

Sermon: If I'm a Butterfly, Why Am I Still Crawling?

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Ephesians 4:17-24

Introduction

Since 1986, Father Greg Boyle or G-Dog, as he's known in his neighborhood, has been engaging the gangs East Los Angeles with the gospel. Every day, he wades into the danger zone, connecting with young men and women who already have long arrest and prison records. He shares the good news of Jesus with them, and calls them to break with the wicked life they have known and trust Christ for salvation. The message is simple and real: you can have a future or a funeral. Jesus will forgive your sins, wash your past clean in the eyes of God, and give you a hope and a future.

To date, this ministry has seen members of about thousands leave the pseudo-family of a gang for the real family of God by faith in Christ Jesus. And that's not because Boyle has watered down the gospel. In fact, he makes plain that Jesus is calling them to radically break all the destructive, sin-inducing ties to their former life. Over 1500 ex-gang members have trusted Christ and taken steps in a new direction with the guidance and help of Father Greg. They have to learn a new language, buy new clothes and learn how to make an honest day's wage.ⁱ

That sounds like what we have been studying over the last several weeks from Ephesians 4. The Bible says a true Christian will undergo metamorphosis, a change of nature that renovates core values and imprints Christ's character on your inner world. This is change from the inside out. The speed of this internal overhaul, which is often called sanctification, will vary from person to person. But the certainty is rock solid. Spirit-wrought change is so fundamental, so axiomatic to Christianity, that it is expected, even commanded in the NT.

What is more, change that radical on the inside inevitably shows itself in your behavior on the outside. There is a kind of system interface between my inner world and my chosen actions, so much so that the Bible tells us that when Judgment Day comes and I stand before God, He will look to my outward behavior as the determining factor in my eternal destiny. Romans 2:6 says that when your turn comes to stand alone before the living God, He will render to each one according to his works. The evidence that we are truly born again will be demonstrated in the most obvious and irrefutable of ways: what we did and didn't do.

Why? Because your deeds are the infallible sign of what fills your heart. Jesus told a bunch of spiritual posers that a tree is known by its fruit. And then He added that "out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks" (Matt. 12:33-34). I can fake my true identity for while. But in time, I will leak out what is really inside. So the change God brings about in us is pervasive and common to every true believer.

There's even an entire book in the NT built on the premise that if you are a true believer in Christ, it will show in your behavior. First John lists 11 evidences or proofs that you have been born again, like the one in 1 John 2:3-4: "By this we know that we have come to know Him, if we keep His commandments. Whoever says 'I know Him' but does not keep His commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him." There's a new norm in the lives of believers: they obey God.

Then there's 1 John 2:5-6: "By this we may know that we are in Him: whoever says he abides in Him ought to walk in the same way in which He walked." Real Christians ought to live like Jesus . . . just like Jesus, so that when people see us, they are drawn to Him.

Add 1 John 2:15: "If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him." Or 1 John 3:9-10: "No one born of God makes a practice of sinning, for God's seed abides in him, and he cannot keep on sinning because he has been born of God. By this it is evident who are the children of God, and who are the children of the devil: whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is the one who does not love his brother." The list goes on, presenting the link between what's true on the inside and what shows on the outside.

But there is one part of this entire study that stops me in my tracks. I don't measure up to this all the time. You can hear these evidences in 1 John and go away thinking, "Wow, I've got to be perfect! If you're born again, you don't sin at all!" But we all know the truth about ourselves. We're far from perfect. We sin daily.

"So what's wrong with me, pastor? I know 'whom I have believed, and I am convinced He is able to guard what I have entrusted to Him against that day,' but I fail so much! What's wrong with me? If I'm supposed to be a butterfly or something, soaring above sin, why am I still crawling?"

This morning, I want to close this series in Ephesians 4 by flagging the all-important point where the rubber meets the road. In this series, we've seen the necessity for this inside out change. We've examined what we are being changed into. And last week, we saw the inner power that fuels lasting life-change. Today, we want to talk about how to plug into that power, how to put everything we've seen so far into motion so that we're experiencing more victories than defeats, and becoming more like our Savior than the world.

