



FORMED INTO A NEW CREATION

SERIES: FORMED INTO CHRIST

Ephesians 4:17–24

3rd Message

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For the first two weeks of our summer series we have focused on God's work in shaping us into Christ. God has done the big things and continues to do them and forms the life of Christ in us through the Spirit. Last week we saw that God creates and forms us in love in order that we might become love. Knowing God's love is foundational to being formed into Christ.

But this week we are going to get involved in working out the mess and muddle of our lives. Our discussion centers on the movement from what Paul calls the old self to the new self, the journey to become who we were always intended to be as human beings created in God's image, the process of becoming who we actually are in Christ. This topic can be very confusing and confounding to us. We wonder why God doesn't just snap his fingers and change us rather than allowing us to struggle against the sin, habits, and addictions of our hearts and minds that are entrenched in—what Paul calls “the flesh.” We wonder how we can change or if we will ever be able to change.

A New Creation in Christ

We start with a foundational truth and that is that we are a new creation in Christ. Paul tells us this plainly in 2 Corinthians: “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come” (2 Corinthians 5:17 ESV).

This truth is so real for Paul that he does not know anyone, even Christ, by the flesh—the old creation—any longer. He only recognizes people as a new creation. In several NT passages we are told that our story of redemption is characterized by two periods of time: “at one time” and “but now.” Here are three examples from the apostle Paul:

At one time...you were...separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who were once far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. (Ephesians 2:11–13)

Formerly, when you did not know God, you were enslaved to those that by nature are not gods. But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God (Galatians 4:8–9)

And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him (Colossians 1:21–22)

The reason that we are a new creation is because we have been united in the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. What happened to Christ happens to us, as Paul tells us in Romans 6:

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as

Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. (Romans 6:3–4)

In Colossians Paul tells us that we have been relocated: “[God] has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son” (Colossians 1:13). And later in the letter Paul tells us: “You have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God” (Colossians 3:3).

When we hear the gospel and believe, something dramatic and spectacular takes place. In Christ we become new people, not a refurbished version of the old. We are raised with the resurrected Christ. The days of the new covenant arrived following the resurrection and ascension, just as they were spoken of by Jeremiah and Ezekiel; the days when God would give his people a new heart and write the law on their hearts through the Spirit. Our life is now completely in Christ.

This truth might be difficult for us to imagine, especially for people here who have grown up in church. The church might be the culture we simply grew up in but we don't experience the full impact of this shift in our lives like some who come to Christ out of deep darkness. But it doesn't matter whether we are 9 or 19 or 90. At the point of belief a monumental change takes place. We no longer are who we once were.

Living as a New Creation

Now that we are in Christ, we are taught by Scripture to live our lives here on earth as new creations, to walk in newness of life. Paul tells us in Ephesians that we “must no longer walk as the Gentiles do” (Ephesians 4:17) but rather “walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called.” (Ephesians 4:1)

He prays for the Colossians “to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God” (Colossians 1:10). And to the Thessalonians “to walk in a manner worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory” (1 Thessalonians 2:12).

We know we are to live different lives now that we are in Christ, but we also know that living as new creations is not easy. Often times we find ourselves saying with Paul in Romans 7

I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate...I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing (Romans 7:15; 19).

Ray Stedman always said that these words described his golf game and I could say the same of mine.

But this is where we live much of the time, battling against sin, trying to live like Christ, wishing that it would be easier. All of us have our compulsions and addictions. We make resolutions, pray for deliverance and change, and strive to live in the Spirit, but often find ourselves defeated. We think we should be better people and often

pretend that we are more holy than we actually are. It can all seem like a vicious cycle and we just want to give up. Perhaps we try harder through rule keeping or we turn to escape. We can easily become hypocrites and Pharisees, pointing our fingers at the sin of others instead of our own.

God could have made living as a new creation so much easier, but he doesn't do that. Why? Well let me suggest three things. First, God wants us to learn how to battle and fight against enemies. When Israel entered the Promised Land God didn't eradicate all the enemies and idols by snapping his fingers. He wanted to his people to learn to battle. He allowed temptation to remain in order to test his people, realize their choices, and see the consequences. And the same is true for us. The land is a symbol for entering into our life in Christ. But there are still enemies in the land that we must face.

