

TRANSFORMATION: To Become More Like Christ

Theme: We can count on God to do what it takes to transform us into the reflection of the image of Christ.

Text: Romans 5:1-5; James 1:2-4

Series: What Can We Count on From God?

Last Sunday, I introduced this question as the topic of our exploration through the Sundays of January. If you were here last week, you will know that I launched my acting career with a dramatic rendering of this question in a number of moods. But apparently there were no talent scouts in the audience, because my phone has not been ringing off the hook for auditions.

This question can be heard on one level as simply an interesting one to explore. But the question quite often comes out of confusion—frankly I don't quite know what I can be assured that God will deliver: do I ask for healing of a disease and expect it? Can I assume that my child of wayward faith will return, if I pray in faith believing? We might say, I don't want to give up my belief in God, but I really am not sure what to believe him for.

Philip Yancey, one of my favorite Christian authors received the following note: **"I have no trouble believing God is good. My question is what good is He? ...I look at my life—the health problems, my own daughter's struggles, my marriage. I cry out to God for help, and it's hard to know just how he answers. Really, what can we count on God for?"**

Where do we begin to address such a question? I said last week that the foundational truth, the bed rock of what we can count on--is that we are loved by God. It is a love of presence. This love of God is an experience that transcend circumstances and is conveyed directly to our hearts through the Holy Spirit. Last week, we explored the amazing claim of the apostle Paul, **"I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation."** Contentment must be something that is a constant that goes beyond the ever changing variables of life. There must be an internal constant that serves as the ballast for our listing ships in life. That ballast is the indwelling presence of the life of God Himself. The message of the Spirit to our hearts is that we have been claimed as the beloved sons and daughters of God by adoption through the work of the Son. Yet this is not just an individualistic, privatized message in isolation from others, but the Holy Spirit is the life of the Christian community, the body of Christ. There are times when I need to lean on your love, and times when you need to lean on my love. We are to be little "christs" to one another.

I said that this question gets asked because we tend to go through life with an unexamined assumption: The assumption is that if we are faithful followers of Jesus, doing the best we know how, then there must be rewards, even advantages for those who have chosen to live in a way that is pleasing to God.

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Don't we expect that there must be perks, a certain credit added to our account that we can draw one that gives us a leg up on those who don't acknowledge God in their life?

There is a popular teaching within the Christian Church today that would affirm just that. In answer to the question, "What Can We Count from God?" some would assert that being a follower of Jesus does put us in a favored position, which comes in the form of material rewards now. The theological reasoning goes something like this, "We are children of the king. We have been crowned with glory and honor. As a result we are royalty. Therefore we should expect that we can live a life of privilege. The children of the King can assume that they will be better off. If we are royalty then God wants to pour not his blessings of wisdom and creativity upon us, but also material blessings in the here and now." To quote one of the proponents of this view, "God wants us to be constantly increasing, to be rising to new heights. He wants to increase you in wisdom and help you make better decisions. God wants us to increase financially, by giving you promotions, fresh ideas, and creativity." This approach is built on the assumption that life for a Christian is ever upward, and God is a God of progression. He intends us to be better off than our parents. To be a graced as child of God means to have advantages that others do not and thereby we can expect favor from the King. To have favor means "to provide with special advantages and to receive preferential treatment." So one of these teachers writes of himself, "Consequently—and I say this humbly—I've come to expect to be treated differently. I've learned to expect that people will want to help me." As evidence of this favor he shares how he has been bumped up to first class from coach, received goods at a jewelry store for half price and even blessed with well positioned parking spaces. In summary, "If you believe, you will receive." This is often equated with material prosperity.

I could say many things in response to this teaching, which I consider be to be dangerous and heretical, but my fundamental objection is a basic misunderstanding of the goal of the Christian life. I can summarize this in one sentence: *God is far more concerned about our character than he is our comfort.* The end goal and entire focus of God's work in us is to reflect the face of Jesus through our life.

