we neither make nor save ourselves. God does both the making and saving** ("What is our only comfort in life and in death? That we are not our own, but belong body and soul, in life and in death to our faithful saviour Jesus Christ- Heidelberg catechism Q/A #1"). **He creates each of us by Christ Jesus to join him in the work he does, the good work he has gotten ready for us to do, work we had better be doing (Ephesians 2: 10).**

When you are formed spiritually in a deeper relationship with Christ, you will be freer from the distractions and the things that bog you down and cause pain. These are the best days of your life! Let's continue to move forward continually forming our connection – our relationship with Christ and with one another. Let Jesus take the lead. Then God's purpose is fulfilled in us and we are moving forward. Amen.