

What Spiritual Transformation Looks Like

When Paul wrote the church in Ephesus, he gave them a simple game plan for how to live their new life. He said: "...you have heard about him [Jesus] and were taught in him, as the truth is in Jesus, to **put off** your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, and to **be renewed** in the spirit of your minds, and to **put on** the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness" (Ephesians 4:21-24 ESV).

This is perfect for preachers—a three-point outline and a catchy title: *Three Simple Steps to Spiritual Maturity*.

- 1) We have an old life which has been corrupted by sin's deceptive desires. That old life with all the ways it manifests itself must be set aside.
- 2) We engage a renewal process that goes on in our minds and hearts, an internal transformation of our thoughts, points of view, convictions, values and deeply held beliefs.
- 3) We have a whole new life to adopt with godly behaviors consistent with our new identity as followers of Jesus.

In the verses that follow, Paul illustrates that pattern with a fistful of old behaviors to get rid of: lying, anger, stealing, abusive speech, arguing and meanness. With them he gives renewing truth that challenges the old ways of thinking that result in these bad choices. Then he exhorts us to new behaviors reflecting the transformed character of God's people.

The process is simple: Stop doing the wrong things you used to do before you became a believer; be intentional about re-forming your interior self; and start acting like Jesus would from the inside out.

It's simple. It's not easy.

We refer to this in Ephesians because when we come to our study in the letter Paul wrote the Colossians, we discover exactly the same process: we have old behaviors to leave behind, new ways of understanding how life works, and new behaviors to adopt. The pattern is remarkably consistent.

Paul begins chapter 3 of Colossians by calling believers to a radical reorientation—to redirect our *ambitions* and *attentions* away from earthly things and onto those spiritual realities found at God’s right hand in Christ. Our lives now are safely wrapped up with Christ in God so it only makes sense to learn how to live our lives out of the full awareness this new reality with a God-ward focus.

In order to do that, we have to cut loose the tethers that keep us earthbound. So we put to death immorality along with all the sinful passions that energize it. We put away old patterns of getting our way using anger and nasty words to intimidate and demean others.

Which brings us to Paul’s thought in v. 9: “Do not lie to one another [stop lying to one another], seeing that you have *put off* the old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator. Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all” (Colossians 3:9-11 ESV).

Do you see the pattern? We have old junk—an old self—to get rid of, a new identity—a new self—to adopt, and a renewal process to embrace modeled after the image of our Creator, Jesus Christ.

But what is this thing called “the old self” we’re supposed to throw off, and how is it different from “the new self” with which we’re supposed to clothe ourselves?

The word translated “self” is a word that in other contexts is usually translated “man” or “mankind.” We have an *old man* to put off and a *new man* to put on. But what is this old and new man?

Many think of it as our old *nature* and new nature. Both struggle side by side within believers. By this way of understanding the words, “our old nature” is sometimes called “our sin nature,” because it is thoroughly tainted by sin. It is that part of us that even yet drags us off with its passions and evil desires.

Those who understand the text this way believe our new nature, by contrast, is what we receive when we become Christians. It describes a new thing in us because of our life in Christ. That’s what I was taught in Bible College.

There is much in this way of understanding the text that makes sense. We do indeed recognize in ourselves vestigial remnants of our old sinful self—what we were before we came to Christ. And we have truly become new: forgiven, inhabited by God’s Spirit. God initiates a process designed to renovate our hearts so that we are increasingly characterized by what is new.

But the terms old and new self, or old and new man seem to point us in another direction. I believe they refer to our old identity **in Adam** and our new identity **in Christ**.

The New Testament talks about these **corporate identities** in several other passages. The entire human race—everyone who has ever been born—in seen solidarity with Adam, the old man. We are co-participants in his sin, his guilt, and his distorted humanity. In Adam we have a nature that is sinful.

As believers we now stand in solidarity with Jesus, the new Man from heaven, in his righteousness and resurrection. We are “in Christ.”

For instance: In Romans, Paul describes how “...sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because **all sinned**...” (Romans 5:12 ESV). The entire human race sinned when Adam sinned. We all share now in the corruption of fallen humanity, in sinfulness. We all sin.

In Corinthians Paul explains further: “For as *in Adam* all die, so also *in Christ* shall all be made alive” (1 Corinthians 15:22 ESV).

All of humanity is divided into one of these two identities: we are either *in Adam* or *in Christ*. We are born into Adam, the old man. We are born again into Christ, the new man. The old man is the body of sin. The new man is the Body of Christ.

In his commentary on Colossians, Douglas Moo writes: “This ‘new self,’ we must recall, is not a ‘new nature,’ or even a ‘new person’; it is a ‘new humanity’” (Douglas Moo, *Pillar New Testament Commentary*).

This understanding helps explain why Paul said what he did in v. 11: “Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all.”

