



BUILD CHARACTER

NEW CREATION

Reality

Let's talk reality.

We're not into pretending to be something we're not. We're not into conformity. We're not into acting as if we want to live a certain way, but internally wishing to live otherwise. We loathe fake religiosity. Many do pretend. They skip across the top of life pretending all is well. They give the right answers to the right questions and feel very right about it. All is well because externally all is very pretty.

But internally, reality is quite different.

It's sad to have external conformity without internal passion. Who wants to live like that? Who wants to go through life living one way on the outside but wanting something very different on the inside? It's a sad reality that religious circles are notorious for promoting such plastic and conflicted lives. Jesus held a very different perspective. One example speaks boldly:

You have heard that it was said, "Do not commit adultery." But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.
(Matthew 5:27-28)

Note Christ's distinction. It's critical:

Adultery is external.

Lust is internal.

Jesus didn't do all he did so people wouldn't commit adultery even though they really wish they could. He came with a much more powerful message. It's the message of *transformation*. It's not *just* about forcing oneself to refrain from adultery or any other external action. It's about becoming the kind of person who genuinely doesn't want to commit adultery.

Although at times necessary, forcing external action without genuine internal desire is a frustrating way to live. When internal passion matches the external reality of what we know to be good and healthy, there's a resonance that's nothing short of *life*. And *life* is very much what Christ came to bring: "*I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full*" (John 10:10).

Lust and adultery are simply one example. There are countless others.

Consider generosity.

What if we became the kind of people who didn't give out of obligation but gave out of passion? We've tasted such passion and long for more. We don't enjoy greed. It's a

miserable way to live. The only more miserable way to live is to be greedy but pretend that we're not.

Consider self-control and discipline.

What if we were ever-increasingly the kind of people, who from the inside, exercised self-control with our thoughts, with our words, with our appetites? What if we exercised greater discipline in both our work and our play? Life requires both work and play, but frustrated is the life that *plays* internally when *work* is needed or *works* internally when *play* is needed.

Consider kindness.

What if we were genuinely kind people externally and internally? Yes, we experience kindness flowing from us; and yes, it is at times genuine. But we also know times when that kindness comes with an agenda, when we're leveraging it as a tool to get something we want. We know what it's like to offer acts of kindness, but hollow are those actions when they're simply a veil for insecurity or selfishness or greed. We've tasted true kindness and genuinely thirst for more.

There's more. What about internal rest, the kind of rest available in the midst of activity and inactivity? Frustrated is the life swinging in a hammock while internally rifling through the mental checklist of needs pressing down upon us. Or how about courage? Sure, we can put on a courageous front, but what would it be like to ever-increasingly face life's challenges with genuine and resonant courage? Yes, a measure of success can be achieved in all of these by outward conformity, but internal realities have a way of making themselves known.

If we are going to build authentic character, we must dig more deeply into the supernatural work of Christ. What did Christ bring? What did he teach? What does he do for us today? As we consider our own encounter with Jesus, let's eavesdrop on another's encounter with him.

A New Reality

Nicodemus was a religious man...in the worst sort of way.

He aligned himself with the Pharisees. Pharisees were notorious for outside conformity without inside transformation. Christ boldly challenged this. He called them whitewashed tombs. Tombs look elegant and refined on the outside; they're made of marble and are often ornate, but open the door and you'll quickly discover death on the inside. To say the least, Christ's word-picture made it clear he wasn't too excited by this form of religion. With that in mind, it's fascinating to eavesdrop on a conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus.

Nicodemus is intrigued. He comes to Jesus after hours under the cover of darkness. He strikes up a conversation. He compliments Jesus. He calls him Rabbi. He admires his miracles and clear workings of God.

Jesus, clearly unaffected by the compliments, tells it like it is: "*I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he experiences a new birth*" (John 3:3).

Nicodemus' response reveals his surprise, maybe scoffing, at this idea: "*No one can enter a second time into his mother's womb!*" (John 3:4).



He doesn't get it. He isn't aware of the good news unfolding right before his eyes. Nicodemus has missed critical drumbeats along the way. This Messiah standing before him would usher in change, but this change would not be just another addition to Nicodemus' growing list of religious activities and things to do. This change would involve an entirely new reality. Once seen, this new reality changes everything. It could be stated many ways, but if we are to experience transformation, we must not miss two observations:

Jesus did not ask Nicodemus to make changes to his existing person. Jesus insisted he become a new person (the new birth).

