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Ephesians 1:3-14

First Message

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FORMED BY GOD

SERIES: FORMED INTO CHRIST

Today I have the privilege of introducing our summer series, something we have done now for the past several years on Sunday mornings. We will return to our Luke studies in September. This year the summer series will focus on being formed or shaped into Christ. Several of us will be talking about aspects of our life and how God uses these different aspects in a spiritual dimension to do his transforming work in us.

While our summer series will not be in our typical exegetical style, we will still have a source text, the book of Ephesians. Most of Paul's letters—Corinthians, Galatians, Colossians—were written to specific issues in various churches. But this is not true of the letter to Ephesus. Ephesians is more holistic, and so it isn't surprising to encounter most of the topics we will talk about in this letter. I encourage you to familiarize yourself with the flow and themes of Ephesians and make this text your companion this summer.

The Goal of Formation

I want to start by talking about the goal of our life in Christ. Why are we here? What are we doing? Where are we headed? What is the overarching goal? The apostle Paul is very clear about this in Ephesians and elsewhere.

In chapter 4 of Ephesians Paul tells us that the body of Christ is to be built up through graces given to the church

until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ (Ephesians 4:13 ESV).

Instead of being immature, "we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ" (4:15). In chapter 3 Paul prays for the Ephesian believers be "filled with all the fullness of God" (3:19).

To the Colossians Paul's desire and labor is to "present everyone mature (complete) in Christ" (Colossians 1:28). Paul is so troubled for the Galatians that he writes he is "in the anguish of childbirth until Christ is formed in you!" (Galatians 4:19).

In 2 Corinthians Paul talks about the radical transformation, the metamorphosis, that is taking place for those in Christ: "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" (2 Corinthians 3:18 ESV). In Christ we are being transformed from the glory of man to the glory of God. Again Paul uses this same language when he tells the Romans to not "be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind" (Romans 12:2).

Peter adds to Paul's words by saying that God

has granted to us his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire (2 Peter 1:4).

There are a lot of things we ponder when thinking about the Christian life: doctrine and theology, community and a place to belong, insights on family life and marriage, evangelism and missions, outreach and social justice. These are all good things. But all of these ideas find their home in the Paul's overarching goal of being formed into Christ. Many different words and phrases speak to this goal—to grow to maturity, follow Jesus, live a life of discipleship, engage in the process of sanctification, or live fully in the God's kingdom. If we are focused on the primary thing, then a lot of other things will result.

What does it mean to be formed into Christ? Formation and maturity are matters of growing in character and being people of substance and authenticity. You might have an image of what maturity might look like for you. If your desire is to be more gentle, kind, loving, content, and patient then you have a pretty good idea of what Paul is talking about.

Paul uses two metaphors for this process in Ephesians—architecture and biology. Growing to maturity is like becoming a solid structure (actually a new temple, the dwelling place of God) or a fruitful organic plant and this applies not just to us individually but also corporately as a community of faith. Irenaeus said, "The glory of God is a human fully alive."¹ This is what we see in Jesus and this is what we were designed and created to be. A human fully alive lives in freedom instead of slavery and love instead of fear.

The Need For Transformation

Why do we need to grow and be transformed? The reason is because we enter this world broken, under the power of sin and death. Even though we retain aspects of being created in the image of God, that image has been tarnished. Early in our life we come up with our plans for personal happiness. We seek to live separate from God and define our own way, pursuing things that will give us life apart from God. Our lives become patterned or molded into the shape of world. The good news of the gospel is that we are made alive with Christ and can be formed into Christ, transformed through the work of the Holy Spirit so that the life of Christ can live in us. And although we are new creations in Christ, the work of maturing is an ongoing activity.

Eugene Peterson comments that one of the key words in Ephesians is the word "equip" in chapter 4, the verse I just quoted. God gives gifts to the church in order to

equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ (Ephesians 4:12–13).