In theological language, this is called *sanctification*: the process of being made holy. We could just as easily say that God is more interested in our holiness than he is in our happiness. The Scripture uses a number of images to convey the process of transformation into Christlikeness: In Ephesians 4:22-24, Paul speaks of "taking off" the old nature, and "putting on" the new—like removing an old tattered set of garments; and being clothed with the new clothes in true righteousness and holiness. Paul also speaks of not being conformed to this world's prevailing values, but being transformed in the renewal of our minds (Romans 12:2). We need to look at the world with a different set of glasses. In

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Romans 8:29 Paul writes that the purpose for which we were created is to be conformed to the likeness of his Son.

I believe that one of the most attractive and appealing images is one used by both Jesus and Paul. Jesus says in John 15 that we are branches connected to the vine of Christ, whose life flows through us and in us so that we would bear much fruit. Then the apostle Paul picks up the same image and says, **“But the fruit of the Spirit is...” (Galatians 6:22-23)**. Before I finish that line, let me tell you a story that will complete it.

Becky Pippert, the author of *Hope Has Its Reasons*, tells the story of getting lost in Jerusalem which led to a very insightful exchange with an Orthodox Hasidic Jew. She had gotten off at the wrong bus stop and found herself in an Orthodox Hasidic Jewish neighborhood. Bewildered, her face registering that she was lost, she heard a voice behind her, **“Can I help you?”** When she turned around she saw a man with beard and earlocks, and wearing a long black coat. Knowing that Hasidic Jewish men were not allowed to address women in public, amazement crossed her face. The man said, **“Sometimes we are permitted to help people in distress. Where do you need to go?”** As he walked with her in the direction she needed to get to her apartment, Becky was told that his name was Moshe, he lived in an ultra-orthodox community, though he had been raised in Chicago.

Becky said, **“We have something in common. We are both religious.”** He asked Becky, **“Are you Jewish?”** Becky replied, **“No, I am a follower of Jesus.”** [BTW that is a much better response than saying, “I am a Christian.”] Moshe said, **“I have never talked with a religious Christian before. There is much I would like to ask you, but it is so difficult. If anyone in my community saw me holding this conversation with you it would be very awkward. I have to be so careful. Yet when will I have this opportunity again?”** Becky answered, **“I would love to talk with you. I would be honored to have you as a guest in my house.”** He hesitated, glanced around to see who was watching and said, **“Let us go quickly.”**

Once they settled in, Moshe began to pepper Becky with questions. What he wanted to know was--what happened to human nature as a result of being in relationship with God through Christ. Becky responded by saying that when we put our faith in Christ, he gives us His Spirit, who transforms us day by day and enables us to live as new people with new power. Then he asked a wonderful question, **“What is the essence of this new nature?”** She listed the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 6:22-23.

With all the eagerness of one with a hungry heart he said, **“Wait, say those words again.”** She again recited them. **“Say them again”**, he asked.

Then Moshe said with wonderment, **“What beautiful, beautiful words. Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Imagine it! All of these qualities come into your heart as a result of being in**

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relationship with God. Just think, to receive the very nature of God as a gift. No more beating down the evil inclinations with negatives but rather fighting evil with positives, with the very attributes of God himself! Ah, what a precious gift you have inherited, Becky. Do not take it lightly.” Did you here that? Do not take it lightly!

This new nature is the goal of the Christian life. The rewards, the perks are primarily internal. But, how do we get there? How do these delicious qualities get formed in us? The fruit of the spirit is the distilled essence of a tested life. My thesis this morning: **We can count on God to do what it takes to conform us to the image of His Son.** We are like metal alloys shot through with impurities that must be removed if we are to grow the fruit of love, joy, peace, patience, etc. The Scripture outlines a common process through which the Lord will take us, because our God will do what it takes to make us like His Son.

Read Romans 5:3-5; James 1:2-4

Paul says that the usual pattern for growth is that **suffering** produces **endurance**, **endurance** produces **character** and **character** produces **hope**. James echoes this same pattern.

We might object. Does it really take suffering to cause growth into Christlikeness in us?

Two things seem to be true. First, when things are going well, we tend to trust in ourselves. In other words, when life is working out just the way we had hoped our tendency is to rely on ourselves and frankly be self-congratulatory and forget that all good and perfect gifts come from above. In other words, if we pray for prosperity, will we handle it well? Frankly, it is a tougher test to handle prosperity than to handle adversity.