Jesus did not ask Nicodemus to make changes to his existing reality. Jesus referenced a new reality (the kingdom of God).

These give cause for pause. It's as if Jesus is saying, *"Making changes to your existing person will not work. Making changes to the existing reality will not work. You must become a new person living in a new reality. Anything short of this will simply be yet another program that comes and goes."*

And we know this.

We know it because we've experienced it: two steps forward, three steps back, three steps forward, two steps back. Christ's plan is far more radical than making changes to existing realities. Jesus does not ask Nicodemus to simply change a few behaviors and offer self-management tips to make the changes stick. Rather, he cuts through the chaos and insists upon a new reality, a new person, a new birth.

Let's dig into this new birth. What did Jesus mean?

Murderers

Scripture can be confusing. Isolated texts can seem out of character. We read something, and we think, *"Does it really mean that?"* At times, questions linger, and we don't honestly know the answers. Other times, passages that initially produce great confusion later bring tremendous comfort. The following, a seemingly straightforward statement, is no exception.

Anyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life in him.
(1 John 3:15)

At first blush maybe it makes sense: Murderers don't get eternal life. That sounds reasonable. For one person to take the life of another is a serious offense. There's justice in the statement. We shouldn't be surprised at the thought that murderers don't get eternal life.

Or should we?

For starters, the passage states that to hate one's brother runs on the same tracks as murder. Who among us hasn't experienced hate? Even more, since when is murder the unforgivable sin? It sounds terribly out of character for Scripture and even hypocritical. Three of Scripture's most noteworthy writers were murderers or accomplices to murder. Moses murdered an Egyptian. David arranged the wrongful death of Uriah, the husband of a woman with whom he had an affair. Paul participated in the stoning of Stephen and



probably other early followers of Christ. If murderers are categorically out, then these three men are out.

What's with that? Are murderers categorically rejected by God?

When we dig deeper, the shocking answer is: Yes, murderers are categorically rejected by God. We can say with biblical authority that murderers don't go to heaven. God sees this grievous offense and does not shrug it off. Scripture is abundantly clear: There will be no murderers in heaven. Murderers are out. And actually, more than just murderers. Consider the following:

Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God.
(1 Corinthians 6:9-10)

So now this gets offensive. It's one thing when it was just murderers; now we're talking everybody. If the previous passage associates hate with murder, we can assume attitudes that run on the same tracks of the acts mentioned here associate with those acts as well. Not all have been male prostitutes, but most have experienced twisted lust.

Then there's mention of greed and slander. Those right there could encompass pretty much all humanity. It's a bleak story and even a bit offensive. It's bleak and offensive right up to the very next line—one of the more stunning statements of Scripture.

And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.
(1 Corinthians 6:11)

There's something in this statement we must not miss. Yes, we've heard of forgiveness in Christ. Forgiveness in Christ is profound, but our understanding of forgiveness is often shallow. We must not miss that first line: "*And that is what some of you were.*"

This tells us that the person who was once categorized and labeled *murderer* is no longer categorized and labeled *murderer* when that person has experienced the washing of Christ. The good news of Christ is not just the reality that the offense is no longer held against a person. The good news is that the murderer is no longer a murderer. The adulterer is no longer an adulterer. The thief is no longer a thief.

John can tell us that "*no murderer has eternal life,*" and he can mean this literally. Murderers will not go to heaven. They are categorically out. But when a person experiences the washing of Christ, that person is not *just* forgiven. That person becomes a new person.

Might the person experience earthly consequences for past offenses? Of course. The murderer may be in prison, but if he has been washed by Christ then he is no longer a murderer. He is a new creation. He is forgiven from his past, and his past is considered by God to be another person, the old person who was then crucified with Christ. Consider the following: "*Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!*" (2 Corinthians 5:17).



We must not view forgiveness as just saying, "I'm sorry," and God saying, "That's okay." We must view forgiveness as the gift of becoming a new person no longer associated with the old person. God declares the old person gone, and so must we.

Names

Consider a childhood lie...

Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.

We know better. How often would we prefer a stick or a stone to the words thrown our way? Words are powerful. The child on the playground slumps back to class believing she's worthless. The employee in the office slumps back to his desk believing he'll never get it right. The wife in the car slumps down in her seat convinced she's intrinsically displeasing. These degradations need not come by actions, but simply by words, accusations, and names.

