

Ephesians 2:8–10 (NRSV)

⁸For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God— ⁹ not the result of works, so that no one may boast. ¹⁰ For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.

1 Corinthians 9:24–27 (The Message)

^{24–25}You’ve all been to the stadium and seen the athletes race. Everyone runs; one wins. Run to win. All good athletes train hard. They do it for a gold medal that tarnishes and fades. You’re after one that’s gold eternally.

^{26–27}I don’t know about you, but I’m running hard for the finish line. I’m giving it everything I’ve got. No sloppy living for me! I’m staying alert and in top condition. I’m not going to get caught napping, telling everyone else all about it and then missing out myself.

If it is God who sets our hearts on fire, then what is there for us to do?

Just wait?

In her book, *Almost Christian*, Kenda Creasy Dean¹ likens much church ministry to the famous flux capacitor in the movie, *Back to the Future*. Marty McFly has found himself in 1955 and he will stay there unless 1955-Doc figures out how to use 1985-Doc’s much-modified DeLorean to get Marty back where he belongs. The problem is that it takes 1.21 “jigowatts” of power flowing into the DeLorean’s flux capacitor to make the jump back. Where are they ever going to get that much energy? And harness it in a single moment? The brilliant idea is to harness a lightning bolt. The problem is that they have to get the car to precisely the right place at precisely the right time to make it work.

And that, Dean suggests, is how we too often see our various church ministries – as flux capacitors. If we can get just the right programs to go along with powerful sermons and vibrant small groups we’ll create some “holy fire.” But, as Dean succinctly puts it:

The delusion that human effort can generate mature faith – in young people or in anybody else – is old as fiction itself. Trying to channel God, like trying to channel lightning, kept countless false prophets in business throughout the Hebrew scriptures. Today, we are more likely to view God as a source of fuel than a source of awe as we try to harness divine power for our own use. But ancient people had it right: they hid their faces at the Lord’s approach, and prayed for mercy.

The apostle Paul agrees with Dean. In the passage from Ephesians that we read a couple of weeks ago (a portion of which is reprinted above in the NRSV translation) Paul proclaims that we have been put right with God (saved) by his grace, not by anything we have done. God’s grace and grace alone. *Soli gratia!* as the protestant reformers had printed on their bumper stickers.

The hard-to-face truth is that we don’t create faith in ourselves or in anyone else. When Wesley’s heart was strangely warmed, it was God doing the warming, not the preacher. Despite many extravagant claims, no preacher has ever saved a single soul. It is God who saves, not we. We may like to be in charge and in control, but we aren’t.

¹ Dean’s book, *Almost Christian*, is a preacher’s treasure trove, chock full of great illustrations, metaphors, and phrases.

So . . . what do we actually do then? Just wait for God to do God's thing? Find a comfortable easy chair and pass the time? A couple of weeks ago, we prayed that God would ignite a fire in us. Do we just hang out until God hits the switch? Or to put it in more Bible-sounding terms, do we pray and then wait patiently on the Lord?

Dry kindling

We can't set our own hearts afire, but we are real good at dousing them with cold water. Ever been "tuned out" by your own kids? Ever felt drowned out by the noise of your teenager's life? I imagine God feels much the same way at times.

Thus, Dean hits on a very apt metaphor when she suggests that, though we can't set our own hearts on fire, we can make ourselves *highly combustible*. We can shape ourselves into dry kindling, which even a tenderfoot knows catches fire much more easily than a pile of wet, green wood.

How do we make ourselves highly combustible? Here too, the apostle Paul is helpful. Using an ever-popular sports metaphor (after all, guys are guys), Paul tells these Christians that they have chosen a life that takes training, not merely trying. And certainly not waiting around in an easy chair for God to light a match.

Why Paul?

Today's Scripture passages are from two letters by the apostle Paul. I am sometimes asked why I talk so much about Paul and his New Testament letters. A fair question.

I am drawn to Paul by the nature of his work, his understanding of the Good News, and his faithfulness to God. Paul's vocation, given him by God, was to crisscross the Mediterranean founding Christian colonies across the Roman empire. He was founding churches and helping them grow. It may have been 2,000 years ago in a world far different from our own, but still, many of the problems and opportunities Paul had to deal with are the ones we deal with. Paul was helping new Christians and more mature Christians to grow in their discipleship and to grasp the enormity of the three-word statement: Jesus is Lord. He was helping them find their way to unity in the body of Christ. He was teaching them the full meaning and depth of the Christian proclamation so that they might withstand a hostile world and false teachers of the gospel. In the deepest sense, Paul was helping people to make their way into the people of God and, once there, to make their way toward God and one another . . . toward the Good Life.

Paul's letters are the oldest writings we have about Jesus and the ushering in of the kingdom of God. Sometimes, people, particularly in television specials, will try to pit Paul against Jesus, as if Paul messed up the simple teachings of Jesus. Nothing could be further from the truth. Perhaps this metaphor will help. Imagine Jesus' life and teachings, his death and resurrection, to be a symphony composed by our Lord. You can think of Paul as that symphony's first great conductor. The music is Jesus' but Paul is the one who teaches the orchestra (yes, that is you and me) to play as one beautiful and skilled ensemble.

When trying is not enough

In his book, *Finding the Life You've Always Wanted*, John Ortberg too uses a sports metaphor. Suppose you woke up tomorrow morning and decided to run a marathon. You put on some running shoes, don the right apparel, and head out the door to begin your 26.2 mile run. Could you do it? What if you tried hard? Really, really hard? If you gave it the ole' 110%? The obvious answer is no, of course not. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't simply head out the door and run 26 miles. If I want to run a marathon, I'm going to have to train for it. Effort alone won't cut it. I once taught people to fly jet airplanes. There again, effort was essential, but it took a year of hard training to create an Air Force pilot. Nobody flies a jet by effort alone the first time they try, or the second, or the tenth. They train for it.

