

# Before and After

## Week Four - Movin' Out

### Turning Our Focus to the World

A Lifelong Learning Study with Allen Hilton

#### **Part One - A Three-Week Build**

We've been building something together in these weeks. Our picture of how God makes change in us gets more complete each week. Let's review for a moment so we can remember that progress together.

#### ***Week One - Our Change-Making God (General Intro)***

In our quest to understand God's way of changing us, we began with Romans 12.1-2, the part of the Bible that focusses most directly on this divine-human transformation. In it we noticed three main things:

1. God is the sort of God who loves us just as we are, but too much to leave us just as we are;
2. God doesn't leave us on our own for that second part, but wants to help us become His people more fully; and
3. to "be transformed" (Paul's strange passive command) we are called to offer our bodies to God as a living sacrifice.

Our first step, then, is to present ourselves and make our whole lives available to God, who can then get to work on us and with us.

#### ***Week Two - New Clothes***

Imagining a change of clothes is one way to picture God's way of making change in us. Paul commands the Romans to "put on Christ" (Romans 13) and the Colossians to "put on love." (Colossians 3) By that he means that the habits of our lives become more like the way of Jesus'. Method acting offers a version of this imagining. Method actors become so immersed in a role that they almost become the character they play. When Christian disciples imitate Jesus earnestly and long enough, God helps us to feel our way into a new life in Christ. All of this lines up with a kind of social psychology called symbolic interactionism.

### ***Week Three - One Thing***

Jesus said, "Seek first God's Kingdom and righteousness, and all these other things will be added to you." (Matthew 6.33) Brain scientists and life coaches align with this wisdom when they counsel us to begin by choosing one out of the myriad possible habit changes we might seek. We hope to choose a keystone habit that will bring others along with it. In all of this, self-mastery (ENKRATEIA) becomes the key to progress in habit change.

### ***Gathering Epiphanies: Opening God's Gifts***

Each week, God teaches us new things through our conversation around Bible. We've had a handful of "Aha!" moments each these weeks. Take a moment and recall yours. Epiphanies evaporate too quickly. Do you remember breakthroughs that you've experienced during our first three sessions? Reflect on those moments below:

1.

2.

3.

Is there any pattern to your epiphanies? What is God trying to tell you?

### ***The Table Is Set***

After three sessions, then, we know...

1. that God desires and is willing to help with transformation;

2. that we can open ourselves to God's transforming power, through practicing Christianity and watching those behaviors change us within;
3. that we have been created as people who will be most successful tackling one habit at a time;

What's next is to identify a Christian behavior that will change each and all of us in ways that glorify God.

## **Part Two - The Habit Called "Outward"**

When have you FELT generous - as if another person's interests are actually more important than your own? Sometimes such windows of other-concern arise in us spontaneously. But it seems that most times we feel more generous when we're doing generous things. We may not feel like showing up at the soup kitchen or the nursing home visit or the mission trip or any other missional outreach. But when we do show up, more often than not, we report something like, "I got a whole lot more than I gave!" The action came first; the attitude followed.

### ***Our Inward Curve***

As we hope to move our focus outward, our main obstacle, of course, is a native selfishness. Great theologians have employed strong words to describe it:

1. Twenty centuries ago, the Apostle Paul described the human predicament in dire terms: "The good that I wish, I do not do; but I practice the very evil that I do not wish." (Romans 7.19)
2. Sixteen centuries ago, St. Augustine defined our innate sinfulness with the Latin words, "*Incurvatus in se*" - "the self turned in on itself".
3. Five centuries ago, Martin Luther expanded on this definition in his *Lectures on Romans*:  
*Our nature, by the corruption of the first sin, [being] so deeply curved in on itself that it not only bends the best gifts of God towards itself and enjoys them (as is plain in the works-righteous and hypocrites), or rather even uses God himself in order to attain these gifts, but it also fails to realize that it so wickedly, curvedly, and viciously seeks all things, even God, for its own sake.*

Paul and Augustine and Luther use language that communicates their frustration at this part of themselves and others. Can you relate to what they are describing? How would you phrase it?

If this is the predicament of all humanity, and people of all eras share this self-obsession, our contemporary western culture has gone out of its way to bless our self-serving instinct by catering to it through everything from advertising to psychotherapy. Market development makes it advantageous for people who sell products and services to fortify and even encourage our innate tendency to preserve and serve self. To quote a bygone ad for a hair product I have never had the privilege of using, "Sure, Preference by Laoreal is expensive. But I'm worth it." The people who hope to sell us things that we may not need incline us to want them by establishing how central and important we are in the big picture.

