

Looking Like Jesus

Divine resources for a changed life are always available.

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Some time ago I came to realize that I did not love the people next door. They were, by any standards, dangerous and unpleasant people—ex-bikers who made their living selling drugs.

They had never tried to harm my family, but the constant traffic of people buying drugs, a number of whom sat in the yard while shooting up, began to wear down my patience. As I brooded over them one day, indulging my irritation, the Lord helped me see that I really had no love for them at all, that after "suffering" from them for several years I would secretly be happy if they died so that we could just be rid of them. I realized how little I truly cared for nearly all the people I dealt with through the day, even when on "religious business." I had to admit that I had never earnestly *sought* to be possessed by God's kind of love, to become more like Jesus. Now it was time to seek.

But is it possible to be like Jesus? Can we actually have the character of the heavenly Father? We know God shows sincere love for everyone and is consistently kind to even the ungrateful. Jesus likewise showed himself to be merciful, freely forgave injuries, and was glad simply to give, expecting nothing back.

It is possible, I now believe, to "put on the Lord Jesus Christ" (Rom. 13:14). Ordinary people in common surroundings can live from the abundance of God's kingdom, letting the spirit and the actions of Jesus be the natural outflow from their lives. The "tree" can be made good, and the fruit will then be good as a matter of course (Matt. 12:33). This new life God imparts involves both a goal and a method.

His heart, our heart

As disciples (literally *students*) of Jesus, our goal is to learn to be like him. We begin by trusting him to receive us as we are. But our confidence in him leads us toward the same kind of faith he had, a faith that made it possible for him to act as he did. Jesus' faith was rooted in his gospel of heaven's rule, the good news of "the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 4:17). *Heaven* is a deeply significant word. From Abraham (Gen. 24:7) onward, it signified to the people of Israel the direct availability of God to his children, as well as his supremacy over all that affects us. From heaven, "the eyes of the LORD are toward the righteous, and his ears toward their cry" (Ps. 34:15; also I Pet. 3:12).

Jesus was concerned to pass on to his followers this reality of heaven's rule that undergirded his life. When he sent his 12 friends out on their first mission, he told them it was like sending "sheep in the midst of wolves." It would be butterflies against machine guns. Nevertheless—imagine sheep being told this!—there was no need for them to fear. Two sparrows cost a penny. Yet not one falls upon the earth "without your Father's will." Heaven is so close that even the hairs on our heads are numbered. "Fear not," Jesus tells us, "you are of more value than many sparrows" (Matt. 10: 16, 29-31).

Avoiding dreary substitutes

Living under the governance of heaven frees and empowers us to love as God loves. But outside the safety and sufficiency of heaven's rule, we are too frightened and angry to really love others, or even ourselves, and so we arrange our dreary substitutes. A contemporary wording of Jesus' comparison of God's kind of love, *agapē*, and what normally passes for love might be: "What's so great if you love those who love you? Terrorists do that! If that's all your 'love' amounts to, God certainly is not involved. Or suppose you are friendly to 'our kind of people.' So is the Mafia!" (Matt. 5:46-47).

Now reflect: Has your heart gone out in generous blessing to someone who has insulted or humiliated you? Can you work without thought of gain for the well-being of someone who openly despises you, maybe has told you to drop dead? Are you enthusiastically pulling for the success of someone competing with you for favor, position, or financial gain?

A much-used doormat says: "Welcome, friends!" Could yours also genuinely welcome enemies? When you lend a dress, a stereo, a car, or some tools or books, are you able to release them with no hope of seeing them again as Luke 6:35 suggests we should? I do a good bit of my own mechanical and carpentry work, and I have a good supply of tools—which neighbors soon discover. I am glad for opportunities to lend a chain saw, an ax, a crescent wrench, or pliers, for I see them as a true spiritual exercise in abandonment to God. I am learning to love others in these little things that truly matter.

The golden triangle

If this life of faith and love from heaven is the goal of the disciple of Jesus, the natural fulfillment of the new life in Christ, how can we enter into it? While it is in one sense a result of God's presence within us, the New Testament also describes a process behind our "putting on" the Lord Jesus Christ. It is repeatedly discussed in the Bible under three essential aspects, each inseparable from the other, all interrelated. This process could be called "the golden triangle" of spiritual transformation, for it is as precious as gold to the disciple, and each of its aspects is as essential to the whole as three sides are to a triangle.

One aspect or side of our triangle is the faithful acceptance of everyday problems. By enduring trials with patience we can reach an assurance of the fullness of heaven's rule in our lives.

James, the Lord's brother, began his message to the church by instructing us to be "supremely happy" when troubles come upon us: "When all kinds of trials and temptations crowd into your lives, my brothers, don't resent them as intruders, but welcome them as friends! Realize that they come to test your faith and to produce in you the quality of endurance" (1:2-3, Phillips). When endurance or patience has been given full play in the details of day-to-day existence, it will make us "perfect and complete, lacking in nothing" (v. 4).

Certainly James learned this from Jesus, his older brother, during more than 20 years of sometimes rancorous family life (John 7:2-8). We must never forget that for most of his life Jesus was what we today would call a blue-collar worker, a tradesman, an independent contractor. His hands had calluses from using the first-century equivalents of hammers, drills, axes, saws and planes. He was known in his village simply as "the carpenter."