So it is with all the great endeavors of our lives. It takes learning and training and practice. And what could be a greater endeavor than becoming the person God has created each of us to be, a passionate servant of our Lord Jesus Christ, with the power “to work the works of the kingdom,” as Dallas Willard puts it.

When Paul wrote to the Christians in Corinth, Greece, he was training hard in the things of God. He knew that without training, we would never become highly combustible dry kindling.

Too often, Christians make the mistake of thinking that this is a “one and done” game: I believe in Jesus; now it is time to get back to real life. But nothing could be further from the truth. Embracing Jesus with our heart, mind, soul, and strength could never be about “getting our ticket punched.” The Jesus way is a life-long pursuit.

Training for the fruit

Of course, it is one thing to say that we are going to train ourselves to be more highly combustible, but it’s another to know how. In his letter to the Galatians, Paul tells the Christians that those who are led by the Spirit will bear the fruit of the Spirit: “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.” But how do you train yourself to be gentle or to be joyful? I can *try* to be patient (boy, have I tried . . . and failed), but how do I *train* myself to be patient?

John Ortberg knows that he needs to slow down if he is going to embrace the life God offers him. But he also acknowledges that he suffers from “hurry-up sickness.” I know just what he means. I make a careful and complex calculation as I arrive with my basket at the grocery store checkout. I scan the lines, estimate the speed of the checkers, note which lines have a dedicated bagger, and, after factoring in estimated tender times (carefully estimating the number of check writers), I select my line and then, too often, end up enormously frustrated because my “competition” (the person standing in my place in the line I didn’t choose) gets out faster than I do. Patti and I have been known to stand in two ticket lines at the movies. Whoever gets to the window first buys the tickets! Yes, it is a sickness. After all, what do I really do with those five minutes I might save? Surely less than I imagine.

How do I possibly learn patience? How do I learn to slow down and catch my breath? Ortberg has tried picking the longest line on purpose, hoping he’d learn to like it. I haven’t yet worked up the strength of will to emulate his training method. But I do know that if I don’t actually train myself to be more patient, I won’t ever get there. Yes, God helps me in this, but I must still learn to be patient.

How about prayer? Christians with deep and meaningful prayer lives didn’t arrive there by accident. They learned to pray. They trained to pray. They were disciplined, praying even when they didn’t feel like it or thought they had nothing to say. The same with Bible reading and study. Those who completed the *Thru the Bible* reading program a few years ago did so because they were disciplined and determined, reading even if they didn’t feel like it, learning a method that would get them to their goal. Have you ever taken a Bible study with other Christians or are you still just trying on your own to discover the life-changing power of Scripture?

The same with St. Andrew’s four values, the topics of our next sermon series. We can train ourselves to be givers of abundant grace, to offer radical hospitality, to give everyone the unexpected extra, and even to demonstrate the can-do confidence that comes from knowing God’s purposes *will* be accomplished.

No time for an easy chair

This is no time for resting comfortably in an easy chair. American Christianity has been too comfortable for too long. It is time to move, to ignite new fires in God's church.

Yes, it is God who sets our hearts on fire. Yes, our salvation is a gift. But there is also work for us in God's rescue. Making ourselves highly combustible, ready to ignite with God's spark, is our part in this.

The question is this: "Will we?" Will we just tiptoe into these waters or are we ready to go all-in?

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

Rev. Arthur Jones has written the curricula for the *Christianish* Connection Group series. The video is available on-line at www.standrewumc.org. You might view it before considering the following questions:

1. We are continuing our conversation about the word "Christianish." If you are on a plane and you find out that the person next to you is active in their church, what would you actually expect of them. (In other words, don't describe what they should do, but what they actually do.)
2. One of the assumptions that seems to guide many people's lives is this: "We built our lives expecting that the highest calling that we could achieve would be so that everyone would like us and we would be polite and nice."
 - a. Is this statement true? This statement doesn't say that there is anything inherently wrong with people liking us or with politeness or with being a nice person, but do we operate on a regular basis caring more about what others think than what is good or right?
 - b. Keeping in mind that when we talk about the *Christianish* we are always talking about ourselves, in what ways might we be settling for being liked or being nice rather than being good?

(Disclaimer: We are not saying that niceness is in any way bad, but that there might be something more to which we are called. There might be moments in our lives where God calls us to something more than what the world expects of us)
3. Consider the gift that Christ gave the church, his body and his blood in bread and wine...
 - a. Read Philippians 2:5-11. Paul instructs us that we are to have "the same mind ... that was in Christ Jesus." Jesus was willing to "humble himself and become obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross." How are we called to pick up our own cross and imitate Jesus?
 - b. The church is God's means of offering himself to the world. We see that through communion – God offering himself to us. How might we reach outside the walls of the church to offer God to those who are desperate for Him.

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Monday, Romans 8:12-30 Our inheritance as children of God is guaranteed.</p>	<p>Tuesday, Colossians 2:6-19 The fullness of our life in Christ</p>
<p>Wednesday, Romans 12:3-13 Unity, love, and community living</p>	<p>Thursday, Ephesians 2:1-10 Our conversion from death to new life</p>
<p>Friday, Ephesians 4:1-16 Here, you'll see that, as usual, Paul wants us to understand that we are called to build up the body of Christ. Put that abundance to work! Also, don't get off track with Paul's mysterious aside in verses 9 & 10.</p>	<p>Weekly Joys and Concerns</p>

