

Morphing Into Christlikeness: Forming the Habits of Transformation

Theme: Morphing into Christlikeness is founded on a commitment to a lifelong process of training and discipline.

Text: Ephesians 4:17-24; Romans 12:1, 2; II Corinthians 3:18

Introduction:

Ever had one of the “dah” moments, when the obvious hits you right between the eyes? I had one of those embarrassing moments when I was pasturing a church in Northern CA. I had been working with the elders to craft a mission statement for the church which it is all the rage to do. We spent the better part of two years trying to arrive at a well crafted statement around which we could all gather. With all the various drafts we had deforested much of No. CA. Then hit me after all that work, Jesus had done the work for us when he wrote the mission statement for every church, “Go and make disciples [of me] of all nations.” (Matt. 28:19) The singular, exclusive, targeted mission of every church is to “make disciples, students, apprentices of Jesus.” This is what we are consumed by at the church I serve in the Chicago area.

Writing a personal mission statement is a popular thing today. Ever since Stephen Covey published his book The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People creating a personal mission statement to maximize one’s life focus has received wide use. He frames a personal mission statement by saying that we need to start with “the end in mind.” Covey writes, “Begin today with the image, or picture of the end of your life as your frame of reference. Each part of your life – today’s behavior, tomorrow’s behavior, next week’s behavior—can be examined in the context of the whole, of what really matters most to you.”

Apparently this truth was not just discovered just by Covey, because we find that the apostle Paul wrote his own personal mission statement. He started with the end in mind. Paul’s mission statement is a personalized version of Jesus’ clarion call to make disciples. In his own language he said that the driving force of his life, what made his juices flow, the reason why he greeted each day was to bring God’s people to maturity, to full adulthood in Christ. “Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone in all wisdom, that we might present everyone mature in Christ. For this I toil with all the energy, He mightily inspires within me.” (Col. 1:28, 29)

He saw maturity as becoming adult in the Christian faith. *Spiritual parenting* was Paul’s dominant metaphor for achieving the end of the Christian life. The goal of parents is to raise children who become caring, productive and

independent adults, who don't come back home to live. Paul strived with all his energy to encourage "grown up", mature Christians.

What got to Paul was watching people who for many years had been Christians yet had remained children or infants in the faith. Paul chided the Corinthians "as infants in Christ", who were still drinking milk when they should by now be eating solid food. (1 Cor. 3:1, 2) Some have arrested growth. Here you are 15 years old and still in drinking from a bottle. Not a pretty picture. Move onto to adulthood in faith, Paul is saying.

But how? What is missing? Transformation into Christlikeness.

Read Ephesians 4:17-24; Romans 12:2

The Scripture says essentially that each one of us is a reclamation project. God is in the salvage business. We are in need of a makeover. During my growing up years I watched a dramatic transformation take place. Scholl Canyon in Southern California was a gorge where the trash trucks unloaded their rotting garbage and human discards. Yet in my twenties I had the opportunity to play golf on this same site. It had been *transformed* from a stinking landfill into beautifully manicured, green playground overlooking the San Fernando Valley in Southern California. Once the ravine was filled to capacity it was *changed* from a refuse depository into a new creation or should I say a place of re-creation.

Paul uses a couple of images that describe the makeover or transformation that is to be a continuous lifestyle of apprentices of Christ. Makeover is an appropriate term because Paul speaks of undressing and redressing. First, we are to put off the old tattered, soiled garments that represent our former life apart from Christ. In Ephesians 4:22 Paul says, "You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self." Undress. In its place we are put on a brand new set of garments consistent with our new life in Christ. Paul writes, "put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness."

Paul changes the images somewhat, but not the intent in Romans 12:2, when he writes, "Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind." "Put off" is parallel to "not conform to the patterns of this world." "Put on" is parallel to "be transformed in the renewal of our minds." There are two words for *form* in Greek. The first one is the root of "conform", which is *schema*, from which we get the word *scheme*. This refers to the external, changeable form. *Schema* has to do with outwardly blending in, like a chameleon adapting its skin to the flora and fauna. Instead of conforming outwardly we are to be transformed from within. The root of transformed is *morphe*, from which we get the popular image of *morph*. This

has to do with the “inward and real transformation of the essential nature of a person.” Ironically, this word has slipped into our popular vocabulary in association with computer generated images. On the screen we can watch the transformation of a man’s face into that of a woman’s gradually, one morphs into the other. Within the last decade the Mighty Morphin Power Rangers were all the rage. Normal teenagers could access power that turned them into martial arts heroes. When their special powers needed to be called upon they would say, “It’s morphing time.”