Second, we face struggles against the "flesh" so we will learn to depend on God, not just in our own strength. When we find ourselves defeated and powerless and are honest enough to admit it, this is a good thing. God wants us to depend on him and others, to live interdependently rather than independently. When Israel trusted the Lord in battle, God's strength was always sufficient. But when they went it on their own, they didn't do so well.

Third, when we are willing to face our sins and habits we have the opportunity to grow stronger and more mature in perseverance, courage, and patience. James tells us that the "testing of your faith produces steadfastness" (James 1:3). We gain the ability to hang in there and remain under the pressure when life is tough. God doesn't want to destroy us. He wants to strengthen us. We are spiritual athletes growing in character. Facing our battles is part of the training, the refining process that burns the dross from silver and leaves purified metal.

Sometimes God brings a change or deliverance in some dramatic way, a Jericho experience. That happened to me when I first became a Christian. I had developed a habit of smoking cigarettes when I was in college and when I became a Christian I really didn't want to do that anymore. I prayed and prayed over this for several months. One morning I woke up and the desire was completely gone and I knew it was gone. And it has never returned. But there were plenty of other areas that remained and that have been sources of struggle. For most of this is the norm, part of God's plan.

The Old Self and New Self

The tension and struggle we face is between the old self and new self, our old and new natures, the flesh and Spirit. Regardless of how we feel we don't have a split personality. We are not ping-pong back and forth between two different people in one body. We are no longer in Adam but completely in Christ. We are redeemed people that carry around some false ways of thinking and living. We are growing into the person we are in Christ, moving from slavery to freedom, but we will never be complete until the consummation. Redemption is both past and present. As I said the first week of our series, transformation is a lifelong process.

The Old Self

What exactly is the old self? Paul tells us in Ephesians that the "old self, belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires" (Ephesians 4:22). And then in Colossians he says it is "What is earthly (lit. of the earth) in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry" (Colossians 3:5).

The old self is who we were once, our natural, earthbound person, separate from God. It is perishable, destined for ruin, and has desires that lead us astray. It is a self-referenced life, autonomous from God. The old self is the way we learn to live, survive, and cope in a broken world. It is based on what we do, what we have, and what people think about us, our default way of living that was rooted in sin.

Robert Mulholland writes: The essence of the false self "is a mode of being in the world decentered from life in God, although seeking to retain God on its own terms; a mode of being that creates its own structures of identity, meaning, value and purpose; and mode of being that determines for itself the nature of its own being"¹

The old self is like a virus in our flesh that seeks to control and run our lives. It is characterized by being protective, defensive, possessive, manipulative, destructive, self-exalting, and indulgent. Perhaps the most prominent feature of the old self is fear and anxiety, often resulting in anger. One of our chief fears is that something will happen that we can't handle. The old self is hostile to God and can't change even though we try to make it religious or patch it up with duck tape. The old self or flesh is very predictable and boring, always the same. There are only about a dozen so sins and they just keep appearing in various ways. Living under the control of the old self or flesh results in slavery to sin.

The New Self

But this is no longer who we are. Paul tells us that the new self is "created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness," and is "being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator" (Ephesians 4:24; Colossians 3:10).

Our new self is both patterned in God's likeness and being renewed into his image as we grow in Christ. God has designed and empowered us to live in a completely new way. According to Colossians 3, the true self is characterized by compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, which are all undergirded by forbearance and forgiveness. And then love binds everything together in perfect harmony.

The new self is not easily offended; doesn't hold onto old hurts; doesn't have to punish or get revenge; doesn't dwell on the differences in others; doesn't need to protect, hide or cling or grasp; doesn't hate or reject itself; doesn't dwell on being worthy or unworthy; lets go of consequences and results; is satisfied and content. The new self no longer has an "I" but now the "I" is united with the "I AM." Life is not about me. I am about life and my life in God. The new self cannot be lost or taken from us because it is heaven bound. The new self lives in freedom.

I grew up in Nebraska, but for many years now I have lived in California. Nebraska was my former residence. California is my current residence. But even though I don't live in Nebraska, I have memories, ways of thinking and living, even some longings for what I once knew, like getting out of town in 10 minutes and driving in the country. I can try and live in California as if I was in Nebraska and sometimes I really want to, like when I get stuck in traffic. But it really doesn't work out too well because I live in California. I know this is not a perfect illustration, but we can live as if we are residents of earth but that is not where we live. We are residents of heaven and we are learning to live here and now according to our new spiritual residence. I am not saying that California is heaven.

