

Life in the Rearview Mirror: Antidotes to Regret

A Vibrant Faith: Becoming Like Jesus

Last week we began a new series titled: *Life in the Rearview Mirror: Antidotes to Regret*. When you get to the end of your life, whenever that might be, and look back, what kind a person do you wish you had become?

The first topic we are exploring is *A Vibrant Faith*. Last Sunday I talked about “Trusting Jesus.” We examined three characteristics or aspects of faith, three key words: Belief, Trust, Commitment. All are involved in coming to a saving relationship with God through Jesus Christ. They are also involved as we move beyond that initial response of faith to God’s gracious offer of forgiveness and eternal life.

This is the focus of the next two messages. Today we will concern ourselves with “Becoming Like Jesus.” And then next week, “Walking Like Jesus.” The first is a focus on character; the second on conduct.

God has a plan for your life. This is more than just a cliché; it is more than a lead into a presentation of the Gospel; it is a biblical truth.

When this building was built, there was a set of plans that detailed not only the process/procedure/specs, but also what the final product should look like.

The New Testament gives us the blueprint that God is working from in your life as one of his children. Turn to the New Testament book of Romans. Just keep your finger in that book; we are going to be in and out of it all morning.

Romans 8:28-30

The word *predestined* in verse 29 means “to determine from the start what the outcome shall be.” So, here Paul says that God predetermined in eternity that those who believe in him would be conformed to the image of Christ. That is your destiny as a believer. The guaranteed end product is to be just like Jesus.

The Apostle John describes that truth in this way:

Beloved, we are God’s children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is. – *1 John 3:2*

Let me go back to Romans eight. Our salvation was ordained in eternity before time began and will end beyond time in eternity in our glorification. Paul is so certain of the guarantee, the assurance, of this truth that he speaks of our future glorification in the past tense – as if it has already happened. That’s how sure he is that what God has promised will come to pass.

James Denney called this: “the most daring anticipation of faith that...the New Testament contains...” Can you see how excited Paul is about the future destiny, the future certainty, of every believer in Christ?

That’s why Paul can say that God causes all things to work together for good. God sees the big picture. He sees the beginning from the end. There is a wonderful poem titled *The Weaver* that illustrates this perspective. It goes like this:

The Weaver

My life is but a weaving
Between my Lord and me,
I cannot choose the colors
He worketh steadily.

Oftimes He weaveth sorrow,
And I in foolish pride
Forget He sees the upper
And I, the underside.

Not till the loom is silent
And the shuttles cease to fly
Shall God unroll the canvas
And explain the reasons why.

The dark threads are as needful
In the Weaver’s skillful hand
As the threads of gold and silver
In the pattern He has planned.

– *Grant Colfax Tullar*

God began the work of redemption in you with the end in mind. The end: your glorification. When we begin to understand God’s perspective, God’s intent, God’s plan for us, we can then begin to believe that He will cause everything in our lives to work for good. We have to see the whole, not just the parts.

Notice that Romans 8:28 doesn't say that all things are good. All things in life aren't good. There's a lot of bad in the world. It doesn't say that all things work out the way I want them to be good. It doesn't say that all things end good. It doesn't say all things have a happy ending here on earth. Some things end quite badly – humanly speaking.

It says that God works all things for good. This is the assurance that there is nothing that happens to you that God is not able to use for his ultimate purpose in your life – to conform you to the image of Christ. God works everything according to purpose. That means there are no “accidents” in God's plan.

There was a cowboy who applied for an insurance policy. The agent asked, “Have you ever had any accidents?” After reflecting for a moment, the cowboy responded, “Nope, but a bronco did kick in two of my ribs last summer. And a couple years ago, a rattlesnake bit me on my ankle.”

“Wouldn't you call those accidents?” asked the puzzled agent. “Naw,” the cowboy said, “They did it on purpose!”

God really does have a plan for your life – a plan that is rooted in and will be worked out according to his eternal purpose.