There James saw him practice all he later preached. We know what it is like to "do business with the public." So did Jesus. Every single thing that Jesus taught us to do was something he had put into daily practice. In the trials of his

everyday existence, in family and village life, he verified the sufficiency of God's care for those who simply trust him and obey him. And, at least in retrospect, James understood. Once he saw who his older brother really was, he realized the power of patience in the events of daily life—manifested above all by an inoffensive tongue (James 3:2)—as the path in which God's character is fulfilled in our lives.

Opening our lives to the Spirit

The second side of our triangle is interaction with God's Spirit in and around us. As Paul points out, the Spirit allows us to "walk in" the Spirit (Gal. 5:25). This all-powerful, creative personality, the promised "strengtheners," the *paraclete* of John 14, gently awaits our invitation to him to act upon us, with us and for us.

The presence of the Holy Spirit can always be recognized by the way he moves us toward what Jesus would be and do (John 16:7-15). When we inwardly experience the heavenly sweetness and power of life—the love, joy, and peace—that Jesus knew, that is the work of the Spirit in us.

Outwardly, life in the Spirit manifests itself in two ways. *Gifts* of the Spirit will enable us to perform some specific function—such as service or healing or leading worship—with effects clearly beyond those of our own making. These gifts serve God's purposes among his people, but they do not necessarily signify the state of our heart.

The *fruit* of the Spirit, by contrast, give a sure sign of transformed *character*. When our deepest attitudes and dispositions are those of Jesus, it is because we have learned to let the Spirit foster his life in us. Paul confessed: "I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me" (Gal. 2:20). The outcome of Christ living within us through the Spirit is fruit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Gal. 5:22-23).

Both gifts and fruit are the result, not the reality of the Spirit's presence in our lives. What brings about our transformation into Christlikeness is our direct, personal interaction with Christ through the Spirit. The Spirit makes Christ present to us and draws us toward his likeness. It is as we thus "behold the glory of the Lord" that we are constantly "transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit" (2 Cor. 3:18, NASB).

The disciplines of Christlikeness

The third side of our triangle is made up of spiritual disciplines. These are special activities, many engaged in by Jesus himself, such as solitude and study, service and secrecy, fasting and worship. They are ways in which we undertake to follow the New Testament mandate to put to death or "make no provision for" the merely earthly aspects of our lives and to put on the new person (Col. 3).



The emphasis in this dimension of spiritual transformation is upon our efforts. True, we are given much, and without grace we can do nothing; but our action is also required. "Try your hardest," Peter directs us (2 Pet. 1:5, NEB). We are to add virtue to our faith, knowledge to our virtue, self-control to our knowledge, patience to our self-control, godlikeness to our patience, brotherly love to our godlikeness, and *agapē* to our brotherly love (vv. 5-7).

In Colossians 3, Paul urges us "as the elect of God, holy and beloved" to renew our inner selves with organs ("bowels" in KJV) of mercy, kindness, humbleness of mind, meekness, long-suffering, forbearance, forgiveness, and *agapē* (vv. 12-14). We should not only want to be merciful, kind, unassuming, and patient persons, we are also to *make plans* to become so. We are to find out, that is, what prevents and what promotes mercifulness and kindness and patience in our souls, and we are to remove hindrances to them as much as possible, carefully substituting that which assists Christlikeness.

Many well-meaning people, to give an example, cannot succeed in being kind because they are too rushed to get things done. Haste has worry, fear, and anger as close associates; it is a deadly enemy of kindness, and hence of love. If this is our problem, we may be greatly helped by a day's retreat into solitude and silence, where we will discover that the world survives even though we are inactive. There we might prayerfully meditate to see clearly the damage done by our unkindness, and honestly compare it to what, if anything, is really gained by our hurry. We will come to understand that for the most part our hurry is really based upon pride, self-importance, fear, and lack of faith, and rarely upon the production of anything of true value for anyone.

Perhaps we will end up making plans to pray daily for the people with whom we deal regularly. Or we may resolve to ask associates for forgiveness for past injuries. Whatever comes of such prayerful reflection, we may be absolutely sure that our lives will never be the same, and that we will enjoy a far greater richness of God's reality in our lives.

In general, then, we "put on" the new person by regular activities that are in our power, and we become what we could not be by direct effort. If we take note of and follow Jesus in what he did when he was not ministering or teaching, we will find ourselves led and enabled to behave as he did when he was "on the spot."

The single most obvious trait of those who profess Christ but do not grow into Christlikeness is their refusal to take the reasonable and time-tested measures for spiritual growth. I almost never meet someone in spiritual coldness, perplexity, and distress who is regular in the use of those spiritual exercises that will be obvious to anyone familiar with the contents of the New Testament.

Like stars in a dark world

The three sides of the golden triangle of spiritual transformation belong together. No one of the three will give us a heart like Christ's without the other two. None can take the place of any other. Yet each, connected to the others, will certainly bring us to ever-increasing Christlikeness.

In Philippians 2 the apostle draws all three together in one grand statement: "You must work out your own salvation in fear and trembling; for it is God who works in you, inspiring both the will and the deed, for his own chosen purpose. Do all you have to do without complaint or wrangling. Show yourselves guileless and above reproach, faultless children of God in a warped and crooked generation, in which you shine like stars in a dark world" (vv. 12-15, NEB).

When we accept moment-to-moment events and tribulations as the place where we receive God's provision, we patiently anticipate the action of his Spirit in our lives. In hope we do our best to find the ways in which our inner self can take on the character of the children of the Highest. This is the path of radical change—change sufficient to meet the needs of the world and prepare a people to be the habitation of God.