The Greek word is *katartismos* (*katartismoŝ*) The word is used of mending nets or mending a bone. Thus it means to be healed,

made fit, put together. We have been in a terrible accident but now we are healing and becoming whole. We might walk with a limp or require radical surgery but we are on the mend to becoming fully functioning as we were intended. A good question to ask is whether our goal and Paul's goal is the same.

Guiding Thoughts

I want to start by laying out some guiding thoughts, some thoughts that might undergird our studies this summer. They are really simple ideas, but they help keep me on track.

A Lifelong Process

“Formed into Christ” is a lifelong process, a spiritual journey. This journey is not a straight line and you cannot preplan your itinerary. The journey is slow because maturity does not come quickly and God has his own timetable. There are detours, backtracking, and many surprises. Often there is mystery and lack of understanding. It is easy for us to stall and get stuck. We never arrive during this life, but keep moving towards the ultimate goal of being like Christ in a home not of this world. All of us are spiritual pilgrims, like Abraham and Moses, Ruth and Esther, Israel and Jesus, Paul and Peter.

I have a good friend who is currently walking the Camino de Santiago with his son, a month long, 500 mile spiritual pilgrimage. In one church he encountered a list of the Beatitudes of the Pilgrim. One of them read: “Blessed are you pilgrim, if you search for the truth and make of the ‘camino’ a life and of your life a ‘way,’ in search of the one who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life.” This lifelong pilgrimage is for all of us.

Deeply Internal

“Formed into Christ” is something much different than rearranging our outer world, making behavior modifications, managing our sin, or fixing our problems. Sin avoidance does not lead to transformation.

Maturity doesn't happen from the outside in by coming up with a program, a formula, a set of moral principles, understanding a system of theology, conforming to a church culture, acquiring knowledge we can put to use, or even having a mystical experience. All of these things can be imposters to authentic transformation. Transformation is not something we figure out and then work out a program to make it happen.

Transformation is a deep, inner journey where we align our deepest longings and desires to God. It is an embodied spirituality. Throughout our life we attach our deep desires for love and life to power, possessions, and people, i.e. to idols. Idols can never satisfy the deepest longings, which even though they might not be recognized as such, are really restless longings for the one who created us and loves us. Those who open us to our desires and longings can be helpful guides. We might ask ourselves, “What is our deepest desire and where are we looking to satisfy that desire?”

Journey of Descent

Growth in Christ is not a journey of ascent nor is it a journey only for the spiritual elite. Such a journey would lead to feeling superior over others and living in our own strength. The journey is a journey of descent, the way of Jesus, the way of the cross. It involves dying to self, descending, letting go rather than clutching and holding. We must realize that we are not in control and surrender ourselves to God. Not my will, but thy will be done. The idea that we are in

control of our life is an illusion. We are to discover the way the Holy Spirit works.

Embracing Reality

Most of us distort, minimize, avoid, deny, or repress the painful aspects of our reality. We try to fabricate or create the reality that we want. We play mind games to rationalize and justify our compulsions and addictions. Living in truthfulness is a key factor in becoming free and whole. Transformation can only happen when we are vulnerable and honest about our life and the situations in which we find ourselves.

Uniqueness

“Formed into Christ” results in uniqueness rather than sameness. The church is not designed to be a Christian zoo nor a factory for bobble-head Christians. Spiritual growth is not one-size-fits-all. If we take away all the sin in the world we will not be alike. There are no copies. Each of us is an original. There are common themes to our journeys and a common goal in terms of quality of character, but everyone has a unique journey, unique ways of experiencing God and giftedness in serving God. We don't have to fit into a Christian box and we should not try and put others in one. We honor others, become companions, and celebrate our uniqueness.