With the end in mind, then we can begin to see the process by which God is conforming us into the image of his Son, Jesus. It is not by God making robots of us by taking away our human will, temperament or personality. It is by working in our lives so that our character is more and more like Christ.

The Screwtape Letters is a delightful satire written by C.S. Lewis. It is a series of letters written by a senior demon (Screwtape) to his nephew, a junior demon, instructing him on the way to handle the “charge” assigned to him, a charge that he loses to “the Enemy” – that is, God. In one letter he writes:

One must face the fact that all the talk about His love for men, and His service being perfect freedom, is not (as one would gladly believe) mere propaganda, but an appalling truth. He really does want to fill the universe with a lot of loathsome little replicas of Himself – creatures whose life, on its miniature scale, will be qualitatively like His own, not because He has absorbed them but because their wills freely conform to His. – *The Screwtape Letters*

When we come into a relationship with God through Jesus Christ, he begins his work in us – a process the Bible calls *transformation*.

When we acknowledge our sin and need for forgiveness, God saves us on the basis of his sovereign grace and brings us into his family, forgives our sin, and gives us eternal life. He gives us a new identity in Christ, a new purpose for life and a new power for living through the Holy Spirit.

And he begins to work in us this process of transformation. Just what does that mean? I know I am not plowing new ground for most of you, but it's important we be reminded of these truths.

We find our word in **Romans 12:1-2**. There's our word – “transformed.” The Greek word is: *metamorphoumai* – “to be changed into another form.” We get our word “metamorphosis” from this.

This word in verse two is set in contrast to an earlier one – “conformed.” Paul writes: “Do not be conformed.” This word means:

Conform: to assume an outward appearance that does not come from within, nor accurately represents what is inside.

It carries with it the idea of masquerade. It is change on the outside alone.

Metamorphoumai is change within – on the inside. This same word is used in Matthew 17 where Jesus and three of his disciples went up on the mountain, and the Gospel text says that Jesus was “transfigured” before them. There's our word. His face shone like the sun and his clothes became as white as the light.

What did the disciples see? It was the glory of God that was within him, radiating in revealing splendor. The Apostle John, one of the three, later wrote:

And we saw his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. – *John 1:14*

The transfiguration was not a masquerade. There was no stage lighting by the angels. The glory came from within. He was transformed on the outside by revealing the glory that was on the inside. This is what God wants to do with you and me.

The verb *transformed* in Romans 12 is in the present tense. It is an ongoing process. The change within results in change without.

Caution – transformation is not simply conforming our outward actions to a standard with no inner change. We are not just talking about a cosmetic make-over on the outside.

Joe was 80 years old when his beloved wife passed away. After a respectable period of mourning, he decided that life must go on. He went on a diet and lost 30 pounds, got a face lift and a hairpiece, learned to dance and began to date. Thirty days later, Joe died of a heart attack. When he arrived in heaven, he wistfully asked God, “Why me? I was just beginning to enjoy life again.” God replied, “Sorry, Joe. I didn’t recognize you!”

Bad theology, but makes my point. We are talking about something that is centered on the inside. Then it is revealed or manifested on the outside.

W.E. Vine, in his *Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*, defines *transformation* this way:

The obligation being to undergo a complete change, which under the power of God, will find expression in character and conduct.

It is an inside job that manifests itself on the outside – a change in character that produces a change in conduct. This process of transformation takes place primarily in three general arenas.

The first arena is **The Mind**.

Transformation involves a renewed mind. Vine defines this word “renewing” as:

The adjustment of the moral and spiritual vision and thinking to the mind of God, which is designed to have a transforming effect upon the life.

Every one of us has a belief system comprised of core values. The renewing of our minds takes place at this level of our core values – in our belief systems – in the way we understand and interpret facts and truths. Until we change at this level of our being, we are not going to have profound change in character. It begins in the mind.

As a man thinks within himself, so is he. – *Proverbs 23:7*

The second arena is: **The Heart**

If we are to experience significant change, God must also soften our hearts. Years ago, former congressman Les Aspin was the Secretary of Defense under President

Clinton. It was revealed that he had a heart condition caused by the thickening of the heart muscle. Hearing that, I was struck with the spiritual equivalent. We have a tendency to suffer from a spiritual thickening of the heart.