This steady flow of rhetoric that puts us in the center of our universe presents the formidable obstacle that faces any of us who hope to live with outward focus, rather than inward. But that movement of value outward and beyond ourselves is precisely the project in Jesus' timeless Golden Rule, which captures his own deferential habit of life perfectly: "Always treat others as you would have them treat you." (Matthew 7.12). By these simple words, Jesus put a big EQUALS sign between me and everyone I meet, between you and everyone you meet.

#### That Person = Me

We quote the Golden Rule flippantly, easily, as if we were living it out. But if we reflect on our daily lives for a moment, we very often notice that we really don't. We're nice enough to people we meet in our normal migratory patterns, as we would like them to be toward us. That's good, but it's only a small beginning to living out Jesus' words. Augustine's *Incurvatus in se* - the soul curved in on the self - becomes painfully clear when we begin to apply the Golden Rule more broadly, beyond the person we chance to meet in the grocery store.

When we ask, "Who else belongs in this 'others' category?", Jesus' answer is simple: "everyone". Each human being is not only equal to us, but should be treated by us as an equal. That means people we might unconsciously avoid meeting by living in the neighborhood we choose or the social group we choose or our patterns and habits of movement through a day. And that doesn't even begin to get at people who live altogether outside our sphere - on other continents, for example. Meditating on the

truth of our limited love is a humbling and very helpful way to spend a moment. It opens us to God's transformation.

Augustine goes all Latin on us, but I call our predicament the Proximity Problem. We value people by their nearness to us or to our interests. We come by it honestly, because surviving and thriving has long depended on taking care of ourselves and our own kind. Jesus solved the Proximity Problem - or at least instigated its overthrow - by moving beyond the boundaries of convenience and intentionally embracing people farther from him. Then he taught his contemporary Jewish followers how to do this, by praising often-loathed "others" from their world, like a Samaritan (Luke 10) and Gentiles (Matthew 8.5-13; Luke 4.27), who lay outside the comfort circle of his audience.

Here are a couple questions:

1. What would it take for the anonymous person in the other car (or behind the counter at the gas station or at the bank or in the DMV) to become equal enough for you to treat him or her as yourself?
2. Who among those who live or walk near your life whom you avoid? Political others? Racial others? Cultural others? What would it take to value them as much as you value yourself?
3. Let's take this quest one step further: how will you and I come to value the lives far from us - the ones we don't encounter or consider in our normal, every day lives - equally to our own? What measures shall we ask God to help us take so that we can live all the way into the Golden Rule?

### ***Baby Steps Outward (a.k.a., Golden-Rule Drills)***

For years, my close friend Skip and I waged a friendly competition to see who could open more doors for the other. We took the battle to ludicrous extremes, laughing all the way. But the project was to install the *agapaic* (altruistically loving), Golden-Rule-ish habit of putting another's good before our own. We thought the best way to do that was not to sit back and wait for an attitude to rise, but to act deferential, so we could become deferential. This silly (we often gloated...) and trivial (what is the big deal about a door?!) example features the sort of habit installation available to you and me in our everyday lives: small things done differently to tear us out of ourselves. We were trying, in our own very competitive and trash-talking way, to open ourselves to God.

Here's another one: if you're like 99% of humanity, you take the nearest parking place to your destination, whether it is a supermarket or your church. That practice is understandable. But our normal pattern of parking is habitual and self-serving. It disregards the next person and the person after that, for the sake of our own deeply-engrained quest for convenience.

Also (and this may be the most important part of small acts), because parking nearest the door is a deeply-engrained habit, our brains have checked out and let the self-centered script play out unconsidered. To challenge that habit - to enter the parking lot and intentionally do something different - wakes our brain and, after we do it intentionally repeatedly for a time, eventually becomes our new unconsidered habit.

All this seems trivial, right? It's just a parking spot, after all. But small acts make up a big part of the 40-45% of our actions that are habitual. Here's the scary, beautiful thing: small acts form us. As Aristotle knew 2400 years ago and brain scientists know now, we become what we repeatedly do. That means that, just as rushing through a door ahead of another and parking nearest the destination door both express and form self-interest, changing those habits by holding the door or parking far away express and form a new, more generous self. Chipping away at our unconsidered preference for self begins to move the center of gravity from self to other.

Another daily routine that leads to generosity is meditation or contemplative prayer. In quiet moments alone, slowed to a contemplative stillness, we can intentionally practice placing other people first. We can envision our next encounters and rehearse the absolute value of every person we'll meet in a day. This form of practice does not move a muscle outside our brains, but it nonetheless reroutes neural pathways toward other-centering habits of mind.