Literally the term here is *metamorphosis*. This has to do with becoming a new you, not just on the outside, but a new, unchangeable inner character. Whereas *schema* is adapting to the external and fleeting fashion of this world, *metamorphosis* describes the process of a caterpillar becoming a butterfly. The caterpillar spins the cocoon and within the chrysalis becomes a new creature.

A few moments ago I did not tell you the whole story about the transformation of Scholl Canyon from a landfill to a golf course. I only played golf once on that “transformed” course. For emanating from below the thin layer of topsoil was a nauseating stench. All I could think of when standing on the putting greens was that just below my feet was a bubbling chemical caldron. The landfill had been *schematized*, but it had not *morphed*. A superficial change occurred, but there was no permanent transformation from within. A true transformation would have meant a removal of the rubbish to be replaced by “clean” soil. This is why Paul constantly connects transformation with the images of “putting off” the old nature and “putting on” the new nature (Ephesians 4:17-32).

What does this mean practically? What does this process of transformation look like for an apprentice of Jesus?

Let me share with you one of the most helpful distinctions and insights that I have come across in recent years. I get this from John Ortberg’s book The Life You Have Always Wanted. He says that most of us have been *trying* to live the Christian life, instead of *training* to live the Christian life. There is an enormous difference between *trying and training*.

What is the difference? A “trying” mentality is what you do when you dabble, when take “a shot” at something new. When presented with a fresh challenge, we might say, “I am going to give it a try.” A trying mentality is often evidenced by our response to a sermon. The preacher exhorts us to be more patient, so the next week we resolve to control our temper around an irritating three year old, or to be more tolerant of a work associate whose personality sends up a wall. Trying gets us to Tuesday.

There are many areas of life where a trying mentality will just not cut it. No one wakes up on a Saturday morning, opens the newspaper, notices that there is a marathon being run that day, and then says, "Hey, I am not doing anything today, I think I will give it a try." It is obvious that months of careful preparation are needed to propel oneself over a 26 mile course, no matter what your pace may be. You don't simply try to run a marathon, or play the piano or become a lawyer. All those New Year's resolutions and failed diets? Why?

Because we have had a trying vs. a training approach. I would submit that the Christian life needs to be approached in the same way that an athlete trains to compete. Practice, discipline, repetition, routine. Michael Jordan in his prime routinely pulled games out in the end. Why? Because he tried at the end of a game? No because, even though he is a most gifted athlete, he spent hours out of the sight of the public practicing his jump shot and free throws. He worked harder than anyone else. The apostle Paul turns to images of an athlete when it comes to describe the training that a disciple needs to exercise. "Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever." (I Cor. 9:24, 25) There is good evidence that Paul was writing against the backdrop of the Isthmian Games, second only to those held in Athens. Any competitor entering the games was required to undergo ten months of training or they would be disqualified from participating. Note the "how much more" argument here. In human athletic competition a person gets accolades in the moment, but it is fading and fleeting. But you are after a crown that will last forever, therefore how much more should we be training to morph into resemblance we follow or whom we are an apprentice.

Images of a disciplined life dominate the New Testament. Paul compares our life to a *builder* who must decide the kind of quality of materials that will be used to build on the foundation of Jesus Christ. Will it be wood, hay or straw that will not make it through the fire of judgment, or will we build with precious metals? (I Corinthians 3:10-15) In Paul's last letter to his son in the faith Timothy just prior to his death, he exhorts him to accept the baton of the gospel that he is passing on to him in the face of opposition. He urges Timothy to be strong in the grace of our Lord. Then Paul piles up accessible images of strength that should shape Timothy's attitude toward the faith: (1) Assume the posture of obedience of a *soldier* under the authority of commanding officer; (2) Take on the discipline of an *athlete* who gets the crown by competing according to the rules; (3) Arise early and go to bed late like a *hardworking farmer* who then will receive the fruit of his labor (II Timothy 2:3-6).

“Spiritual transformation is not a matter of trying harder, but training wisely...”, writes Ortberg. “The need for preparation or training, does not stop when it comes to learning the art of forgiveness, or joy or courage. In other words, it applies to healthy and vibrant spiritual life just as it does to physical and intellectual activity. Learning to think, feel, and act like Jesus is at least as demanding as learning to run a marathon or play the piano.”