Being

Many of us are addicted to compulsive busyness, to performing, and basing our worth on what we do. I know I am. Our world operates this way and our culture invades the life of the church. An absence of stillness results in shallowness. We become like the Platte River in Nebraska where I grew up, a mile long and an inch deep. Compulsive doing blocks the undercurrents of our hearts and souls, the things that often rattle around inside of us that God can use in the transformation process. Growth in Christ requires some amount of space where we open ourselves and listen to God, where we allow the Word to sink deep into our hearts, and face the things that God wants us to attend to. He is going to do it one way or another. Actions definitely are a part of growth, but actions have a different quality and dimension when flowing out of being.

Circumstances

Circumstances have very little influence in the transformational journey. Rather it is our response to whatever we encounter. Many of the things in our lives we don't get to choose—where we are born, who our parents are, etc. Some of us have an easier time through life and manage pretty well while others seem to struggle year after year. But God can use every circumstance and every person in our life in order to mold his character in us. Many times the most transformational moments come in seasons of suffering and adversity. God uses it all, even our sin and our rebellion. This is why we are going to look at several aspects of our lives and how God uses them to grow us to maturity.

Blessed Are The Poor

The gospel turns the world upside down. Often it is those who are broken, suffering, and poor who have the inside track on being formed in Christ over and above those who are capable and adequate. The poor and needy know they need God and live in dependence on him. They know they cannot handle life on their own strength. This is the beatitudes—blessed are the poor, those who mourn, those who are persecuted, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. Transformation is not a competition for the brightest and the best, but takes place in poverty and brokenness and weakness.

Living into Grace

So where do we begin? I talked about some of what I just shared with a group of men a few weeks ago. Something very interesting happened. Immediately the men started thinking about their sin, how far they fall short, things they need to improve. Basically they all got very quiet and rather depressed. Maybe some of you are feeling that way right now.

The place for us to begin is not with us, but rather with God. In a lecture I recently listened to, Eugene Peterson stated, “God, the Holy Spirit, forms the life of Christ in us.”² And this is where Paul begins his letter to the Ephesians. He begins with a blessing prayer telling us what God has done and will continue to do. Formation is centered in the work of God first and foremost. The potter of Jeremiah 18 is at the wheel forming and shaping us. The image of a potter’s hand molding a clay pot is an appropriate image for our entire summer.

The text of Ephesians 1:3-14 is in your worship guide and instead of reading the whole thing, let me point out several powerful and marvelous phrases which are highlighted for you.

First, “we are blessed in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places” (1:3). Paul begins by blessing the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ and then includes and invites us into that blessing as well. The blessing we truly desire is already ours.

Second, God “chose us in him before the foundation of the world” (1:4). We are not an accident, but rather a divine choice. God doesn’t make any junk. In Christ we now have unchangeable worth and value.

Third, God “predestined us for adoption as sons (and daughters) to be his sons through Jesus Christ” (1:5). God decided beforehand to put Christ and us together to be a member of his family. We are his children, not slaves or servants. The fact that we are predestined means that we are in the car but God is doing the driving. God has decided where your life is going to end up which takes the focus off of us and rescues us from small mindedness.

Fourth, in Christ “we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses” (1:7). Through the cross, God’s lavish grace overflows giving us freedom and acceptance without shame, or guilt, or condemnation. Our failures and regrets are swallowed up.

Fifth, God made “known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ” (1:9). He revealed to us things that we could have never known about, such as his plans and purposes in Jesus. We have insider knowledge and the SEC can’t touch us.

Sixth, in Christ “we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined” (1:11). We have a purpose and destiny not only to have an inheritance but also to be God’s inheritance, his possession.

Seventh, in Christ we were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, giving us assurance and resources that come from God and not from ourselves.

Finally, we might note the repetition of “in Christ” and “in him,” highlighting the centrality of Christ, and the three-fold occurrence of the phrase “to the praise of his glory” threaded throughout. Every blessing comes to us through Christ and everything that happens during our lifetime is for our good and God’s glory.

Paul is giving us the big picture and showing us where to start. We could spend a week talking about each of these phrases I have

mentioned. God is the subject of the sentence. He is relational and he is personally involved with us. God is doing the big things. He has created us and chosen us. He has redeemed our life and continues to work out that redemption. Formation is centered on God and his unmerited, undeserved, overflowing grace towards each and every one of us. This is the starting point.