What small habits in your life express a Golden Rule preference for the other person?

What are a few small acts in your life that are accidentally selfish?

Which of those accidentally-selfish habits would you like to change in a way that moves your attention and value outward, rather than inward?

In a sort of parable Jesus spoke late in his ministry, he raised the stakes even higher when he spoke directly to the “sheep” who had helped needy people and the “goats” who hadn’t. He named a whole lot of helping behaviors – feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, visiting the sick, clothing the naked, etc. – to profile what the sheep had done and the goats had not. Then he brought home the value of the hungry-thirsty-sick-naked people: “Inasmuch as you’ve done it to the least of these, my brothers and sisters, you’ve done it to me.” (Matthew 25.40) Jesus lived and taught utter deference to the other. He embraced outcasts, knowing that it would cost him with powerful people. His death on a Roman cross “for us” powerfully culminated Jesus’ self-giving way of living. I imagine the first evidence for that deferential existence came in small things, like our opened doors and parking spaces and other-oriented contemplations.

### ***“Incurvatus” for Groups***

Most of the groups we’re a part of exist mostly for themselves. We form country clubs, corporate teams, baseball teams, bridge clubs, bowling leagues, and nations primarily to serve our own members and their interests. In that context, it’s easy for churches to forget that God calls us into existence mostly for the sake of people and purposes outside ourselves, beyond our walls and our membership rolls. It’s easy for pastors to cater to our members’ comfort and for members to feel like consumers, rather than disciples.

That wasn't Jesus' plan. When he'd finished schooling his followers, he pointed them outward: "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." (Acts 1.8) They came together for what we call "church" (Acts 2.42-47) precisely to prepare for their main work, which was a larger call to the world.

All of this may be sounding quite taxing and hair-shirt-ish - the kind of things excessively ascetic monks do to punish their selfishness. But a huge bonus lies on the other side of generous and other-oriented living. The profound truth of Jesus' whole plan for us is also a supreme irony: that generous engagement with the world ultimately increases human flourish. God has built us to thrive when we live our individual and communal lives outward, toward a needy world. That's the splendid personal payoff - the "I got more out of this than the people I served!" part. But it is an elusive truth.

Brain-scientists and evolutionary psychologists have a compelling explanation for our collective "*incurvatus se*": we are natively "groupish." The first human groups formed in the context of evolutionary competition, as an advantage in food gathering and storage. Originally, the individual had to carry all of her or his food everywhere, for fear of losing it to a competitor - as a Middle Schooler lugs her backpack in a school without lockers. Once two people decided to team up, though, one could guard the food store while the other foraged. Suddenly, these two...and then three...and then four could enjoy some measure of nutritional security. Groups, then, became a collective expression of looking out for number one. Bonds formed around mutual advantage within the group. If our church is inward, then, we know how our instincts got us there.

Even the first Jerusalem church of Acts 1-6, staffed by people with names like SAINT Peter and SAINT James and SAINT Mary, illustrate the power of this *incurvatus* problem. Though Jesus specifically charged them to turn outward and spread the good news and Christ's Way to Jerusalem, then Judea, then Samaria, and then the ends of the earth (Acts 1.8), they quickly grew comfortable in Jerusalem...and forgot the rest. Those chapters, full as they are of heroic and faithful acts, feature a church in which not a single mention is made of anyone outside their familiar city. In spite of Jesus' call, the Jerusalem church developed no plan to follow that call beyond the city limits. In fact, it finally required a fearsome persecution by opponents in the city to shake them up and move them out.



If the spiritual and faithful and heroic Jerusalem church had trouble thinking outward, it must be pretty hard, right?!

1. What do you think keeps your group in the orbit of familiar people and places?
2. Which persons or groups of people do you forget or avoid? Why do you imagine that is so?
3. What are examples within your church of outward-turning acts that defy "groupish" instincts?
4. When your group or family or church has done these other-serving projects, how has your experience been?

### ***Our Hope for Change***

How then can we hope to overcome this blasted *incurvatus* together?

I bring good news from the history of God's people.

At a turning point in biblical and human history, the God who wanted to bless all peoples of the world decided to enlist partners. In Genesis 12.1-4, God promised Abraham, Sarah, and their family that they would be blessed in magnificent ways. They would have a name and offspring and, eventually, a huge family. Then he named the guiding purpose for this blessed family: "through you all the nations of the world will be blessed." What a calling, right?! Abe and Sarah and their kids and their kids' kids were commissioned to be a conduit of blessing to all the world.