Let's walk through verses 17-20, highlighting four important principles for change.

I. Keep your eye on the target: Christlikeness - v. 17-20

Growing up, I played a lot of sports, almost all of which have as their motto "keep your eye on the ball." When a batter is suckered by an inside curve ball, his team rightly says, "Good eye! Good eye!" When golfers have tried to teach me how to play, they say it over and over: "Keep your head down." It's all about the ball.

In Ephesians 4:17-20, Paul tells us the target. Verse 17 issues a blunt command, followed by an explanation. Therefore, I say this and testify in the Lord: You should no longer walk as the Gentiles walk . . . "Gentiles" is a general word referring to pagans, to the lost world. Paul is saying, "Your life must no longer resemble those who are still in their sin and without God."

And what do they look like? 18 They are darkened in their understanding, excluded from the life of God, because of the ignorance that is in them and because of the hardness of their hearts. 19 They became callous and gave themselves over to promiscuity for the practice of every kind of impurity with a desire for more and more. 20 But that is not how you learned about the Messiah.

The description here pictures incapacity to rightly perceive and respond to the truth about God. Left to ourselves, we give ourselves to empty pursuits (the futility of their thoughts), serving the body (promiscuity), and sinking deeper into sinful behavior (every kind of impurity, with a desire for more and more). Paul says, That is not the way you learned Christ.

Keep your eye on the target. Becoming like Christ is your calling, your purpose for breathing, your reason for living. It's Jesus. Everything else is secondary.

II. Cut all ties to your former life - v. 22

Verse 21 says, "you . . . 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. This phrase put off describes a decisive moment, not a gradual decision. This is not negotiation; this is the end. The verb literally means to strip off, as you would clothing that is filthy. In this verse, what is removed and laid aside is your old self, the "you" you were before Christ Jesus saved you.

Paul says get those old ways of meeting your needs, those old habits that marked your Christless days off your back and out of your life. Throw it away! Cut the root! Don't go to those websites anymore. Throw away those magazines and don't buy anymore. Don't hang out with those people that keep you doing things you know are wrong. Those old ways are dead to you now. So get rid of every trace!

One of the greatest theologians in the history of Christianity is Augustine, who was saved out of an immoral, debauched lifestyle. Before his conversion he had a mistress named Claudia. Shortly after he found Christ, Claudia saw him on the street in the city. "Augustine! Augustine!" she cried after her old paramour [lover]. Augustine paid no heed. "Augustine! Augustine!" she cried out again. "It is Claudia!" "But it is no longer Augustine," he replied, as he continued on his way.ⁱⁱ That's what Ephesians 4:22 means.

Can I tell you how that happened with those gang members who were rescued by Jesus in Los Angeles? Father Greg Boyle told them that the gang tattoos had to go. Gang tattoos link them to a past that no longer defines them and can put them in serious danger on the streets. So Boyle created a free service using local doctors to remove them, thereby scrubbing their bodies of the last remaining marks of their rebel past.

It was not an easy procedure. Many of these street-tough people say it feels like hot grease being poured on their skin. "Yet the list of those waiting to go in a new direction grows longer each day, each name representing another life that longs to be free and is willing to endure pain to seize it."

Hey it may cause you pain to break ties with old friends that are ruining your faith. It may bug you to stop doing some things that used to provide temporary pleasure. You want to plug into the power for real, lasting life change? Here's where you start: no more double life. No more straddling the fence. Make a decision right now to cut the ties that links you to ways that are not Christ's ways.

III. Be renewed in your mind - v. 23

"And be renewed in the spirit of your minds." This is present tense. It means an ongoing, progressive shift is happening in the capacity of the mind to spiritually discern the options and decisions with which we are faced. Being renewed in the spirit of your mind means a new, never before way of thinking is taking root. The spirit of your mind is something like the ability to sense the dirt hidden in an idea or opportunity before it attaches itself to my life.

It means what Romans 12:2 says when it commands, Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect. This mind-renewal is a deep spiritual change in how the mind assesses and values things. It acts like an early warning system, or a kind of spiritual filter, stopping temptation that used to fly under the radar and get me.