The Scriptures present us with a not-so-pretty picture of the human heart – the seat of our emotions.

The heart is deceitfully wicked and desperately sick; who can understand it? –
Jeremiah 17:9

The heart has been deeply affected by the Fall – by sin in all its aspects. The writer of Proverbs has advice for us:

Watch over your heart with all diligence, for from it flow the springs of life. –
Proverbs 4:23

Lastly: **The Will**

The third arena for change is the will. God strengthens our will in transformation. The Holy Spirit, who lives within every believer, energizes the desire and capacity to choose God's will and ways in one's life.

You can have a change in thinking or in feeling, but until you engage the will – the power to choose – you have not accomplished anything. Change will not occur without choosing to follow God – choosing to listen to Him – choosing to obey Him.

We are partners with God in this process of transformation. It involves not only his part, which we will get to in a moment, but also our part.

A couple of thoughts about our part: things required on our part. First, there needs to be a growing knowledge of God and his will for our lives. Paul writes that “faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of Christ.” In other words, there are things that we need to know as part of the process of growing spiritually into maturity in Christ. Look what Paul writes to the Colossians:

For this reason also, since the day we heard of it, we have not ceased to pray for you and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that you may walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, pleasing him in all respects, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God. – *Colossians 1:9-10*

A second thing on our part is spiritual discipline. Look what Paul writes to Timothy:

Discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness; for bodily discipline is only of little profit, but godliness is profitable for all things, since it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come. It is a trustworthy statement deserving full acceptance. For it is for this we labor and strive, because we have fixed our hope on the living God.... – *1 Timothy 4:7(b)-10*

The process of transformation is not easy, nor quick. We live in an instant society – instant coffee, instant replay, instant photo-processing. Transformation is a process that occurs over a lifetime.

There is no such thing as instant spiritual maturity. It is a disciplined process – a pilgrimage. But it requires effort. Notice that Paul uses the words “labor” and “strive.” It is a strenuous task on our part which is why discipline is necessary.

Discipline involves several things. Here’s a few of them:

- **Focus on the right things.** The goal Paul says is godliness – another word here would be Christ-likeness. Discipline is not the end, but the means to the end.
- **Organize & live around priorities.** What place does God and his plan for your life have in your priorities? Is it the most important thing in your life? Is it the center around which everything else revolves?

God wants your whole life, not just Sundays, not just 10 percent or 50 percent or even 95 percent. C.S. Lewis said:

Christianity, if false, is of no importance, and if true, of infinite importance. The only thing it cannot be is moderately important.

- **Develop godly habits.** This involves our thinking and our doing. Look at the way Paul put it in his letter to the Philippians:

Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me – practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you. – *Philippians 4:8-9*

Two critical words: think and practice.

This involves the discipline of reading & studying God's Word, developing a life of fellowship with God through prayer, a life of obedience – these are all spiritual disciplines to which we apply ourselves as God works within us to conform us to the image of Christ.

On God's part, he employs many tools in the process of transformation, but I want to mention three special tools in his work in your life.

The first is **PRESSURE**

What is it that transforms an unformed, useless hunk of clay into a beautiful pottery vessel? It is the pressure of the potter's hand. This clay could sit all day on the potter's wheel, going round and round, and at the end of the day would still look the same and be no different than at the beginning. But it is as the potter puts his fingers to the clay and applies pressure that form begins to take shape.

Look at the perspective of Paul in Romans 5:

And not only this, but we also exult in our tribulations, knowing that tribulation brings about perseverance; and perseverance, proven character; and proven character, hope; and hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us.
– *Romans 5:3-5*

That word *tribulation* means “pressure” – the pressure of circumstances. That pressure produces endurance or perseverance in our lives. It is building reliance upon and dependence upon God and his grace. That perseverance produces character and then the outcome of all this is hope.

