

BEFORE AND AFTER

Week Two - Changing Clothes

An NC Congo Lifelong Learning Study with Dr. Allen Hilton

Open - Acting a Whole New Part

Part One - Learning Our Part

"The apparel oft proclaims the man," said Shakespeare's Polonius to his son Laertes (Hamlet 1.3).

Paul's project after Romans 12.1-2 was to impress on the living-room full of Christians listening to his letter in Rome how utter and complete Christian transformation is. He knew, as we saw last session, that God and the faithful person both have roles in this process. In Romans 12.2 he used a passive command - "be transformed" - to acknowledge the mysterious divine-human division of labor. But how would he communicate that experience of change to his young churches? He chose the everyday act of putting on clothes.

In 13.12-14, Paul writes,

The night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires."

Paul tells his charges to "put on the armor of light" and, ultimately, to "put on the Lord Jesus Christ." We'll need to figure out what that means!

Paul picks up the clothing theme again in his letter to the Christians in Colossae (western Turkey), where he commands his charges to "put on" virtues like compassion and love:

As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each

other; just as the Lord^{lfi} has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. (Colossians 3.12-14)

In this session, we ask what it might mean for us to “clothe ourselves” in this way, and how all that relates to the transformation we seek in this series. Our first crack at this comes from the world of theatre, where the costume, in some ways, helps make the actor.

Method Acting

As we search for a way of internalizing faith, considering the actor may seem entirely wrong. After all, the ancient Greek word for “actor” was “hypocrite,” because acting by nature meant portraying someone different than one’s self. Ancient actors sometimes wore masks to symbolize that difference. Isn’t acting the opposite of faith?

Sometimes. There is a kind of acting, though, that ushers us toward transformation. In the early part of last century, a Russian actor and director called Constantin Stanislavsky moved the history of theatre forward by insisting that his players be believable, rather than grandiose and over-the-top, as was the custom of his day. The result is called “method acting.” Method Actors famously “get into their role” by fully taking on their character’s personality. Marlon Brando, Robert DeNiro, and Al Pacino popularized the approach in the US. Method Actors often stay in character until long after rehearsals or performances end. For example,

“Kate Winslet was so focused on accurately portraying her character in THE READER she struggled to return to day-to-day life after filming wrapped. The actress plays a former Nazi concentration camp guard in the post-war drama, and put all her emotions into the intense role...‘When I leave a character, I have to analyse the trance through which I have just passed. It can take me several months to say goodbye to them.’” (http://www.contactmusic.com/kate-winslet/news/winslets-method-acting-struggle_1092193)

And when Larry Linville left his role of Frank Burns on the hit TV show, “M*A*S*H”, after only five years, he did so because he felt that putting on the character of someone who’s character he so disliked day after day for so long had taken too large a toll on him personally. He was ready to shed that face.

Imagine being so immersed in a part that you can't get out of it. We can imagine that negatively. Can we also imagine it positively, seeing how the ongoing imitation of good character can help us internalize virtue? What would it be like to "put on Christ" so thoroughly that compassion, kindness, etc. become second-nature? That seems to be what Paul wants for us. But how?!

Learning the Part

When an actor researches a part, she begins with the script. What do the lines say about the character?

Paul supplies his own version of research in Colossians 3. Remember that he elsewhere says, "clothe yourselves with Christ" and here he says "clothe yourself in love." Paul has the same question we have: what does love look like, what is it to 'play' Christ? So he turns quickly suggesting how we ought to research the role: "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him." (Colossians 3.16-17)

The script that gives us access to our role, of course, is "the word of Christ" which should "dwell in you richly." (You knew this would somehow all lead back to Bible!) We can't act it line for line, of course. Unfortunately, even the best of Bible as script does not fit precisely the vicissitudes of our day-to-day life. Instead, the Bible becomes our character study of the Christ whose life we are "putting on." The former Chaplain to Duke University and current Rector of St. Martin-in-the-Field Church in London is Rev. Dr. Samuel Wells. He understood this, so as his main metaphor for Christian life, he has turned, not to the scripted stage play, but to improvisational acting. By Wells' light, being Christian means drinking in scripture and Christian tradition so fully that we can spontaneously meet any "line" or situation with an in-character response. Wells never says it this way, but if we "put on Christ," we are ready to be Christ in circumstances that Christ himself never faced while on earth. (Dr. Wells' excellent book is called *Improvisation: The Drama of Christian Ethics*)

All of this makes Bible Study our primary "research," not to learn the verbatim part (though memorizing the actual text of Bible is helpful), but to "know Christ" (Philippians 3.17) and therefore begin to clothe ourselves in his ways.