False attachments

Why then, is this process of living in the new self so difficult? The root of the problem is the false attachments that the old self forms with people, power, and possessions to gain identity, meaning, purpose, and value. Early in our life we develop programs for gaining personal happiness, strategies for meeting our basic needs—love, survival, power, and control—and techniques to deal with feelings of vulnerability, shame, and inadequacy. Basically, our false attachments are idols. They have power over us and do not yield the results we truly desire. Attachments are unhealthy patterns worn in by time and practice that keep tripping us up and controlling us. The flesh never forgets the attachments we have made.

Practical Ideas to Ponder

And so we ask, what will help us to gain a foothold on our enemies and grow into living as the new creation we are in Christ? Let me offer some ideas for us to ponder.

God and Us Together

God doesn't force us to live in the new self. He wants us to be involved in what he is doing. We have choices and we need to take responsibility for our choices. We experience the consequences of our actions and sometimes those consequences are horrible. We can choose to be angry, resentful, unforgiving, or lustful. God lets us do what we want.

Paul tells us to live worthy of our calling. Eugene Peterson comments that the word "worthy" provides us with a word picture of an old fashioned scale with two pans. The word for "worthy" is *axios* and refers to the piece that connects the two weighing pans together, meaning that what happens in one affects the other. The two pans in the picture are calling and walking.²

The picture tells us that we can never separate our walking from our calling. We don't take over the walking now that God has done his part. We live in the center where there is tension. Transformation can only really happen by God's grace but we are involved and God invites us to participate. Grace does not mean we should be less serious about holiness or that we give up and give in to unhealthy patterns. We can fake our Christian life or we can settle into living out this life, working it out, engaging in the tension, and spending the rest of our lives doing it—praying, walking, living, and obeying.

Honesty

C. S. Lewis used to ask, 'What is the most significant conversation you have every day?' People would respond piously, 'Your conversation with God, of course.' 'No,' Lewis would reply. 'It's the conversation you have with yourself before you speak to God, because in that conversation with yourself, you decide whether you are going to be honest and authentic with God, or whether you are going to meet God with a false face, a mask, an act, a pretense.'³

Honesty is critical for transformation. The flesh loves to evade, deny, justify, and play mind games. When we are honest about our secret sins and addictions, which we all have, they lose power. Thus it is critical to become aware of our false attachments and our plans for personal happiness, places where we are seeking value, meaning, purpose, and identity apart from God, the places we think are home. We can think through the health of our relationships and notice people who have too much control over us based on what we are seeking from them. We can become aware of our emotions

and the things we react to strongly. Honesty is the practice of self-examination and confession and brings us into the presence of God.

Dismantle False Attachments

In Ephesians and Colossians Paul tells us to "put off the old self" like old, worn-out clothing (Ephesians 4:22). Other phrases we encounter are "put to death," "deny himself and take up his cross daily," and "make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires" (Colossians 3:5; Luke 9:23; Romans 13:14).

The truth is that the old self has died and we are to leave it buried. The idea of putting to death involves a serious, harsh, ruthless, definitive attitude. Making no provision implies desertion and deprivation.

In prayer we detach ourselves from false attachments and release them. We become aware of our plans for personal happiness and the way we want life to be ordered and we dismantle those plans at the core. My grandson loves excavators and things that dig. We need excavators to tear down the walls and dig up the foundations and roots of false attachments. This will not feel comfortable because it will leave a hole, an empty space, and move us into unknown territory where we are required to trust that God is good and his plans for our life are better than our own.

Sometimes we make it too difficult by examining the motivations and reasons for living in the old man. Sometimes we can simply say, "no" or "quit." We can get off the merry-go-round. God gives us permission not to obey the voice of the old self. Paul says in Romans: "we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh" (Romans 8:12). We do have the power in the Spirit to enable good choices.

Renew our minds

Formation into Christ is not anti-intellectual. We are not to be darkened in understanding or ignorant, as Paul says in Ephesians, but through the Spirit we base our thinking on truth and reality. The Scriptures use the phrases: "Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth," and "those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit" (Colossians 3:2; Romans 8:5).