So how does this fine-tuning of the mind to spiritual realities take place? 2 Cor. 3:18 offers a parallel verse that shows us. And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.

Same transformation language we read in Romans 12 and Eph. 4, describing the progressive inner change, degree by degree. Same goal as before: true Christians take on the image of Christ in their lives. So how can this happen for me? Pay careful attention to the wording: And we all . . . beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed. We become what we constantly behold. If I give my time to gazing intently at the television, I will adopt the ways and words of what I see. If I looking deeply into the glory of God, my minds will be reprogrammed so that I take on the mind of Christ.

Congregation, where is the primary place where we can see the glory of God? The Word of God. "I have stored Your word in my heart, that I might not sin against You" (Ps. 119:11). My mind will be sensitized

Leroy Eims told of how the Word worked in his life. As a new Christian, he was reading through Colossians 3:8: "But now is the time to get rid of anger, rage, malicious behavior, slander, and dirty language." Leroy said, "I tried to slide past it, but he kept bringing me back to the words 'get rid of anger.' "I had a violent temper. Whenever it flared, I'd haul up and bash my fist into the nearest door. Even though I often bloodied my knuckles and once completely smashed a beautiful diamond-and-onyx ring my wife had given me, I couldn't seem to stop. Yet here was God's Word: 'Get rid of anger.'

"So I made a covenant with God. I promised him I was going to work on it. My first step was to memorize the verse and review it daily. I prayed and asked the Lord to bring this verse to mind whenever I might be tempted to lose my temper. And I asked my wife to pray for me and remind me of this verse if she saw me failing in my promise to the Lord. So Colossians 3:8 became a part of my life and gradually removed that sin from me."ⁱⁱⁱ

When I marinate my mind in God's will and truth, I am inputting eternal truth. That changes your thinking and sensitizes your mind to detect even small amounts of dirt in what you're facing.

Keep your eye on the target. Cut ties with your pre-Christian past. Be renewed in your mind.

IV. Put on a new you - v. 24

" . . . and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness." In v. 22, we are urged to shed the old clothes of our former way of life. Now, the Holy Spirit instructs us to put on something brand new, created by God to fit you perfectly, but with a likeness to God in true righteousness and holiness.

So now, as Paul wrote in Gal. 2:20, it's no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me." It's Christ's life that should be obvious in how you do your job, treat your spouse, live out your singleness, or parent your children. How you respond, what you think, even how you feel will find its reference point in your new relationship with Jesus. This is who you are from now on, your essential identity, your new nature in action.

I love how The Message paraphrases these verses:

"From now on, think of it this way: Sin speaks a dead language that means nothing to you; God speaks your mother tongue, and you hang on every word. You are dead to sin and alive to God. That's what Jesus did. That means you must not give sin a vote in the way you conduct your lives. Don't give it the time of day. Don't even run little errands that are connected to that old way of life. Throw yourselves wholeheartedly and full-time . Remember, you've been raised from the dead into God's way of doing things. Sin can't tell you how to live. After all, you're not living under that old tyranny any longer. You're living in the freedom of God."

Conclusion

One day, it will all be over. I will be like Him because I will see Him as He is. Ruth Bell Graham saw a sign along a strip of highway that she would like carved in her gravestone. It read, "End of construction. Thank you for your patience." Meanwhile, this "work in progress" needs intentional, deliberate focus on the target that drives the passion to become like Jesus. That means stripping away this world from my life, having my mind renewed by God's Word, and purposefully living out my new identity in Christ.

ⁱ Jill Carattini, "A Slice of Infinity," No. 1186, Ravi Zacharias International Ministries (6-23-06), online at <http://www.preachingtoday.com> see also Edward Iwata, USA TODAY, "Homeboy Industries Goes Gangbusters" (7-11-05), online at <http://www.usatoday.com>

ⁱⁱ William M. Greathouse, *Romans: Beacon Bible Expositions* (Beacon Hill Press, 1975), p. 103; online at <http://www.preachingtoday.com>

ⁱⁱⁱ Leroy Eims, *The Lost Art of Disciple Making*; found in *Men of Integrity* (May/June 2006), May 5; online at <http://www.preachingtoday.com/>