Here's the problem, though: you can comb the book of Genesis and you'll not find a single character asking, "How are we going to answer God's call and bless the world? What's our strategy? In fact, the first generations of the family seem utterly oblivious to their other-blessing job. They don't lift one intentional finger to carry out that mission. Nothing in Genesis even hints at any conscious attempt at benevolence to anyone beyond the clan. It is not until Joseph's brothers sell him into slavery that any member of Abraham's family intentionally helps someone from outside the clan. He literally had to be dragged kicking and screaming to Egypt before this "blessed in order to be a blessing" pattern dawned on him.

Israel's *incurvatus* pattern continued for centuries, as Israel navigated life in the near east. They plundered Egypt's gold as they left, and, when they got to the promised land, their judges did not talk of helping other people in the land. In fact precisely the opposite: they began to mow down the peoples they encountered. Kings Saul, David, Solomon, and so on never launched a policy to bless the nations. Not until the people Israel were once again literally bound and marched outward - this time to Babylonian exile - did they move benevolence toward another people.

But here's the thing: God kept going with that family. God kept guiding and prodding. Stories of how Israel and the earliest Christians ignored God's call outward may not seem to you like good news....until we hear the rest of the story.

Abraham and Sarah's family endured 400 years of slavery in Egypt. But at its end, their priests learned a divine lesson from the experience. When they began to craft the laws that would define the tribe and form their habits, Israel's leaders heard God telling them,

*"When a stranger resides with you in your land, you shall not do him wrong. The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt; I am the LORD your God."* (Leviticus 19)

The experience of going outward to Egypt changed them. God was already there to meet them, God loved the people they met, and they themselves began to value others.

Later in Israel's history, after the people had lived in the Promised Land for hundreds of years under their own rule, powerful rulers from Assyria and Babylon attacked and conquered, first the northern kingdom and then the southern one. When the people

were force-marched into exile by Babylonian soldiers, they initially mourned and raged against their plight. But in time their experience of a wider world helped them discover that God loves the Babylonians too. Jeremiah commanded them to seek the welfare of their new city (Jeremy 29), and when they did they discovered people God cared about. The prophets began to speak for the first time about, not Israel alone, but all nations gathering to the mountain of the Lord. (Isaiah 2.2) The experience of going outward changed them. They began to value other peoples as God's children.

The Jerusalem Church took a while to go beyond the city limits and into the world. They only did it when their opponents stoned Stephen and pursued others violently. But once they got out there - once they took their good news to Samaritans and Gentiles, they discovered that God loved those people, too, and some of their best friendships grew out of those encounters. The experience of going outward changed them. They began to value others.

This all may sound pretty familiar to you. You've felt this too, haven't you?

Consider the last time you launched beyond your comfort group to another population, whether in mission or just in life. How did that experience impact you?

I know that as a pastor I've heard hundreds of people report the impact of mission trips. The most common report is, "I got more than I gave!" God got there before you and blessed you through people you had never met. The experience of going outward changed you, and I'd guess that you began to value others differently.

### ***Movin' Out Together***

God's secret to individual and group transformation of "incurvatus in se" seems to be doing things that outward-focused people would do. If Israel and the early church were forced out of the nest, you and I might wish to go more willingly. Imagine God as we keep our weekly rhythm of worship on Sunday and learning on Wednesday-Thursday. Surely God likes both endeavors. But when our migratory patterns stay inward, God must grieve, don't you think?

Step One - Go!

Find something that's already happening at the church and sign on to go and serve somebody you've never met. Get your body (or, during Covid, your electronically-transmitted self!) out there.

### Step Two - Take People with You!

Another reason evolutionary psychologists tell us we flock to groups is affirmation. We like to know that we aren't alone. If it's easier for you to step over boundary lines with company, find another person to walk with you.

### Step Three - Build a Group

Surely there are others who have the same passion or compassion as you have. Let your ministers help you find them. If a mission or even a meet-up has become important to you, find other people who join you there.

### Step Four - Keep Going!

A habit takes time to overthrow and a new one takes time to build. One trip won't do it for you - just as opening the door for someone or parking far away from the building once will change you. Keep doing it. Find ways to repeat the outward acts you choose!

## **Close - The Greatest Commands**

When pressed to name the most important command of the 613 in the Hebrew Scriptures, Jesus named two: Love God, and love neighbor. People who do the first eventually make their way to the second. And sometimes people who do the second make their way back into the first. What we know is that "neighbor" for Jesus meant something different than "person with whom we're familiar and comfortable." After all, when a lawyer asked him "Who is my neighbor?!" Jesus told the story of the Good Samaritan. And he even commanded his disciples to "love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.

Jesus lived outward and he calls us to live outward. So...outward ho!