In Deuteronomy 8, Moses attempts to prepare the people for life in the Promised Land. They are a rag-tag bunch attempting to survive the rigors of the wilderness, but Moses knows that the greatest temptation will come with luxury. Moses instructs them to remain faithful to God and to keep his commands and to revere Him, when they come “into a good land—a land of streams and pool of water, with spring flowing in the valleys and hills; a land of wheat and barley, vines and fig trees, a land of bread that will not be scarce...” (Deut. 8: 6-9) Here is his warning, “When you have eaten and are satisfied, praise the Lord your God for the good land he has given you. Be careful that you do not forget the Lord your God, failing to observe his commands, his laws and his decrees that I am giving you this day. Otherwise, when you eat and are satisfied, when you build fine houses and settle down...then your heart will become proud and you will forget the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt.” Far more of us are destroyed by prosperity than adversity.

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This leads us to the second truth. Not only don't we handle prosperity well, we primarily learn through life's difficulties, not in times when things are going well. What does it say about us that we learn primarily through life's difficulties? We grow through hindsight rather than by foresight. We only change when forced to. The Scripture describes human beings as hard-hearted, and stiff-necked. Like the farmer who takes out a two by four to get his donkey's attention, we are a two by four race.

C. S. Lewis has said that God whispers to us in our joys, but shouts at us in our pain. In joy or happiness there seems to be a lot of noise in our life, like God whispering in a crowded auditorium. On the other hand, pain is the megaphone of God.

It is for this reason that both Paul and James speak the positive value of suffering or setbacks in life. Paul writes, "**We also rejoice in our sufferings**" and James adds, "**Count it all joy when you meet various trials**". Why? Because we should be masochists who invite difficulties because we enjoy pain? Paul and James are not saying that we should engage in self-flagellation, beating ourselves for the kingdom sake.

It is just the truth that we grow far more through life's challenges than we ever do when all is going swimmingly.

Malcolm Muggeridge, the late controversial agnostic British journalist, came to faith in Christ in his later years. He made this very insightful comment about the role pain in our growth. "**Contrary to what might be expected, I look back on experiences that at the time seemed especially desolating and painful with particular satisfaction. Indeed, I can say with complete truthfulness that everything I have learned in my seventy-five years in this world, everything that has truly enhanced and enlightened my existence, has been through affliction and not through happiness.**" (Malcolm Muggeridge, *A Twentieth Century Testimony*)

In my personal journey, I have often said that my first year of professional ministry was my worst year of ministry. Yet when I look back on it, it was the most formative time that shaped my understanding of my role as a pastor. I graduated from seminary in 1973--full of myself. I thought I was the latest and greatest thing to be unleashed on the church. Any church would be glad to have me, I thought. My first ministry position was an associate pastor on the staff of Presbyterian Church in Pittsburgh, PA. The church was located right in the middle of the University of Pittsburgh, and college ministry was my focus. Yet instead of being hailed as the messiah, as my imagination proclaimed me to be, things went south almost from the beginning. No palm branches for me. I followed the first leader of the college ministry who had been a star tackle on the University football team. No one confused me for him. I inherited his ministry team, loyal to Bob, and they were did not seem pleased I was there. And to make

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matters worse, the senior pastor and I had quite varied expectations for the kind of relationship we would have. Then to compound matters, after 4 years of marriage Lily and I moved into an 8 bedroom 3 story house owned by the church, with 5 college students who were to be key leaders in the ministry. Essentially it was communal living with 7 for dinner every night. In summary, we were 3000 miles from home, working with a team that was mourning the loss of their leader; there was tension between myself and the senior pastor, and there was no privacy in our living situation.

Nine months into my first ministry position, I was so depressed that getting out of bed in the morning was the major victory of the day. I was no longer sure that I had heard the call of God to professional ministry. Yet, I clearly remember calling out to God from the pits of despair and hearing a liberating message, **“Greg, be who I have created you to be. Be a trainer and equipper of others. You don’t need to be a piped piper like your predecessor. Be yourself.”** It was this message from the Lord that set me free and has contributed my sense of self ever since.

