

Sermon: What Are We Becoming?

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Scriptures: Ephesians 4:2-6

Introduction

Most of us have seen the time-lapse photography of a lowly caterpillar becoming a butterfly. The footage usually starts with a ponderous little worm inching its way along a leaf that it devours. It looks silly and awkward as it labors to cover short distances.

When it gets to about two inches in length, it takes a break from stuffing itself, finds a protective branch, and rigs up a silk thread by which it fastens its tail to that branch. Once secured, this little caterpillar begins to contort its body, gyrating in curious ways. At first, it's unclear what is happening. Then suddenly, the outer skin of this worm seems to unzip revealing a green chrysalis within. Minutes later, the molting is done and the green pod that is left becomes motionless for about 14 days.

Nothing seems to be happening for awhile. But then on about day 12, the walls of the greenish cocoon become transparent. For the first time we can see that something dramatic has happened inside. But it's not until a day or two later that the full story is told. All at once, the little creature within begins to struggle and push until finally the shell of its miniature incubator cracks open.

Pushing itself out of the impossibly small pod there comes a Monarch butterfly. Wet, trembling, and dark, it takes a few minutes to unfold itself, opening its collapsed wings for the first time. It forces them outward to their full capacity, spreading patterns of color and symmetry on this new canvas. And then this ex-earthbound caterpillar seizes the wind and lifts off, delicately managing the currents like a poem set in motion.

It is one of the wonders of God's world that such drastic transformation takes place. Where there was once an ugly, cumbersome grub, laboring to get to the next leaf, there is now this magnificent butterfly that bears no resemblance to its former self. We almost can't take our eyes off it as it flits from flower to flower in such an effortless and magical way.

What would it be like to go through such drastic and amazing changes? To be changed from the slow-moving treadmill existence that seems so pointless into someone who soars with purpose and joy! To conquer the cycle of sinning with the accompanying accusations of Satan so that you experience ever-lengthening periods of time freed sin! To become so much more than you once were through the extraordinary inner work of the Spirit of God!

The Bible says that this miraculous inside out change is the experience of every true believer! In fact, the very same word used to describe the transformation of a caterpillar into a butterfly is used by the Holy Spirit to describe God's work in His children. The word is metamorphosis, and God has that in mind for you.

Metamorphosis. The root word *morphoo* means "form" or "nature." It refers to the real inner essence of a person and thing. If the word was applied to you, it would describe the real you, the true nature of who you are, and how that works its way outward in your behavior.

This was the word used to describe Jesus, when Paul was explaining that Jesus didn't come into existence like we do, that prior to His birth to Mary, He existed eternally. Paul says that Jesus was in the form (*morphoo*) of God - meaning that Jesus was in His essence, His very nature, God. (Phil. 2:6).

Now take that root idea and add the Greek prefix *meta* to it, and it means "to change the essential nature of something or someone." This is inside work that has major repercussions on outward living. This is metamorphosis.

Next week, I want to explore with you how exactly God does this, transforming a person who is born again, reordering his spiritual DNA, reprogramming his mindset, and redirecting his choices so that he takes on the very image of Christ. You don't want to miss this all-important study next Sunday.

But this morning, there is a first step that needs to be taken. Last week, as we opened to Eph.4:1, we saw the basic principle about true Christians from Scripture. Notice what the Holy Spirit says through Paul: I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called. We focused on the word "worthy," which in Paul's day referred to a counterweight, a kind of scales by which objects were accurately weighed.

In this verse, Paul says to us, "Take all that Jesus is for you, all that He has done for you and put it on one side of the scale, then you step on the other side. Walking worthy means both sides balance one another. My lifestyle balances with His life in me. My external living matches Him, echoes His impulses, expresses His will. This is my identity now; if I don't want to be tagged by God as a hypocrite - which is far worse than being so labeled by men - then I need to live out that identity with integrity. I will not weigh down my inner world with sin and the world's ways. I want nothing between me and my Savior." That is walking worthy of the calling by which you have been called. That is living out what God has worked in.

But that's still too general for us to grasp. My heart is so deceitful that generalities don't usually work. God knows that too. So He has Paul get specific. Since God changes us from the inside out, what exactly does Christlikeness look like on the inside? And how is that expressed in my life?

In v. 2-6, Paul gives us four attitudes that are the bedrock of the Jesus-life He means to live through us. I want to hold those before you this morning, and then add one more startling aspect that we might miss if Paul didn't flag it so well.

I. Humility

"I, therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, urge you to walk worthy of the calling you have received, with all humility." I challenge you to try to think about Jesus without thinking about humility. It so framed the character of our Savior from beginning to end that it became a kind of hallmark of who He is. In God's plan, He was born in a cow pen, lived a poor life, never served in public office, never wrote a book, routinely exercised restraint in the presence of stark pride, washed the feet of His disciples like a slave, and submitted willingly to the humiliating torture of death on the cross. That's my Jesus!

And He looks at us and says (Matt. 18:4), "Whoever humbles himself like this child - this one is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven." Jesus frequently used the trusting disposition of a child as an example. Why? Because a child has no power. He is not considered great in this world. He is not strong. He is not self-sufficient. The world doesn't write books about the accomplishments of a child. And here's the deal: a child isn't bothered by that. Never even crosses his mind.