The process of spiritual formation in Christ is one of progressively replacing...destructive images and ideas with the images and ideas that filled the mind of Jesus himself.⁴

As we grow up we are shaped by stories in our minds absorbed from our family, culture, and church. Without even being aware of it, these stories determine how we live our lives. But often these stories are not accurate or true. In fact, many of them are lies. Renewing our minds is the process by which we correct our thinking based on the truth of God.

One the areas that is vital in this process involves our story, who we are. Renewing the mind involves correcting our poor self-image and seeing ourselves as God sees us. We are not unworthy or unwanted but rather God's beloved sons and daughters. We see ourselves with dignity rather than self-rejection or self-hatred. Despite sin and rebellion God's love is still unwavering. When we fail or mess up we can treat ourselves with compassion and grace. Even the consequences of our sin are intended to bring us to God in dependence and trust. We live in the new covenant where everything comes from God not us.

Another area that is vital in renewing our mind is to correct our image of God as seen through the story of Jesus. God is not a cruel

taskmaster waiting for us to step out of line, but perhaps more like the ideal fatherly coach. We are on the team and that will never be an issue. God doesn't belittle us or tear us down with negative comments. But he will encourage us to work hard. He wants to build us up and wants us to grow and so he pushes us.

Transformation of Desire

Growing into the new creation we truly are is not just about willpower but rather the transformation of our desires. Living under guilt, making resolutions, adopting rules only leads to more slavery rather than freedom. Part of the problem we have with change is we know we should not do such and such but we really want to. We know we should do such and such but we really don't want to. "I know I shouldn't have another drink, but I really want to." "I know that I should invite Joe to the movie but he doesn't fit in with the other people." "I know I should love my brother but he has really upset me." Our choices often align along our desires. We cannot serve two masters.

Sheer willpower leads us to think, "we can handle it," but only affects external behavior, and makes change our job instead of God's. At times there may be a benefit for willpower but eventually we will mess up or wear out. The real goal is transformation of our heart. One of the most important things we can do is give God consent to change us. God has to do the changing, but we have to let him do it. Like Jesus we acknowledge our will but then pray "thy will be done."

Saying yes

We need to see our areas of false attachments and our patterns of sin, but we can also be too preoccupied with the old self and saying "no" to those old ways. The void left by saying "no" has to be filled by a "yes" to God. At some point we can derive a greater benefit by focusing on the new man. Instead of trying not to be resentful we focus on patience or instead of trying not to brag we focus on humility. Each and every day we clothe ourselves with the new self and choose it as often as possible throughout the day.

As I told you last week, being a good golfer was a way I tried to identify growing up. Because I was self-taught I learned some bad habits. One of those habits was using a lot of wrist when I hit the ball or putted on the green. Growing up I had been a terrific lag putter. I could 2-putt from anywhere. A few years ago, someone told me I was putting wrong and using too much wrist. The proper stroke was to keep your wrists straight. So I tried to change and became so preoccupied with not breaking my wrists that as my putter approached the ball my arms would stop and the ball would go rolling off in all kinds of directions. I would three-putt almost every time. I had a classic case of the yips. Last summer I read a psychology book on putting by a famous sports psychologist. He described my condition to the tee. His advice was to stop thinking about what not to do, focus on the target, and set your mind on putting the ball in the hole. And so I tried it and there was a dramatic change. One day I was playing golf with my friend Rich Harmon and sinking putts. Every time I would make a putt, we would shout out "new man, new man." The old man gives us the spiritual yips, but often keeping our eyes on who we now are in Christ allows us the freedom to live that way.

As we come to the communion table this morning, it gives us an opportunity to say "yes;" to give him consent; to consecrate ourselves to him. "Consecration is the bridge between reformation and transformation, the integrating choice that assents to God's homeward call".⁵ Communion is also a sacrament that binds us together as a community in this work of transformation. Sometimes it feels like routine, but through nourishing ourselves with spiritual food the power of grace can flow into our hearts.

"Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen." (Ephesians 3:20–21)

1. M. Robert Mulholland, *The Deeper Journey*, (IVP, Downers Grove, IL, 2006, 29).
2. David Benner, "Personal Spiritual Formation for Ministry" Audio Course (Regent College, Sept. 2007).
3. Brian D. McLaren, *Naked Spirituality*, (HarperCollins, New York, 2011), 89.
4. Dallas Willard, *Renovation of the Heart*, (NavPress, Colorado Springs, 2002), 101.
5. Gerald May, *Addiction and Grace*, (HarperCollings, New York, 1988), 163.

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