

A
MESSAGE OF HOPE,
comfort and freedom in Jesus Christ

“Shifting Our Focus” by Kyle Murphy

I can't believe it is fall already. It seems like just a few weeks that I was sitting here typing our spring edition of the newsletter. The birds and butterflies that I spoke about in that article have now moved on and migrated south. The gardens I was working on getting planted have, for the most part, been harvested and all that remains in their place is bare dirt. The temperatures are getting cooler, at least in Michigan, and the leaves are beginning to change color. Summer seemed to go by way too quickly!

Another thing that went by too quickly was baseball season. I was blessed to return to United Shore Professional Baseball League this year as a volunteer chaplain. The league has four teams of professional baseball players, and each team has two chaplains. Mel Rutkoske, one of the board members for Message of Hope and a volunteer at Macomb Correctional Facility in the Next Step Christian Recovery program, is a chaplain with the league and invited me to join a couple years ago. Covid changed things quite a bit last year, but I was elated to be allowed to volunteer once again for the 2021 season. I was with the Westside Woolly Mammoths and, even though we didn't win the championship this season, I had a great time sharing God's love with the players as well as sharing a message of hope in Jesus Christ with them.

Shifting now to something I have been wanting to share with all of you. It is something that has been on my heart for a while now and has to do with identity, purpose, and focus. A great deal of time and energy is spent within our culture, our society and even in our churches, in obtaining a greater sense of self-awareness. This quest for self-awareness (i.e., growing in knowledge of our own character, feelings, desires, and/or motives) has led to thousands of self-help books being written that focus on helping us better define ourselves and get to know ourselves better. Topics include self-awareness, defining self, self-image, self-esteem, finding your ideal self, existential self, the list goes on and on.

Even within church and ministry settings, I have witnessed numerous workshops, seminars and classes designed to help individuals in determining what our purpose and unique skills and talents are, helping us better define ourselves (i.e., become more self-aware). We take spiritual gifts tests and SHAPE tests to determine more precisely who we are as individuals and what abilities we might have that we can employ in serving God. While I am not necessarily in opposition to these things, I believe we may benefit from shifting our focus slightly when it comes to this study of self.

Why do I believe a shift might be necessary? Because in its simplest form, this quest for more self-awareness is all about us. The focus is on us: Who am I? What is my purpose? What are my strengths, talents, weaknesses, skills, etc.? We are at the center of these questions. Again, I don't believe there is anything wrong with working on ourselves and getting to know ourselves better, but aren't we made in the image of God? (I will assume you answered "Yes.") If so, wouldn't it make more sense to first get to know Him better? In so doing, we would then also get to know ourselves better. That leads us to the next question: What does that look like?

The study of God starts with getting to know more about Him through His creation as well as through His Holy Scriptures. We read, study, pray about, and meditate on His word. We also discuss and study His word in community with other believers. Again, the more we get to know about our Creator, the more we get to know about ourselves. If we are to have good self-knowledge and appropriate self-awareness, we need to begin with God and think backward from Him. As we more fully grasp how awesome He is – His omnipresence, omnipotence, and omniscience – the easier it becomes to place ourselves properly in the scheme of things.

This study of God is called theology. The word theology comes from the Greek words “*theos*” (meaning God) and “*logia*” (meaning the study of). So, the word theology literally means “the study of God.” What better use of our time is there than to study about and get to know God more and more?

While still mulling these ideas over in my mind, I attended a church service a few weeks back at Heritage Church in Sterling Heights, Michigan, where they spoke about a topic very similar to this. The title of the message was, “What You Believe.” The pastor started the message by stating that the two most important beliefs we have in life are:

1. What you believe about God (*theology*)
2. What you believe about yourself (*identity*)

We have already briefly discussed theology and how we can better get to know God and more firmly shape what we believe about Him. What about ourselves though? What do we believe about ourselves? What is our identity?

Going back to what was shared in the Sunday morning message, oftentimes a person’s identity is defined by their abilities, influences, failures, culture, and by their own opinions of themselves. Isn’t it true that none of these things should matter as much as what our Creator has to say? Only the one who designed us has the power to define us. So, what does God have to say about us? Here are a handful of truths God has shared about who we are:

You are not alone. “Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or terrified because of them, for the Lord your God goes with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you.” (Deuteronomy 31:6)

You are holy and blameless. “For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight.” (Ephesians 1:4)

You are God’s masterpiece. “For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.” (Ephesians 2:10)

You are complete. “...and to know this love that surpasses knowledge – that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.” (Ephesians 3:19)

You are the one God rejoices and sings over. “The Lord your God is with you, the Mighty Warrior who saves. He will take great delight in you; in his love he will no longer rebuke you, but will rejoice over you with singing.” (Zephaniah 3:17)

You are more than a conqueror in all things. “No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.” (Romans 8:37)

You are God’s beloved child. “Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God...” (John 1:12)

My prayer is that we all take some time to meditate on each of these...and keep pursuing a closer walk with God above all else. Maybe that requires shifting our focus somewhat, maybe not. Whatever the case, I encourage you to never stop growing in your knowledge of God and in your relationship with Him!!

Blessing

“The LORD bless you and keep you, the LORD make his face shine on you and be gracious to you; the LORD turn his face toward you and give you peace. May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.”

(Numbers 6:24-26; Romans 15:13 NIV)