Scripture knows the power of words. And yes, at times these words are strong. To a group of religious hypocrites, one of Jesus' earliest followers cries out, "You brood of vipers!" (Matthew 3:7). Christ himself was known to shoot straight with words. At one time he referred to Pharisees and Sadducees as "whitewashed tombs" and "blind guides." Such statements underscore Scripture's disdain for flattery. Jesus would not refer to a group of leaders as "blind guides" if he were not interested in their recognition of reality. He shot straight. He would not puff them up with statements that were not true to make them falsely feel good about themselves. Such is not the way of Christ, and such is not the way of Scripture.

Which makes the following statement from Scripture worthy of careful consideration. It's a statement we barely read, a simple introduction to a multi-page letter. We read it as little more than, "Dear so and so," but the wording is far more profound. To the church in Ephesus, Paul writes, "To the saints who are at Ephesus..." (Ephesians 1:1, NASB).

Saints? This must be a letter to a special class, just to the leaders, just to the inner circle. If so, though, why does Paul then speak directly to husbands, wives, children, and slaves? If by "saints" Paul means a special class of people who have attained a high degree of maturity, would he not speak *about* these people rather than *to* these people? The letter, from beginning to end, is fully intended for the entire church and to be read to the entire church, which makes that brief introduction something to behold.

He calls them saints.

Lift the hood on that word, *saint*, and discover the Greek word *hagios*, meaning "holy." One could translate this introduction: "To the holy at Ephesus..." Similar introductions are found in 2 Corinthians, Philippians, and Colossians. In search of a name for his recipients, Paul commonly refers to them as "the holy." That's profound.

And it leads to a question we must each ask ourselves.

The question is simply this...

What would I name myself?

Or put another way...



Would I give myself the name “holy”?

Forget for a minute that it sounds odd. Simply touch that emotion that instinctively doubts that it’s true.

I’m not holy. To call me holy is flattery.

Or is it?

Free from Accusation

In another place Paul writes this:

Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. But now he has reconciled you by Christ’s physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation.
(Colossians 1:21-22)

We’re given a stunning view of the future. One day, because of Christ, we will stand before God “*holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation.*” Let that soak.

Holy in his sight.

Without blemish.

Free from accusation.

Where this stunning statement becomes a showstopper is when we pause long enough to realize that this holy and blemish-free reality is not based on something that will happen in the future but is based on something that has happened in the past. What did Paul write? “*Once you were alienated from God... But now he has reconciled you by Christ’s physical body through death.*”

Once you were alienated.

But now...

The reconciliation does not happen later. The reconciliation has happened. For this reason, in another place, Paul writes:

We have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand.
(Romans 5:1-2)

It is not, “*to those who will one day have peace with God.*”

It is “*to those who have peace with God today.*”

It is not, “*to those who will one day stand in grace.*”

It is “*to those who stand in grace today.*”

Translation?

“*To the saints who are at Ephesus...*”

It is not, “*to those who will one day be holy.*”

It is “*to those who are holy today.*”



Recognize the Real Me

Consider a question:

How do I perceive myself?

This may sound like a trivial question, but it's anything but trivial. Truth is, we live up to our own self-perception. Those who view themselves as dirty continue to revel in the mud. Those who perceive themselves as blameless in Christ, will live from this self-perception as well.

All of this leads to an essential, an imperative, something we must do. Put plainly, each of us must take the following statement and make it our own.

I must recognize the real me.

Jesus' work was revolutionary. He did not ask Nicodemus to make changes to his current person but insisted he become a new person. If by grace Nicodemus did in time experience this new birth, how odd it would have been for him to view himself as his previous self. To view the old self as the current self is a warped view of reality. To live in reality is to embrace that which is real.

We all have a perception of reality. We are part of that perception. We view ourselves in a certain manner. The *perception* of our own reality may or may not be *genuine* reality. We may view ourselves as dirty and dead, but when *in* Christ, our reality is holy and alive. The false perception of ourselves is an affront to the gospel, an offense. It is calling into question the very good and powerful work God has accomplished in Christ.

When Paul wrote the church in Rome, he exhorted them to recognize their new reality when he stated plainly: "*Count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus*" (Romans 6:11).

