

MOVING FORWARD

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¹ Timothy 4:12 *Don't let anyone think less of you because you are young. Be an example to all believers in what you say, in the way you live, in your love, your faith, and your purity. ¹³ Until I get there, focus on reading the Scriptures to the church, encouraging the believers, and teaching them.*

¹⁴ *Do not neglect the spiritual gift you received through the prophecy spoken over you when the elders of the church laid their hands on you. ¹⁵ Give your complete attention to these matters. **Throw yourself into your tasks so that everyone will see your progress.***

Progress. Advancement. Success.

That is what God has gifted and anointed you for. That is what He wants everyone to see in your life.

But advancement does not fall like a ripe apple from a tree. Like Timothy, you must “give your complete attention to these matters” and “throw yourself into your tasks.”

Sometimes, life throws you a curve. Stuff happens. The yuck can become so thick that it takes all your energy just to wade through a day. In times like those, it's hard to see any advancement at all.

It may help to take a lesson from women of the Old Testament, offered by Apostle Peter:

¹ Peter 3:3 *Don't be concerned about the outward beauty of fancy hairstyles, expensive jewelry, or beautiful clothes. ⁴ You should clothe yourselves instead with the beauty that comes from within, the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is so precious to God. ⁵ This is how the holy women of old made themselves beautiful.*

The application for us today is that true advancement, real advancement, does not first appear on the outside. In fact, it may never appear outwardly, yet be genuine and effective. The most important progress to make in your life is not the kind that other people may readily see and admire, but the kind that is reserved for those who know you best, the deeper kind, the enduring kind. This is valued so highly by God.

Honestly, are you content with your life? Or, is there a longing in your heart for something more? You may not talk about it, or admit it to another living soul, but in certain moments in the presence of God, deep within your spirit, is there a yearning for something you have not yet possessed? This is actually the beckoning of the Spirit of God, stirring you to reach out, to cry out, to move out and move forward with your life.

There are three things that will seriously hinder your progress in life, and none of them come from outside of you!

Let me tell you right now, the devil cannot defeat you if you belong to Jesus Christ. If God permits, he may harass you or annoy you, but he cannot defeat you. Listen again to Paul's words:

Romans 8:31 What shall we say about such wonderful things as these? If God is for us, who can ever be [successful] against us?

³⁵ *Can anything ever separate us from Christ's love? Does it mean he no longer loves us if we have trouble or calamity, or are persecuted, or hungry, or destitute, or in danger, or threatened with death? ³⁷ No, despite all these things, overwhelming victory is ours through Christ, who loved us.*

³⁸ *And I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from God's love. Neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither our fears for today nor our worries about tomorrow—not even the powers of hell can separate us from God's love. ³⁹ No power in the sky above or in the earth below—indeed, nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

So how can we assure forward progress in our lives as God's people? What hindrances must we avoid? To answer these questions, I'm going to use the illustration of an automobile's gear shift indicator that has five settings: Park, Reverse, Neutral, Drive, and Low.

Hindrance #1: Parking

You cannot move forward if you refuse to deal with what God is dealing with.

When you shift the transmission into Park, the gears lock up; the car will not move. When we do this in our lives, we are quenching the Holy Spirit.

Here are five habits that will lock your life down, so that you cannot move forward:

1. Stubborn pride.

We all have issues with pride; it is natural. When it is stubborn, it is sinful. The opposite of pride is humility, but if we try to put on humility it is only another form of pride. The only way to unlock stubborn pride is to offer humble worship to God. Forget about yourself completely and lose yourself in worship. Do you practice such worship? If not, it could be a sign that your life is in Park.

2. Disbelieving fear.

Fear and faith appear to be contrary to one another, but actually they are the flip sides of one coin. Fear is faith in all the wrong things. Fear is disbelief that God truly cares for you and has purpose and power to protect you. The only effective answer to disbelieving fear is courageous trust. If you're waiting for fear to pass before you put your trust in God, it will never happen. Instead, look your fear in the face and courageously begin to move forward as God leads, trusting God to help you in spite of your fear. Faith usually comes in the face of fear.

3. Implacable anger.

Anger is a familiar emotion to all of us, but sometimes anger becomes unrelenting, unyielding, overwhelming. Such anger does not respond to reason and does not abate; it throws your whole life into Park. The only answer is from the inside, through empathic understanding. This requires listening carefully and long enough to gain another person's perspective. Once you find that, you will notice your anger has already begun to dissipate.

4. Inflexible willfulness.

"I want what I want when I want it." When things don't go my way, inflexible willfulness will attempt to circumvent the roadblock, carve a new roadway altogether. It simply will not give in. And while I sweat and scheme, my life is stalled, locked in Park. Yielded obedience is the answer. It begins with yielding to the Holy Spirit ("Your ways are not my ways, and your thoughts are higher than mine."), and is confirmed in acts of obedience to the Spirit's way.