How would this approach impact how you read Bible? To help ourselves understand this, let's take an example from the Gospel of Mark.

They came to Jericho. As he and his disciples and a large crowd were leaving Jericho, Bartimaeus son of Timaeus, a blind beggar, was sitting by the roadside. When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout out and say, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" Many sternly ordered him to be quiet, but he cried out even more loudly, "Son of David, have mercy on me!" Jesus stood still and said, "Call him here." And they called the blind man, saying to him, "Take heart; get up, he is calling you." So throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus. Then Jesus said to him, "What do you want me to do for you?" The blind man said to him, "My teacher, let me see again." Jesus said to him, "Go; your faith has made you well." Immediately he regained his sight and followed him on the way.

What happens in this story?

What is the difference between the disciples' attitude toward Bartimaeus and the attitude of Jesus?

If we're method actors and training for the part of Jesus, what does this episode tell us about Jesus' character?

You and I will probably not run into a blind man shouting in the street this week. What encounters in our lives might this episode inform? How?

How might we prepare ourselves to "be Jesus" or "wear Jesus" in circumstances like that?

Part Two - Practicing the Part

If reading scripture and learning the way Christians have lived through history is our version of character research, what's the next step? How do we get good at playing Jesus in the play of life?

Last week, we learned how central habits are to our day-to-day lives. If God's going to change a person, "make all things new," God had better find a way to change her habits. Let's review this point. You'll remember that we asked: Which comes first, the attitudinal change or the behavioral change? Do we feel love and then act loving? Or do we act loving and begin to feel love? It's an age-old debate. In the realm of habit change, though, both moral philosophers and brain scientists agree that we almost never change habits by wishing or waiting for a feeling.

Our thoughts turned to the ancient Greek philosopher, who wrote, "Moral excellence comes about as a result of habit. We become just by doing just acts, temperate by doing temperate acts, brave by doing brave acts." (Aristotle, *Nichomachean Ethics*)

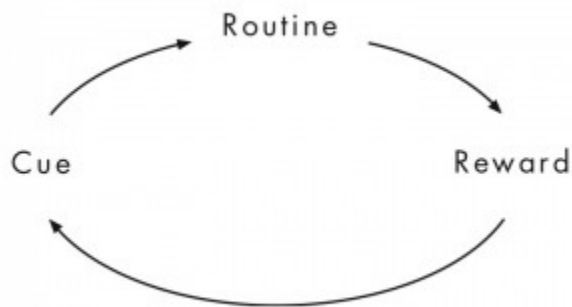
The early twentieth-century psychologists and philosopher, William James, defined the human being similarly, without the nod to virtue: "'All our life, so far as it has definite form, is but a mass of habits - practical, emotional, and intellectual - systematically organized for our weal or woe, and bearing us irresistibly toward our destiny, whatever the latter may be."

As Charles DuHigg puts it, "We are, each of us, a big bundle of habits." In fact, researchers estimate that 40-45% of all we do is habitual.

All of this puts habit change and the front edge of transformation. But how do we change a habit?

The Technique of Habit Change

"MIT researchers have discovered a simple neurological loop at the core of every habit, a loop that consists of three parts: A cue, a routine and a reward.



To understand your own habits, you need to identify the components of your loops. Once you have diagnosed the habit loop of a particular behavior, you can look for ways to supplant old vices with new routines.” (<https://experiencelife.com/article/the-power-of-habit/>)

Charles DuHigg features his eat-a-big-cookie-every-afternoon-at-work habit in the article quoted above. Let’s look at one that fits the notion of “clothing ourselves with Christ.” An example:

The Me Habit: Vengefulness. When someone harms me, I naturally want to harm them back or at least wish them ill.