If the old self is our old nature and our new self is our new nature,

then verse 11 seems to come out of nowhere.

But if the new self—the new man—is a corporate, new humanity in Christ, then verse 11 makes perfect sense. **In this one new humanity, old ethnic distinctions, religious distinctions, cultural distinctions and class distinctions are meaningless.** In the new humanity, Christ is everything—we are all in him and he is in every one of us.

So let's look at verses 9-10 again with this understanding: “Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old [man] with its practices and have put on the new [man], which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator.”

In Christ we have stripped off the old self, our old identity, everything that marked us as part of “Adam’s helpless race,” all we were in solidarity with all people *in Adam*, the old man. In Christ we have put on the new man, identifying with and participating in the life of Christ himself.

Putting off the old self in actual practice means laying aside the old behaviors that characterized our sinful natures when we were dead in our trespasses and sins. So, for instance:

- We put to death immorality and immoral passions because that’s not who we are anymore. In Christ we are saints—holy ones.
- We put away anger and angry ways of speaking because we aren’t who we used to be. We’ve been rescued out of that whole system, that whole way of not getting along in the world with a holy calling to love others like Jesus loved us.
- We strip off lying as a means of self-protection, manipulation, and getting our own way. Since truth is in Jesus and we are in Jesus we choose truth and integrity. It’s who we are.

There are old habits to get rid of and new ones to cultivate. We put the old ones to death; we toss them in the trash; we strip off who we were like old, dirty, smelly clothes. And then we dress ourselves in the character of Jesus.

Last week I told a story about salvaging used lumber when we tore

down the old church building in Sparta, MI. At the end of the day we were covered in layers of attic soot and dirt, and sawdust from the power saws that cut through the timbers we salvaged.

We talked about having to hose off in Aunt Maxine's back yard before she would let us into the house for dinner. And we had to change into clean clothes.

What I didn't say is that some of our work clothes were so filthy they weren't worth washing. We stripped them off and threw them right in the trash.

That's the picture Paul paints when he instructs us to stop lying. Lying, along with anger and immorality and a host of other evils, belonged to our old identity in Adam. In Christ we have stripped that off. Now get rid of all of it, Paul says.

You see, when we came to Christ, we came soiled with layers of moral dirt. We got a thorough washing—God made our souls clean, fresh, new. And he clothed us in the righteousness and holiness of Jesus.

Paul is urging us simply to work out in our conduct what God has worked in us. We have stripped off the old life—all we were in Adam. So we must put it to death and put away all the old, worthless behaviors and habits. We have put on a new identity, so we must clothe ourselves with the new man, adopting Jesus' ways of relating to God and others.

So Paul will urge us in v. 12: “Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience...” (Colossians 3:12). That will be his burden in the rest of the chapter: what it looks like to put on the new self in our new relationships in the church; in the home; and in the surrounding world in which we live, and work, and play.

We have been focusing on two of the three points: stripping off bad things and putting on good things. If we stopped here it might sound like Paul is saying: “Stop it! Just, stop it! Stop sinning and do what's right.”

If that's all he had said, he would have sounded very much like a legalist, the false teachers who were giving them so much grief.

We do have to make very real choices for which we are

accountable. We do have to choose to not sin and to obey Christ. But notice that little phrase in verse ten about the new self: It “...is being *renewed in knowledge* after the image of its creator.”

Commentator Peter O’Brien writes that this new man is “...a corporate recreation of humanity in the creator’s image” (Peter O’Brien, *Word Biblical Commentary*).

In Christ, God is restoring us to his original design for people, what he envisioned when he created us in the first place. God made us in his image and intended that we glorify him on the earth.

The missing piece in spiritual transformation is this renewing process, the renovation of the mind and heart. Rules don’t renovate. We do have to say “no” to old sinful impulses and temptations. We do have to say “yes” to obedience. But all along the way God is working in us to teach us how imitate him—to be *imago dei*, image of God.

This renewal is a major theme in the New Testament:

- “...be renewed in the spirit of your minds...” (Ephesians 4:23 ESV).
- “And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be *conformed to the image of his Son...*” (Romans 8:28-29 ESV).
- “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind...” (Romans 12:2 ESV).
- “...he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ” (Philippians 1:6 ESV).

Just saying “no” to temptation by itself doesn’t work. Neither does just trying to be good all by itself. But when the Holy Spirit engraves upon our hearts the truths we are learning from Scripture, and we’re getting to know the Father better as we hear his voice and talk to him in prayer, we begin to *want* to change from the inside out. Suddenly things above mean more to us than ever before.

And the more we know, the more we want to know. The more we get, the more we get it. We still feel the old tugs but they gradually lose their power as we see new desires springing up in our renewed hearts.

Being renewed in the image of our creator is a lifelong process—a

long obedience in the same direction. It's an individual process worked out in an essential, corporate environment—the church.