The theme of “grace” shows up all over the place in Ephesians. Paul begins with a greeting of grace and peace and ends by saying, “Grace be with all who love our Lord Jesus Christ” (Ephesians 6:24).

We are predestined “to the praise of his glorious grace,” and God has “blessed [literally “graced”] us in the Beloved” in verse 6. In verse 7, our redemption through the blood of Christ that results in the forgiveness of our sins is “according to the riches of his grace.”

And then in chapter two Paul is again piling on more hyperbolic language to make his point:

Even when we were dead in our trespasses and sins...[God] made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God. (Ephesians 2:1,5–8)

Grace is the active expression of God’s love. God’s love is the root of grace; grace itself is the dynamic flowering of this love and the good things that result in life are the fruit of this divine process.³

God is inviting and calling us into a world overflowing with his grace. His desire is for us to participate willingly with what he is doing in us and in the world. Growing to maturity means that we live into this grace and let it touch every aspect of our lives. And that is not easy to do for several reasons.

Since grace is a complete gift it might be hard for us accept. Since grace is invisible and mysterious it might be hard for us perceive. We might be unaware or blind to the presence of God’s grace. God might even appear to us as unloving and absent. We ignore God’s grace and stay focused on our plans for personal happiness or clutch to our idols hoping they will come through. Or in our anger and self-protection we simply don’t want to make ourselves vulnerable to being hurt again.

God is doing the big things, but we are not passive in the process of formation. God doesn’t force us or coerce us to live into his grace. He doesn’t impose himself upon us or force us to do it. He invites us but does not control our response. We have choices to make and we must take personal responsibility for those choices and the resulting consequences. But God’s grace is always available to us to guide, protect, empower, and transform. It is wrong for us to think that God has done his part and now it us up to us to finish the task. We ground ourselves and center ourselves in God’s grace and then we live into this grace on a daily, hourly, minute-by-minute basis, whereby God, the Holy Spirit, forms the life of Christ in us.

A Walk With Jesus

As I mentioned at the beginning I have been ill for several weeks now, but about four weeks ago I was in really bad shape, hardly able to climb off the couch. But sickness isn’t all bad because it creates a space and an openness that would normally be filled with doing. And so I was thinking a lot about beginning this series and Paul’s

prayer in Ephesians 1:3-14. I was also looking back on my life and how hard I basically tried to bless and grace myself with personal plans for happiness, validation from people and performance, and a Midwest work ethic to carve out a solid identity. Looking back now it is so easy to see how fruitless all my efforts had been.

One night, just as darkness approached, I decided I needed to get outside and take a walk. As I left the house my thoughts turned to Paul's word in Ephesians 1 and I felt an overflow of God's grace, at least I am convinced that it came from him and not the medications I was on. I was suddenly caught up in the bigness of it all, the abundance of this grace, this gift that God desires to flow into our lives. And God asked me a question: "How much of my grace do you truly desire? There is so much I want to give to you, and it really makes me sad if you don't receive all I have to offer." And suddenly I simply began to worship God with no thought to my silly efforts and failures over the years to order life the way I wanted it to be.

God's grace may not always be experienced, but it doesn't flow out of a dripping faucet that we have to work hard at opening with a pipe wrench. God's grace flows in abundance. And this is where we have to start and continue if we are to grow into the fullness of God. The grace of God is our foundation for growing in Jesus. We live into this grace. God, the Holy Spirit, forms the life of Christ in us.

1. Ben Patterson, *God's Prayer Book: The Power and Pleasure of Praying the Psalms*, (Tyndale House Publishers, Ill, 2008), 8.
2. Eugene Peterson, "Soulcraft: Spiritual Formation" Audio Lectures (Regent College, Spring 1998)
3. Gerald May, *Addiction and Grace* (Harper One, New York, 1988), 120.

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