The Jesus Habit: Grace. When someone harms Jesus, he “turns the other cheek” and “loves his enemy” and “prays for those who persecute him.” (Matthew 5)

The Transformation: How will you and I inculcate the very unnatural, Jesus-like habit of grace in the face of injury when we are accustomed and practiced at responding to injury with anger and vengefulness?

The habit cycle helps here:

The Trigger/Cue: Injury

The Routine: Vengeful attitude or action.

The Reward: The Short-term Satisfaction of Revenge

As we research our part, in the Sermon on the Mount and elsewhere, we find that Jesus’ version look like this:

The Trigger/Cue: Injury

The Routine: Gracious other-oriented compassion for the persecutor.

The Reward: Long-Term Gain ("the joy set before him")

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely,^[a] and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, ² looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of ^[b] the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God. (Hebrews 12.1-2)

To get from our habit to Jesus' habit takes serious practice. Gandhi and King practiced non-violence (they weren't born with it!) and they taught their followers to practice it. Anything that runs against nature needs concerted practice for habits to change.

We asked you last week to identify one habit that you and God can begin to tackle together. What one would you like to get at first? After you have identified the habit, write out your cycle, moving from Cue/Trigger to Routine to Reward.

Current Habit: _____

Cue/Trigger: _____

Routine: _____

Reward: _____

The Research: What example from the life and teaching of Jesus gives you the best picture of the new life with which you'll be "clothing yourself" through this transformation? You may need to read around a bit to find it. Or it may be something you've known for a long time but haven't put into practice. After you've soaked yourself in Jesus' way of doing life in this area, begin to imagine the way your life will look when you put on Jesus.

Transformed Habit: _____

Cue/Trigger: The Same

Routine: _____

Reward: _____

This may feel very mundane. But it's how Jesus taught his disciples. He lived out love in front of them and then helped them change the way they did things one at a time. One of my favorite devotional books when I was in college was called "With Christ in the School of Prayer." Have you ever thought of learning the Christian life as going to Jesus school?

Part Three - Help from Above

We've emphasized in Part Two the very human part in this divine-human collaboration. But that is not even nearly all of the story. While we may be tempted to see the life of discipleship in this "command and response" way - God tells us what to do, we try to do it - the biblical picture is quite different.

- When Jesus teaches his disciples to be like him, he uses the image of a vine and branches. That's a long way from commander and soldier. He pictures a vital connectedness that moves life from Jesus to us: "Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing." (John 15.4-5)
- When Paul teaches his new Christians how Christian life happens in them, he moves between instruction and assurance. He says, "clothe yourselves with compassion" in one place, but "the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience..." in another place. Notice that the Spirit is the one producing the change. (Galatians 5)
- When Paul describes his own Christian life, he writes, "I have been crucified with Christ, and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me." (Galatians 2.20)

This sort of reliance is a gift. We don't have to go it alone. We truly do undertake transformation with and in Christ.

These examples show how much the divine presence matters for our habit change. This leads to a very cool realization: Prayer is a vital part of every transformation process.

Praying Change

Where shall we put prayer in our habit-change chart?

Surely each day begins with prayer that God will be with us and form Christ in us as the day rolls on. But it can get even more vivid than that. It can be a habit within a habit. Imagine this revision of our chart:

Cue/Trigger: Injury

Sub-Cue/-Trigger: NEED PRAYER!

Routine: "GOD HELP ME!"

Reward: I AM NOT ALONE IN THIS BATTLE. (Whew!)

Routine: Channeling Jesus' Grace/Love Toward My Persecutor

Reward: More like a team celebrating victory with a touchdown dance!

Can you see the difference between moving through the habit-change steps alone and sensing that you are participating with Christ in the transformation? Describe the difference.

Holy habit changes require teamwork between us and God.

Close - A New Way to Walk