5. Unrepentant bitterness.

Innumerable slights, wounds, losses, "curve balls," and bad breaks in life can add up to bitterness, if we have not learned from God's mercy to freely forgive. And bitterness is a contagion that defiles others around us and infects our own world with heartache. Unfortunately, much bitterness is buried, instead of healed, with self-justification and vengefulness, throwing our lives into Park and forbidding forward progress. The only answer is to develop a ready forgiveness. "Forgive anyone who has anything against you," said Jesus. That covers it all, doesn't it? Before God, forgive those who have injured you, even when you don't feel like it (feelings will follow, if you keep it up). It's not because they deserve it, but because they don't! Forgive, because God forgave you.

Hindrance #2: Reversing

You cannot move forward with rearview vision.

If you look in your rearview mirror all the time, the only direction you can travel is backwards. When you live like this, you are resisting the Holy Spirit.

Let me offer three lessons concerning your past:

1. Your past is a fact; accept it.
You cannot go back and change what has been done. Your birth, your family, your childhood, your physical stature, the rejections, the breaks you never got, cannot be undone. All of these contribute to the self-image you bear today. And for many people, that image is poor and disabled. When someone compliments you, do you smile and say, "Thanks," but inside think, "That's not true of me"? Whatever God has permitted in your life from conception to this present moment — if you would begin to accept it, not as His best will for your life, but as the path in which He has led you, accept it instead of constantly fighting it — wishing you had been born to different parents, had better breaks, made better decisions (constantly looking in the rearview mirror) — you could begin to move forward from here.
2. Your past is history; learn from it.
What about all those mistakes we have made (and we *have* made them)? They are now the facts of our history, the potholes in our road to the present. You cannot go back and change them. All you can do about your mistakes is repent of them and learn from them, so you don't repeat them in the future.
3. Your past is redeemed; leave it in Jesus' hands.
when Christ died on the cross He died for you — all of you and all of your past. He overlooked nothing. It is all covered by His sacrifice. Your sins have been paid for and your guilt has been taken away. Leave them there.

The more you engage your past (self-pity, shame, guilt), the more your past holds you in its grip.

Hindrance #3: Coasting

You cannot move forward if you take it out of gear.

There is no coasting in God's Kingdom, as it is an "upward" call. If you're not moving forward, you're moving backward.

The reality about "neutral" Christianity is this: It is ignoring the Holy Spirit. Spiritual neutrality is backsliding. Listen to Jesus' own words on the subject:

*Revelation 3:15 "I know all the things you do, that you are neither hot nor cold. I wish that you were one or the other!
¹⁶ But since you are like lukewarm water, neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth!"*

Lukewarmness is nauseating to Christ.

Drive Ahead

Make up your mind to move forward with Christ.

Get in step with the Holy Spirit, as Paul admonished.

Galatians 5:25 "Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit."

There are three ways to look ahead and move forward:

1. Look into your future through the character of God.
If you look at your future through your own character, with its flaws and chips and cracks, it's likely to be a miserable scene. But if you look ahead through the character of God — altogether holy, altogether worthy, altogether wise, altogether loving, altogether able — the scene will continually brighten.

Jeremiah 29:11 "I know the plans I have for you," says the Lord. "They are plans for good and not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope."

2. Look into your future through the promises of God.
The Bible is full of promises, express and implied. You cannot pick and choose the ones you want, but the Holy Spirit will choose (illuminate) and apply them as you read His Word. Those are the promises you take to heart and commit to memory and begin to use to view your future.
3. Look into your future through the power of God.
“Words are cheap.” We are in the current of a major political election right now, and the political promises are flying fast and furious. Regardless of goodwill, which of the politicians has the power to perform what they promise? None of them. But God’s promises are backed by His power.

Romans 4:21 [Abraham] was fully convinced that God is able to do whatever he promises.

We need to look forward, so we can move forward.

Colossians 3:1 Since you have been raised to new life with Christ, set your sights on the realities of heaven, where Christ sits in the place of honor at God's right hand. ² Think about the things of heaven, not the things of earth. ³ For you died to this life, and your real life is hidden with Christ in God.

Bow Low

When the going gets steep and rugged, you need to shift into your lowest gear.

When you find yourself locked in Park, careening in Reverse, or sliding away in Neutral, you’ll need extra oomph to rebuild spiritual momentum — you need Low gear. Here are three ways to get moving again:

1. Bow low in worship.
It’s not time to just sing and clap anymore — you’ve got to get out of a rut. So you have to get into your lowest gear of worship. Lift up your hands in surrender. Lift up your voice in song. Don’t just worship silently. Don’t just whisper your praise. This is the time to work hard at it in low gear.
2. Bow low in prayer.
Spend time with God. Talk with Him about your feelings, your condition, your hopelessness, and talk with Him about His purpose, His promises, and His power. Get serious about it. Bow low in prayer.
3. Bow low with fasting.
When you’re haven’t been moving forward, fasting can help break you loose from whatever is hindering you. Fasting weakens the flesh so the spirit may arise. This is your spiritual low gear.
4. Bow low with service.
We haven’t really bowed low until we’ve served someone *else* — not for pay or recognition, but just to help meet their needs. This is the lowest, strongest gear of all. Use it to break free.

In English the Olympic motto reads: “Swifter, higher, stronger.” Interestingly, the Bible also has an Olympic text:

Isaiah 40:31 They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk and not faint.