To be clear the kind of “suffering” and “trials” that Paul and James are most likely speaking about here are the result of being faithful to Christ in a hostile world. Paul’s word translated suffering is the word *thlipsis*, which literally is “pressure”. “We rejoice in our pressures”. Pressure is what we experience when we are out of step with the world’s standards and expectations. What can we count on from God? Paul says it clearly in II Timothy 3:12, **“Everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted...”** Pressurized. Yet, I think we can also generalize and say, **“Life is full of adversity, and it is how we handle it that determines the kind of people are called to be.”**

We rejoice in our sufferings, because this is the means that God uses in the pressure cooker to shape us into his likeness. Where does suffering take us? **“Suffering produces endurance.”** To endure means remain in or abide under the pressure. Stay in the fire, for it is the fire that produces the purity. It is the opposite of panic or bailing out too soon. See it through. God’s pattern generally is not to make life easier but to make us stronger in the midst of it.

Two years into my first ministry position, I hit bottom. The relationship with the senior pastor had deteriorated to such an extent, that one day in his office he showed me the door while saying, **“We will no longer relate to each other on a personal basis, but only make connection as we have need to run the program of the church.”** All my ideals about ministry had been destroyed in the first two years. I wanted out. Everything inside me screamed escape. And frankly, I tried. I interviewed at large church to be the director of their high school ministry. When things are tough any alternative looks attractive. Thankfully, the church that interviewed me was wise enough not to offer me the position. I then felt a pressure of another kind. It was the pressure of kingdom values. For the senior pastor and me to be at odds with each other was a mark of shame and a statement of hypocrisy about everything we claimed about the reconciling love of

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Jesus Christ. We both felt the shame of our brokenness and the pressure to come together. I am so glad that the Lord did not allow me to leave that situation until our relationship was made right. One of my favorite memories in life was the day I was packing my books in my office, getting ready to move back West. Doug stood before me with his 6 feet 4 inch frame and embraced me with a bear hug that said our reconciliation was complete. Hang in there with relationships! See it through--has been the life long message I received by enduring, even when I wanted to bail out.

“Suffering produces endurance and endurance produces character.” The word here that Paul chooses literally for character literally means, “to be put to the test and found approved.” It has to do with the temperament of a veteran versus the shakiness of a rookie. We love sports analogies. I am sure there is a book for TV sports commentators entitled, “Appropriate Clichés for Every Sporting Occasion.” With the Super bowl coming up in a few weeks we will hear them all. If one of the teams in the Super bowl is a recent winner, they will have the advantage and here are the lines you will hear are, “They gone through the wars; they been here before; they know what it takes to win.” James speaks of the end product enduring trials as being “perfect, complete, lacking in nothing.” The character of Christ is being formed in you.

Paul concludes this by saying that “character produces hope”, and that is the subject of next week’s reflection on what we can count on from God.

A woman’s bible study group was pondering the line from Malachi 3 which says of God, “And He shall sit as a refiner and purifier of silver.” One of the women decided to take it upon herself to visit a local silversmith in order to better understand the refining process. She asked the silversmith, “Sir, do you sit while the work of refining is going on?” He replied, “Yes, madam, I must sit with my eyes steadily fixed on the furnace, for it the time necessary for refining be exceeded in the slightest degree, the silver will be injured.” It is a comforting image knowing that our Lord takes us through the fires of the furnace of our life with his eye upon us. As the lady was leaving the shop, the silversmith called her back, and said, “Do you know how I know the process is of complete? I know the purification is done when I see my own image reflected in the silver.”

This is what we can count on from God...Transformation to become more like Christ. Christ will do what it takes to conform us to His image. Do you want riches? Do you want to be on top of the world? Do you want a promotion--pay attention to the riches of the inner life of the Spirit. “What beautiful, beautiful words. Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Imagine it! All of these qualities come into your heart as a result of being in relationship with God. Just think, to receive the very nature of God as a gift. Don’t be deceived, the New Testament promise is not for material wealth, but that the Lord will take care of necessities of our physical life, if we seek first his Kingdom and his righteousness.

