

We're in this teaching series around the idea of spiritual formation. Here is a definition of spiritual formation that we've used throughout the series: Spiritual formation is the process of intentionally opening our lives up to the work of the spirit to become more like Christ. At the core of spiritual formation, is the work of the Holy Spirit in us. We talked a few weeks ago about worldview. Last week, Kevin talked about practices, and next week Mark will talk about life experiences. In this message, we will talk about life with others, and the impact people have on our lives.

You can see the impact of people in your own life. Look back through your history, and you can identify the impact people have had on your formation and growth. The people you have spent time with have shaped who you are.

First, people have shaped our behaviors. During my junior year of college, I spent a summer in a leadership training program, living in a beach house with 12 other college-aged guys. We acted in ways that 20-year-old guys would act. One habit I remember is, after we moved in, we found a green towel, and no one knew where it came from. So, it became the towel we used for everything. It became what we called the all-purpose towel. If there was a spill in the kitchen, we would use that green towel. If you came home from the beach and needed to wipe your feet, use the green towel. As you can imagine, it became gross after a while, but when you're 20-year-old guys in a beach house for a summer, that's kind of what you do. If I told my wife that we're going to get rid of all of our towels except for one, that would not work. People around you shape your habits and your behaviors.

Second, we model our lifestyle around the people we spend our time with. You have speech patterns, practices, and even belief systems based around the people with whom you have spent time. The people with whom you spend your time shape who you become. One of my favorite verses in the Bible is Proverbs 13:20:

**"Whoever walks with the wise will become wise,
but the companion of fools will suffer harm."**

In other words, who we spend our time with shapes who we become. Do you want to get better in some particular area in your life? Spend time around people who excel in that arena.

There's also a third aspect to this idea of life with others. Somehow as a society, our relationships are part of our way

forward as a society. There was a speech that FDR gave or was about to give at the end of World War II in 1945. He wrote,

"Today we are faced with the preeminent fact that if civilization is to survive, we must cultivate the science of human relationships."

Can you imagine that on the back end of World War II, when the globe had changed, and they were trying to figure out how to move forward, FDR said that somehow, our connectedness with one another would shape our way forward?

This is what we're going to talk about. It's a really simple idea, but there's a challenge for us. The idea I want you to grasp is the people present among you influence your formation. We're going to look at a story about Paul and one of the people with whom he spent time, Epaphroditus. Out of this, my hope for you is that you would intentionally pursue relationships that will form you into the type of person you want to be. If you do that, if you pursue life with others, you will see better the work of God and his formative work in you.

We're going to be in Philippians 2:25-30. I want to give a bit of context to this letter of Paul's. In AD 51, Paul went to the city of Philippi and started a church, a community of Jesus followers. Philippi was located on a key road connecting Rome and the East. It was a strategic city.

Ten years later, around AD 61, Paul is in prison (probably in Rome). The church hears that Paul is in prison and send gifts to him. (To be in prison in that day meant that you relied on others to provide basic needs.) They sent a gift to Paul through Epaphroditus.

But along the way, this trip puts Epaphroditus at risk. He has to associate with a known criminal in Rome, but also, he becomes gravely ill. He almost dies by going on this trip. He recovers, and now Paul is sending Epaphroditus back to Philippi, probably carrying this letter with him. And we see in this letter what Paul has to say about Epaphroditus and the influence that Epaphroditus has had on Paul's life.

But I think it is necessary to send back to you Epaphroditus, my brother, co-worker and fellow soldier, who is also your messenger, whom you sent to take care of my needs. For he longs for all of you and is distressed because you heard he was ill. Indeed he was ill and almost died. But God had mercy on him, and not on him only but also on me, to spare me sorrow upon sorrow. vv. 25-27

We see from the beginning that Epaphroditus is a gift to Paul. Epaphroditus matters to Paul. You can see it in the descriptors that Paul uses about Epaphroditus. He calls him a brother, someone of a close bond. He says Epaphroditus is also a co-worker with him. This word in Greek is the word from which we get the English word, synergy.