Instead, a child completely trusts his parents to supply his needs. He does not lie awake wondering if he is going to eat tomorrow. He does not fret in the stroller if the sky turns black. He is happy, anxiety-free, and confident that everything he needs will be provided. That's the part Jesus wants us to see.

"Humility," says Joni Eareckson Tada, "is just another word for the little-last-lost-least position we hold when gazing at Christ."¹

Humility says, "I don't have to have my way." Humility says, "Things don't necessarily have to please me, because I can see that it's meeting the needs of others." Humility says, "The music is not what I'd prefer; the decision of the committee kind of goes against what I'd like; the refreshments are not handled the way I'd do it, the carpet isn't the color I would have picked, but that's OK, because what I want is not the deciding factor; what's good for others is." That's what Jesus did.

You can tell when humility takes hold. It's when you suddenly realize that you've gone a long period of time without thinking of yourself. If you are the center of your attention, driven by your wants, pushing for your way, claiming your rights, more metamorphosis is needed. You aren't much like Jesus.

II. Gentleness

"I, therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, urge you to walk worthy of the calling you have received, with all humility and gentleness." The term was used in NT days to describe horses that had been broken. The animal still has its strength and spirit, but its will is under the control of another. You might define the word gentleness as "power under control." Practically, we could say that humility is expressed by not insisting on your rights, not being easily offended, and not holding grudges.

And again, Jesus comes to mind doesn't He? When the mob came to arrest Him in the garden, He could have called a legion of angels, but He didn't. When Pilate was in His face, Jesus remained silent. When His accusers perjured themselves, He could have crushed them, but He did not object.

Tell me, was Jesus' show of restraint really just weakness? No. He held back because He was strong. He had nothing to prove, no one to impress. With the power He used to bring the world into being at His disposal, He willingly reined in any impulse to retaliate or take over. He trusted in the Father's timing.

James 3:13 reminds us of the value of this virtue. "Who is wise and understanding among you? He should show his works by good conduct with wisdom's gentleness." Say, find it hard to keep from showing others how much you really know or giving them your two bits about what really ought to be done in this situation? Do you have a reputation as one who puts others in their place and plays church politics well? It's a good indicator that your life is out of balance with your identity as a Christian. You are not living like Jesus.

III. Patience

"I, therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, urge you to walk worthy of the calling you have received, with all humility and gentleness, with patience . . . " Literally, the word means "long-tempered" or as one person suggested, "long-fused." This is all about how you respond to frustrations, inconveniences, delays, aggravating people, and maddening circumstances. You don't murmur. You don't write people off. You don't turn in your resignation. You wait, knowing the damage anger does in marriages and meetings. You trust that God is in control of His circumstances.

James 1:19 lays down the rule on this: "My dearly loved brothers, understand this: everyone must be quick to hear, slow to speak, and slow to anger, for man's anger does not accomplish God's righteousness."

Jesus endured. He endured the cross, despising the shame. He endured hostility from sinners against Himself. (Heb. 12:2-3) You want to be like Jesus? This must mark you.

IV. Bearing with one another

" . . . with all humility and gentleness, with patience, accepting one another in love."

Literally, this means putting up with people. It's kind of a messy word for people that you don't like. This is as real as it gets. This may come as a shock to you, but even Jesus didn't like everyone He met. In Luke 9:41: Jesus replied, "You unbelieving and rebellious generation! How long will I be with you and put up with you? Things were not as He preferred. But He put up with it.

"Bearing with one another in love" means enduring other people's differences, quirks, irritating habits. It means realizing that the pastor has gaping holes in the fabric of his sanctification. It means coming to terms with the fact that there are some people who are grumpy and critical and unreliable. "Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends." (1 Corinthians 13:7-8). When you forbear those who get on your nerves, you stop thinking, "That person bothers me," and replace it with, "That person sanctifies me."² I think I still have some developing to do on this one, how about you?ⁱⁱ

These are the attitudes that should mark me if I'm living my life in balance with my Jesus. Like Him, there should be humility, gentleness, patience and bearing with one another. Where I am deficient, further transformation takes place. How does that happen? We'll see, next week. But for now, let me add this: every one of these attitudes is about relationships. You can't talk about humility or gentleness without being with people. You can't measure patience or forbearance unless you're hanging out with others.

God's classroom where spiritual maturity is imparted is the church! This whole context is about the people of God. Just look at the next verses: " . . . diligently keeping the unity of the Spirit with the peace that binds [us]. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope at your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all."

Conclusion

Growing into Christlikeness is a community of faith project. This is the greenhouse where it happens. That's why it's so important that you regularly gather with God's people, where His Spirit can work to form these traits in you. When God wants to form our character, He doesn't give us a to-do list. He puts us in community with fellow believers where the image of Christ is stamped onto our being.

And when I work out what He has worked in, I will "diligently [keep] the unit of the Spirit with the peace that binds [us]." I will prove that there is "one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all." (v. 3-6)

ⁱ Joni Eareckson Tada, "At the Foot of the Cross" Discipleship Journal, Issue 105 (May/June 1998). Copyright © 2000 by The Navigators.

ⁱⁱ Adapted from a quote by Josemaria Escriva, "Dealing with Difficult People," cited at preachingtoday.com (February 29, 2008).