Let’s get practical about *morphing*. Listen as I emphasize a certain word or phrase, and note what they have in common. (v. 17) “you must no longer *live as the Gentiles do*”, (v. 20) “you did not come to know Christ in that *way*” (v. 20), (v. 22) “you were taught, with regard to your former *way of life*”, or (Rom. 12:1) “do not conform any longer to the *pattern* of this world”. Live or lifestyle, way of life, pattern. What do these images have in common? They state that the nature of life is *habitual*. Transformation is about changing the *habits* of thinking, feeling and acting from learned ways of being and doing that emanate from a life apart from God, to learning new ways of thinking, feeling and acting in a life that emanates from our new identity in Christ.

The main reason why we need to shift from a trying to a training motif is because we are fundamentally *habitual* creatures. Habits don’t change by simple willpower but through training.

1. We are habitual creatures.

What is a habit? Learned ways of thinking, feeling and acting that have become second nature. You don’t need to think about them because they have simply become a part of your routine. Did you button your shirt or blouse from the top or the bottom? Men, could you write out the steps you go through to tie a tie? No, you just do it while planning your day. Can you imagine how difficult life would be if you had to be conscious of everything?

Think back to the time when you first learned to drive a car. So many things to think about—put the key in the ignition, fasten the seat belt, move the seat into position, check the mirrors to see if they are the right angle, keep your eye on the speedometer, be aware of the traffic in front and back, etc. I will never learn all of this. I am sure, if my father were alive, he remembers quite well when I first sat behind the wheel of a car. I learned on a stick or manual shift. My father and I both prayed that upon approaching an intersection that the light would remain green. Mastering the standing start especially on a hill was more of an adventure than my father bargained for. Getting that right balance of releasing the clutch while giving it gas was something that seemed almost impossible at the time. I don’t know how many times I sent the car through the intersection heaving and lunging as if I was riding a bucking bronco. I thought, “I will never get this.” But countless hours later I can slip into our car at the

black of midnight, find the slot for our key while buckling the seat belt all along carrying on a heated discussion about predestination.

Following Jesus is about training ourselves in the proper habits. We are full of God-pleasing and displeasing habits of thinking, feeling and acting. That is why Paul says that we are to put off **"the former manner of life"**, while putting on **"the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness."** Transformation into Christlikeness is a life-long intentional process of unlearning and relearning. The word "habits" is derived from the Latin *habitus*. A priest or a monk wears a "habitus", a piece of clothing that represents a commitment to a holy life. We too are to be clothed in habits that instinctively, habitually honor God.

Let me give you a couple of practical steps when it comes to the process to morphing.

2. Don't underestimate the grip of the old habits.

Paul says that when we came to Christ our lives were immersed in patterns that were not honoring to the Lord. The very nature of habits is that they have become second nature, a part of our automatic response system. We have learned patterns and absorbed ideas from our family upbringing, from our cultural values, especially through the media of TV and film, that have shaped our inner life. This is why Paul said, "No longer live as the Gentiles do..."

No matter how long you have been walking with Christ, you and I still have a power at work in us that is not pleasing to God. We get in touch with what needs to be changed through our automatic responses. This is where the body comes into the process of life change. We are bodily creatures and store within our bodies the habits of feeling, thinking and acting that have become second nature. Our bodies are the best indicators of what we need to pay attention to. I said in a Christmas season message that we can learn much from the phrase "muscle memory". Our muscles, our bodies have stored memories. A good athlete identifies the bad habits in his golf stroke, or shooting motion that have become part of his or hers negative muscle memory and in its place practices new muscle memory until there is a new automatic response. Paul tells us to present our bodies as a living sacrifice, because our physical being is the site in which our thinking, feeling and acting is lodged.

One of the reasons we fail in our attempts to change bad habits is that we don't respect the power of a habit to take hold of us. Have you ever tried to remove a tree stump? You schedule a half hour in your afternoon to take care of that job. Three hours later you have dug a five foot trench around the stump, having exposed a vast network of roots that extends far wider and deeper than

you ever imagined. This is why a *trying* model is so detrimental to the Christian life. We need to go into training if we are ever to become the apprentices Jesus calls us to be.