So he's not just saying that they share the same job. Instead, he says that when they're together, great things happen. We can accomplish more together than when we're separate. Maybe you have people like that in your life. Perhaps you have people like that in your office that when you work together, innovation and productivity increase exponentially. Paul says he's also a fellow soldier with me. The idea in Greek is that he is someone with whom a struggle is shared.

Or to put it another way, we've been through the fire together. Maybe you can think back on your life and the people in your life who mattered deeply to you because you walked together through a difficult time. Psychologists talk about this. They say that if you go through a challenging time together with someone, you have a closer bond with them. That was something I found living in a new culture. We share a unique bond to this day with people who were present with us for just a few months. Why? Because together we went through the challenging experience of creating life in a space where everything we understood about ourselves and our identity was stripped away.

This is someone who profoundly matters to Paul. You can even see this in how he talks about Epaphroditus' healing. He says that the healing of Epaphroditus was mercy for Epaphroditus. He didn't die. But Paul says it was also mercy to him. There was also mercy that Paul didn't have to deal with the loss of someone he cared deeply for. Epaphroditus mattered to Paul, and his presence carried a divine presence.

He is a "messenger" to Paul. The word in the original language is the word from which we get, "apostle." In fact, one commentator wrote that when Paul assigned that label to Epaphroditus, Paul identified him with the disciples of Jesus and people like Paul. He's putting him in that group of people. Whether or not that's the correct idea, the essence is clear: Paul sees Epaphroditus as a divine gift in his life. This is someone who has shaped him.

It's easy to read about Paul or biographies of people in history and think of them as solitary giants, who appeared all of a sudden. That's not accurate. Paul was Paul because of people like Epaphroditus in his life. Paul became Paul because of the people with whom he spent his time.

You are who you are because of the people who have been in your life. You can go back to your story and think about people in your life, whether a teacher, parent, or friend or just someone that you are able to spend time with. You can think back and see that you are different because of that person's influence in your life.

Their presence wasn't a neutral event. God, through the power of His Holy Spirit, has used people throughout your narrative to get you here.

You are who you are because of the people who have been in your life. Have you ever thought about that? Have you ever looked back on the history of your life, open to the idea that the people who have been in your life have been divine gifts from God for you?

It's so easy to think, "God, where are you working? Why don't I see you? Why don't you deal with this?" Maybe sometimes we just need to turn around and look because God is there and God is doing something. Perhaps only in a place and through a person you weren't expecting. You are who you are because of the people God has put in your life and the people that God will put in your life. They carry a divine purpose for your formation.

So, Epaphroditus is a gift to Paul. He sees his presence with him as carrying divine purpose. But not only Epaphroditus. The Philippians also matter to Paul. That's what we see in the next set of verses.

Therefore I am all the more eager to send him, so that when you see him again you may be glad and I may have less anxiety. So then, welcome him in the Lord with great joy, and honor people like him, because he almost died for the work of Christ. He risked his life to make up for the help you yourselves could not give me. vv. 28-30

Paul's joy is to send Epaphroditus back to the Philippians. Imagine that. Paul is in prison. Sending Epaphroditus back makes his life more difficult, not less. But Paul's joy at that moment is that other people would experience the gift of Epaphroditus. Paul sees the value of Epaphroditus not only in his life but also in the life of other people. Paul's joy is that they would have less anxiety because of the absence of Epaphroditus in their community. Paul's joy is to help their life together.

Then Paul gives us kind of like a summary of what Epaphroditus has done. He risked his life to make up for the help that the Philippians could not give to him. He says that Epaphroditus risked his life. This was a gambler's term, banking everything on the roll of the dice. He says that Epaphroditus risked everything to come to Paul "to complete what was lacking in their service to Paul."

What was lacking in their gift to Paul? Nothing was lacking in their gift. This was something they wanted to do, something they were eager to do. Nothing was lacking in the gift to Paul. What was lacking is that the Philippians couldn't physically be there with Paul. What was lacking for Paul was that they couldn't stand face-to-face. They couldn't embrace. They couldn't shake hands. They couldn't cry, laugh, pray, and experience life together. They couldn't do all those things, so Epaphroditus is that

representation. He bridges the gap of the absence between the Philippians and Paul.