Count yourselves...

view yourselves...

perceive yourselves...

dead to sin and alive to God.

Consider another bold statement: "*We are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died*" (2 Corinthians 5:14). That's astounding. Jesus is not the only one who died on the cross. By grace our old self died with him.

How odd it would be to view our current self as the self that died with Christ. For that reason, this bold statement is followed by another bold statement: "*So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view*" (2 Corinthians 5:16). In short, the real *me* is not the *me* who died on the cross with Christ. The real *me* is the *me* who rose with Christ from the grave (Romans 6:4).

I must recognize the real me.

Tragic

Peter, one of Christ's earliest followers, spoke of lives that are "*ineffective and unproductive in their knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ*" (2 Peter 1:8). What a sad



observation. He sees lives that could be filled with passion and purpose. These are lives where old patterns of destructive living could be broken, and even more, these are lives that could be influencing others toward new realities in Christ. And yet, they are *“ineffective and unproductive in their knowledge of Christ.”*

Where his statement gets most fascinating, though, is in what follows. He couples this ineffective living with a disassociation from a person’s own reality. They have forgotten something critical. He puts it like this: *“They have forgotten that they were cleansed from their past sins”* (2 Peter 1:9).

They have *forgotten*.

It’s not that they didn’t know it. They knew it. They just forgot about it. They were cleansed from the “old me,” and they forgot about it. To miss this new reality is not only to embrace a warped view of reality—it’s tragic. What happens when we view ourselves as our old selves? What happens when our perception of reality is that we may be forgiven, but we’re certainly not new? What happens if we view ourselves as devalued and damaged goods?

In short, we live in accordance with that old reality.

Consider the person who believes she’s wearing a fake diamond. She found it tucked away in a little black box and was certain it was nothing. Why take care of the diamond? It’s not worth much. It’s little more than glass. Fling it on the dresser, drag it through the mud, or lose it in the carpet. Who cares? It’s worthless. Or is it? One day she opens the family lockbox to discover a note written by her grandmother describing a multi-carat diamond she’d left in a small black box.

Perception influences action. The person who believes his car is trashy will treat that car in a trashy manner. The person who believes her house is dilapidated will treat that house in a dilapidated manner. Tragic is the life lived with a warped view of self.

This new heart we have been given will beat for the greatest and grandest of things, the love of God. If, though, we deny this new heart and assume the old heart, we will, no doubt, live in accordance with our old self, our old heart. If Christ has done a revolutionary work, we must recognize this work and deny old perceptions. To miss this will influence our actions, and even more, it will dishonor God.

Honoring God

Some offer an understandable objection to this teaching. It goes something like this: If I’m to *recognize the real me*, then I’m making a big deal out of me. I don’t want to make a big deal out of me. I want to make a big deal out of God.

Fair enough, but consider this: As we gaze upon the painting, and as we affirm the richness and creativity of the painting, who gets the honor: the painting or the painter? Or put another way, as we walk through the magnificent new home, as we consider the creativity and interest of the design, the thoughtfulness of the layout, who gets the praise: the house itself or the designer of the house?

To celebrate the creation is to honor the Creator. We are told by Scripture that *“we are God’s workmanship”* (Ephesians 2:10). As we affirm and “recognize the real me,” the purpose is not self-worship. This would be a gross misapplication of this imperative.



Rather, our aim is eternally greater. By recognizing the painting, we praise the Painter. By celebrating the craftsmanship, we honor the Craftsman.

And, of course, the opposite is true. If we define ourselves by our struggles and wounds, not only are we denying the very real work of God, but we dishonor God by demeaning his work. To belittle the creation is to belittle the Creator. To celebrate the good work God has done in our lives is not arrogance; it is humility because it is inspired by the good, mighty, and loving work of God. Scripture does not define us by our old self. Scripture defines those who genuinely follow Christ as “*the holy.*”

Build Character

If we are to make progress in our character, if we are to live bold and courageous lives, if we are to overcome and live in accordance with what we know is right and good, then we must be a people that recognizes and treasures the good work God has done in us through Christ.

Why grovel in our old selves when we can revel in our new selves? Why diminish this work and consequently diminish the God of this work? Far greater is the life lived in accordance with the mighty and gracious work God has already accomplished in Christ. When we recognize this, and when we live from this, we will ever-increasingly live in accordance with who we truly are.

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