It is the new man, the new humanity, that is being renewed—all of us together as well as individually in the Body of Christ. We need each other. We need to speak truth in love to each other. God is creating a new humanity; Jesus is the template, and we're a part of all that.

Let's consider one way that works itself out.

All of us grow up afflicted with misdirected fears and disordered loves. What do we mean by that?

When you are in pain, what is your number one goal? To get out of pain!

In this fallen world we quickly learn ways to protect ourselves from pain. Some pain comes from the tragic brokenness of this creation: skinned knees, broken bones, accidents, sickness, natural disasters, death, loss, etc. We especially learn how to protect ourselves from the pain caused by the evil others inflict on us: they betray our trust, treat us with contempt, shame us, abandon us, and hurt us—even the ones who are closest to us who should love, protect and nurture us.

So we put up self-chosen, self-made walls of protection that keep us safe, but also keep others out. We aren't experiencing pain, but neither are we free to love others.

What does that look like? One man shared with me that when his dad disciplined him, it was accompanied by long, often shaming, demeaning lectures. He dared not argue back or run away to escape. Instead he shut down inside. He endured the lectures silently and sullenly until the scolding stopped and he could quietly slip away.

This gradually became a strategy for him whenever he was in an awkward, uncomfortable conversation. He would shut down until he could finally escape. That protected him from the emotional pain, but it got in the way of developing deep, personal connections with others, even his own wife. His walls of self-protection became a sinful coping strategy that damaged relationships.

God created us to fear him and to love him. Godly fear creates a

healthy reverence for God which is life-giving. It also orientates our hearts to responds to God's love in ways that produce peace and joy.

By focusing our anxious fears on things or people who threaten us, we not only fear wrong things, we put our damaged self first and pursue whatever we are convinced will keep us safe and make us happy.

As a result, the fear and love God intends us to properly focus on him become distorted and disordered.

When we are born again by faith through grace in what Jesus did for us on the cross, we begin to taste the love we were always meant to enjoy. And we find a heavenly Father whom we can trust with all our anxieties.

It takes a lifetime to identify and face our deep-seated doubts and fears, and to re-orient our loves in ways that acknowledge God's trustworthiness, steadfast love and faithfulness.

So the anxious person who shuts down emotionally, discovers a holy God who doesn't reject, abandon or hurt him but accepts him fully in Christ. So he begins to stay present in tough conversations, kindly listening and responding instead of enduring coldly until he can escape.

The anxious person who lies to hide her true identity for fear of rejection, discovers a Savior who already knows her inside and out and still loves her to death—literally. As she entrusts herself to Jesus she begins to risk telling the truth with others, gradually dismantling her self-protective walls and finding openings to reach out and love others like she has been loved.

The person who has always measured his personal worth by how much he makes and what he owns, discovers in Jesus an identity and value that has nothing to do with is bottom line. He finds in the love, acceptance and forgiveness of Jesus a freedom to release his grip on the assets that have always propped up his identity and learns the joy of other-centered generosity.

That's the kind of renovation God works in the hearts and minds of

his children. That's the transformation process to which God commits himself when we are born again into his family. He wants us to grow into the family likeness, renewed from the inside out in the image of our Creator.

So when it comes to temptation and sin, set your heart and your will to say no. Get rid of the old junk. Don't drift back into old ways of managing life like the person you were before coming to Jesus. Put on the new man—wear Christ! Not as a brand on your sweatshirt, but as the external manifestation of the person you are becoming. And fuel the whole process by letting God's Word and God's Spirit transform you from the inside out.

That's how believers grow and mature. We act differently because we are becoming different on the inside as well as the outside. Without the inner work of transformation, trying to be better person is grim, ugly business. Merely packing more Bible data into your brain without making much effort to change your behavior will only breed arrogance. Knowledge, the Bible says, puffs up. Love edifies. We need all three steps.

So which of the three needs your attention this week?

Maybe there's an old habit you need to address, a comfortable disobedience you tolerate. Is it time to say: "That's part of who I used to be; it belongs to the old self. It's time to take it off."

Maybe there's a grace you sense you need to work into your life. Next week Paul will challenge us with a fistful of things he encourages us to clothe ourselves in.

It's simple. It's not easy.

Continuing to live in the kinds of wicked behaviors you used to live in is hard. The consequences damage your relationships, your reputation, your self-esteem, and your capacity to function optimally in this world.

Turning away from your old life, and choosing attitudes and conduct that are like Jesus is hard. So is choosing to investing time and attention reading our Bibles and on our knees in our heavenly Father's presence—choosing those necessary disciplines to cooperate with God's Spirit to imprint our hearts with God's Word. It's hard.

Choose your hard.

Benediction:

“The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; the LORD lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace” (Numbers 6:24-26).