Could it be that at times that God has put you in people's lives to bridge the gap of the absence that they feel? Maybe God has put people in your life at places and times that you deeply needed to bridge that gap. That has happened to me in various seasons. When the gap of life with others has been too wide, someone stepped in.

Life with others is a divine gift of reducing that gap of the absence of relationship. Who does that for you? Who are the people that you seek out to bridge that gap? We're not meant to go alone. We're not intended to be solitary figures in the world. We don't show up one day, perfectly formed. Part of our formation is our life and relationships with people around us. Your formation is influenced by the people with whom you spend your time.

What I want for you to do is consider who you could seek out? I wonder if more often than not we keep ourselves in the sidelines and miss out on something that God wants to do in our life because we don't take the step to say to someone, "Do you want to grab coffee tomorrow? No agenda. I want to hear what's going on in your life." Or, "I have this project at work, and, from what I understand, you worked through a similar project. Can I take you out to lunch?"

Here's something I have found in my life: no one ever refuses a free lunch. No one ever refuses a free coffee. And you have no idea how much that hour may form and shape you in ways you would never imagine.

Back to that story of my summer leadership program. We had speakers fly in twice a week to lead our training. I didn't know them, and they didn't know me. But I found a way to reach out to them and asked, "Can I take you out to lunch tomorrow?" At lunch, I had no plans other than to ask about their life, marriage, family, and ministry. I learned and was formed in profound ways by just asking about their journey. And all it cost me was lunch. I got the better end of the deal.

You have no idea the people that God has around you that can help shape you. It doesn't mean you need to commit to meeting every day for the next five years. Instead, consider the challenge, who do you need to seek out in your life?

There is a book called *Vital Friends*. It has a straightforward thesis: we need different types of people to form us. Gallup researchers discovered 11 different types of people, such as:

"Builders" who invest in your development

"Collaborators" who have similar interests as you

"Mind Openers" who challenge your way of thinking

Whether those labels resonate with you or not, you get the idea that different people form you in different ways. In my life, I

have certain "navigators" to whom I go for that input. If I need a boost, I know who to go to. Not that I've worked this out perfectly, but it helps to see that God has put people around you and me as gifts for our formation.

Maybe there's someone that you need to ask out to coffee this week. You may not know where the conversation will go beforehand, but if you stay open and listen, God will speak to you in ways that you didn't expect. Or maybe you need to join a group.

We've been talking about community groups for the past few weeks. We have groups with people in certain stages of life. Maybe part of your action today is taking a chance and joining a group. Or perhaps seeking out your Epaphroditus starts with thanking someone who has been formative to your life. That may spur on the next relationship.

There are people that God has put around you, and He has put them in your orbit to form you as you remain open to the Holy Spirit. If you do that, if you're willing to take that challenge, if you're willing to seek out in the Epaphroditus in your life, I think you will better see the work of God in your life.

The amazing thing about this "life with others" focus is that it's not my idea. It's not Paul's idea. The concept of life with others is a God idea. This is at the core of God's story. God Himself comes and dwells among people. This is what we see in the gospel of John. *"The word became flesh and made his dwelling among us."*

In other words, when God wanted to change the world, He went toward it not away from it. Change started with God going toward people. This is our story with God. We were far from God, we were separated from God, but God moved toward us in the person of Jesus. Jesus dealt with sin - the very thing that separated us from the Father. And He dealt with sin by moving towards us, dying on a cross.

There are some interesting parallels between the story of Epaphroditus and Jesus. Epaphroditus took a risk and almost died trying to reach Paul. Jesus did die to reach us. Epaphroditus' healing was mercy for Paul because he didn't die. Because Jesus did die, mercy is ours. Epaphroditus bridged the gap of the absence of Paul and the Philippians. What God has done through Jesus for us, bridged the gap between Him and us.

That's what Jesus did for us. He bridged the gap of our absence with God. And we now have an open invitation to a loving relationship with our heavenly Father.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC South. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

© 2019 Central Peninsula Church South, Redwood City, CA
Catalog No. 1438-3SC

This message from Scripture was preached on Sunday, October 6, 2019 at Central Peninsula Church South.

www.cpc.org