Notice here that hope is not at the beginning where you might expect it to be, but at the end. It is not the fuel to keep you going through the struggle of pressure; it is the outcome of persevering through the difficulties.

James has in mind this same thing as he writes about the value of trials in our lives.

Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing. – *James 1:2-4*

James casts the net widely with the use of the word “trials.” It includes all kinds of things we encounter in life including sickness, loneliness, sorrow, and disappointment.

The word “testing” is found only one other place in the New Testament plus twice in the Greek translation of the Old Testament. The Old Testament occurrences refer to the process of refining silver or gold. Our faith which is so involved in our transformation is tested – it is refined by difficulties.

The silversmith heats the metal to boiling. When he does, the impurities rise to the surface and are skimmed off. He repeats the process over and over again. He knows the process is complete when he can see his reflection in the metal.

Another tool God uses is **SUFFERING**. The book of 1 Peter is about suffering. It was written to Christians who were going through the crucible of suffering. He writes words of encouragement to them:

Therefore let those who suffer according to God’s will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good. – *1 Peter 4:19*

Peter encouraged them to not lose heart, but to keep on trusting. The Psalmist puts words to the experience of suffering. He writes:

Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD! O Lord, hear my voice! Let your ears be attentive to the voice of my pleas for mercy. – *Psalms 130:1-2*

Eugene Peterson says the “suffering is set squarely, openly, passionately before God. It is acknowledged and expressed. It is described and lived.”

Peterson writes of God’s mercy and divine purposes even in the midst of suffering. He says:

And this, of course, is why we are able to face, acknowledge, accept and live through suffering, for we know that it can never be ultimate, it can never constitute the bottom line. God is at the foundation and God is at the boundaries.... We are persuaded that God’s way with us is redemption and that the redemption, not the suffering, is ultimate.

For those who see God’s gracious, transforming work – even and especially in one’s suffering, they have a perspective others may never know.

Let me briefly mention one other special tool God employs in the process of transformation. It might surprise you. It is **SILENCE**.

There are times in our spiritual journeys when God is silent. Even when we cry out for him, we hear nothing. This is a time when it is essential that we be careful not to

draw the wrong conclusions: God is busy helping someone else; God is somehow punishing me for some sin or wrong; God doesn't care.

Isaiah, the prophet, puts it bluntly, "Truly, you are a God who hides himself." Philip Yancey in his book *Reaching for the Invisible God* writes:

Why does God hide? ...God recognizes that *we* are the ones on the journey, not himself. The journey does not transpire like a treasure hunt, such that if we follow the instructions and look hard enough we will find the treasure. No, the journey itself is the goal. The very quest for God, our determined pursuit, changes us in the ways that matter most.

The silence and darkness we encounter, the temptation, and even the sufferings can all contribute to God's stated goal of shaping us into persons more like he intended – more like his Son.

Let me wrap up this morning with some thoughts. Paul speaks of this process of transformation as central to the Christian experience. It involves us – you and me – in the pursuit of God and his purposes in our lives. And it is all bound up in God's sovereign, gracious work.

...work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure. – *Philippians 2:12-13*

The ultimate goal of transformation is to shape you into the very image of Christ. How can you know if this process of transformation is at work in your life? One way is to consider what Paul calls the "fruit of the Spirit," that is, character traits that God the Spirit is producing in your life.

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.... – *Galatians 5:22-23*

If your life is being transformed, these qualities ought to be present and increasing in your life. They are checkpoints for spiritual growth.

A woman was asked by a co-worker, "What is it like to be a Christian?"

The woman replied: "It is like being a pumpkin. God picks you from the patch, brings you in, and washes all the dirt off of you. Then he cuts off the top and scoops out all the yucky stuff.

He removes the seeds of doubt, hate, greed, etc., and then he carves you a new smiling face and puts his light inside of you to shine for all the world to see.”

That’s transformation, friends! There is one final thing that I leave with you as God’s unconditional guarantee: he will accomplish his purpose in you. Paul said,

And I am certain that God, who began the good work within you, will continue his work until it is finished on the day when Christ Jesus returns.

– *Philippians 1:6*