1. We are habitual creatures
2. We underestimate the strength of a habit

3. Practice the principle of replacement

Paul is very practical here, but this step is often overlooked. An old habit must be replaced by a good habit. We can't simply put off or stop an old habit, but must put in its place a new habit that is honoring to God. Why do most diets fail? We simply try to eat less, without retraining ourselves to an entire new healthy eating regimen. The tendency is to simply try to stop the bad habit, which works for a while. We reduce our food intake, we stop being critical, we stop drinking, we quit watching certain things on TV or the internet that are not pleasing to God...for a while. Then we fall again under the dominion of the bad habit, which seems all the stronger.

The principle of replacement means that we need not only identify what we need to stop doing, but the God honoring habit that needs to replace it. Let's go back to the image of body. What is the one part of the body we have the most difficulty bringing under the control of the Spirit? James tells us, it the unruly tongue. Is there anything that gets us into more trouble than what comes from our mouth? The principle of replacement says, **"Having trouble with sarcasm and biting remarks, then replace it with words of grace; instead of words of anger or judgment, in its place train yourself to affirm and appreciate; find bitterness and resentment dripping from your lips, cultivate thanksgiving and wonderment; are you a complainer, then find things to affirm."**

Yet how do we make these changes? We adopt a training paradigm for being a Christian, which means we begin to practice what has been called the *spiritual disciplines*, such as bible study, prayer, worship, service, solitude, etc. It is not that spiritual disciplines change you, only God's Spirit changes a person. Spiritual disciplines open space in our heart for God. We are placing ourselves in a position where God's spirit can blow as it wills. Most of us are motor boats, under our control. We need to be sail boats. Spiritual disciplines are like hoisting a sail so we can catch the wind of the spirit. We need to be about making and flying the new sails in our life if we are to see transformation take place.

Are you getting the sense that discipleship or transformation is a life-long process? Here is some good news from Richard Lovelace, **"God will proceed at a rate and follow a course which is ideally suited to the individual, raising successive issues over the years and making a point of the need for growth in**

one area after another. He seldom shows us all of our need at once; we would be overwhelmed at the sight." We are used to watching shows like Ophra, where frumpy and disshelved men or women are given a makeover of hair-do, grooming, and attire all in an hour. There are the before and after pictures. The "oohs" and "aahs" come when the makeover is complete and the new person is presented to the awaiting loved-ones and studio audience. We are not talking instant transformation. There is no such thing as instant godliness.

"Following Jesus simply means learning from him to arrange my life around activities that enable me to live in the fruit of the spirit. Spiritual disciplines are to life what practice is to a game."

Let me conclude with the story of transformation that C. S. Lewis tells in the third book in the Narnia Chronicles, The Voyage of The Dawn Treader. Eustace is a little boy in need a makeover. Eustace is a passenger on the *Dawn Treader*. Being a nasty, complaining, and generally obnoxious, he has managed to alienate his fellow travelers. When the ship docks on an island, the rest of the passengers head out to explore, leaving Eustace alone. He soon comes face to face with a frightful, fire-breathing dragon. Much to Eustace's relief the dragon expires right in front of him. Yet after a dream-filled night Eustace awakes to find that he has become a green, scaly dragon. This is Lewis' way of saying that he has become on the outside what he is on the inside.

Eustace breaks into tears realizing the meaning of what has happened. How can he ride himself of the prison of this green, scaly skin? That night in his dreams he is approached by Aslan—a lion and the Christ figure in the story. Aslan takes Eustace to a bubbling well, shaped like a round bath with marble stairs descending into it. The water is deliciously inviting, but Alsan says that before Eustace can get into the water he must undress first. Eustace knows that this means he is to shed his skin. He strips off the skin as if peeling a banana. He steps out of the skin and goes over to the water's edge, only to see that his reflection still shows the same rough and wrinkled skin. Two more times he attempts to remove this unwelcome outer garment with the same results. No matter his attempts to change, he cannot.

Then Aslan says, "You will have to let me undress you." Even though Eustace is afraid of Aslan's claws, he is desperate now. Eustace lies on his back and allows Aslan to have his way,

"The very first tear was so deep that I thought he had gone right into my heart. And when he began pulling the skin off, it hurt worse than anything I've ever felt. The only thing that made me able to bear it was just the pleasure of feeling that stuff peel off. After he peeled off the skin, I was a smooth and soft as a peeled switch. He caught hold of me and threw me into the water. At first it

smarted, but then it became perfectly delicious. I'd turned into a boy again... After a bit the Lion took me out of the water and dressed me. New clothes and all."

It's morphing time!