

## CONFORMING TO HIS LIKENESS

Welcome once again to The Little Church World!

If you were in our Family Room last week, you'll recall, I talked about authentic Christianity. Now, over the next few weeks, I want to develop this theme by focusing on aspects that enable us to be more Christ-like; in other words, to build Christian character. The Lord created us all to journey, first to find him and then to become more like Him. There's no doubt from scripture that a central aspect of God's plan for our lives is that we progressively become conformed to His likeness and this is the theme of today's message.

God's desire that we become like Jesus is confirmed through the apostle Paul in Romans 8 verse 29 (NIV) and this is what it says: *For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters.*

Paul expands on the verse we've just read, Romans 8:29 (NIV). He expands later in the book of Romans; namely in chapter 12 verse 2 (NIV), where he states the following: *Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.*

Now, taking these two passages together we can understand that God wants Christ followers to become more like Jesus. This involves departing from the ways of the world and transforming our thinking so that it lines up with God's will. This means we need to first review how we gain full access to His will so that we can comply with it. The result of gaining access to God's will is that we will become more Christ-like, so I want to look at some central features of Christ-likeness. As we're examining today's theme, we need to understand that becoming Christ-like is a journey that we will take for the rest of our lives so it is a progression. The journey's end is when we meet Jesus face-to-face in heaven and our goal is for Him to say to us, as in Matthew 25:21 (NIV): *Well done, good and faithful servant.*

### Gaining Access to God's Will

#### Scripture and the Work of the Holy Spirit

Let's begin by looking at how we gain access to God's will. A couple of weeks ago, I contrasted Man's wisdom with God's wisdom, and in doing so made reference to the Bible being God 'breathed' and spoke of how the Holy Spirit worked through the writers to record His words in the various books of the Bible. I also made reference to the fact that the Holy Spirit takes up residence in those of us who have put our trust in Christ and this same Spirit works in us to align us with God's wisdom. God assigned to us a friend, comforter and guide in the

person of the Holy Spirit and left us with His manual for our lives, the Holy Bible. It's through the Spirit and God's word that we gain access, that access that we need to enable us to become more Christ-like.

### Control of the Mind

Now we also need to control the mind. Bill Johnson, a pastor and Christian writer states that our minds are either the gatekeepers of the Kingdom of God; namely, a place where God's power resides and can be activated or they can be the gates of hell<sup>1</sup>. Our mind becomes the gate of hell when Satan infiltrates our thought life with a view to pulling us away from the will of God and leading us into eternal destruction. Paul clearly recognised the effect of Satan and his demons on our thought life and made two telling statements, which we need to heed if we are to progress on our journey to becoming more Christ-like. The first statement was in his first letter to the Corinthians. In 2 Corinthians 10 verse 5 (NIV), Paul states a practice that he adhered to himself, namely to, and I quote, *...take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ*. Elsewhere, in Philippians 4 verse 8, Paul encourages his fellow believers in Philippi with these words: *Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable--if anything is excellent or praiseworthy--think about such things*. Now, these two verses, taken together hold the key to combating Satan's attempt at mind control and at deflection from God's will. When we apply these two fundamental wisdoms, we are ready to embark on the Christ-likeness journey.

### God's Ways: Fundamental Principles of Christ-Likeness

Now when we access God's will, we are then able to apply fundamental principles of Christ-likeness, and remember that this is a journey.

#### 1. We Refuse to be Constrained by this World.

First, we refuse to be constrained by this world Romans 12:2, which I quoted earlier, urges us not to conform to the pattern of this world. Our thoughts, action and behaviour should not conform to the world where fundamental issues of faith are concerned. We are not called by Jesus to 'go with the flow'. We have the model of Jesus when he was confronted by a fundamental issue in the temple of Jerusalem and his reaction to what he saw as a defilement of the temple. Jesus' reaction is described in Mark 11 verses 15 to 17 (NIV) and this is the description: *On reaching Jerusalem, Jesus entered the temple courts and began driving out those who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves, and would not allow anyone to carry merchandise through the temple courts. And as he taught them, he said, "Is*

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<sup>1</sup> Bill Johnson (2005) The Supernatural Power of a Transformed Mind, Destiny Image Publishers, Shippensburg, PA.

*it not written: 'My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations? But you have made it a den of robbers'.*

Now, we don't necessarily have to overturn tables when confronted by an issue that would have us compromise what we know is right by the Lord. The point is that we should not operate in worldly fear over these things and we should stand strong for the Lord. It's worth remembering the following words of Jesus in Mark 8 verse 38 (NIV): *If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of them when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels.*

## 2. We are Obedient.

In our journey to Christ-likeness, we become obedient. Perhaps one of the most significant examples of obedience is when Abraham is called upon, by the Lord, to sacrifice his son Isaac. For those who do not know the story, Abraham and his wife Sarah, who was way past child-bearing age, had been granted a son by the Lord's supernatural intervention. Yet, just a few short years later, God asked Abraham, who loved his son dearly, to give him up.

While this may sound an extreme sacrifice, the experience of God's interaction with his followers, throughout human history, reveals that God is not capricious, He has his reasons, and we can totally trust that his reasons are for the good of those who love him. Given Abraham's destiny as the father of the Jewish nation, perhaps the Lord needed to be sure that He came first in Abraham's life.

Now, Genesis 22 verses 9 to 12 (NIV) captures the extent of Abraham's faith and trust in God. This is what it says: *When they reached the place God had told him about, Abraham built an altar there and arranged the wood on it. He bound his son Isaac and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. Then he reached out his hand and took the knife to slay his son. But the angel of the LORD called out to him from heaven, 'Abraham! Abraham!' 'Here I am,' he replied. 'Do not lay a hand on the boy,' he said. 'Do not do anything to him. Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son.*

The ultimate example of obedience, of course, is demonstrated by Jesus himself in the Garden of Gethsemane when, anticipating His coming crucifixion, He also anticipated the whole burden of the sins of the world falling on Him coupled with an excruciatingly painful death. In Luke 22 verse 44 (NIV) Jesus is described as being in such anguish that he was possibly sweating drops of blood, a medical condition known as 'hematohidrosis' which is associated with extreme stress.

Matthew 26 verses 36 to 39 (NIV) describes the event: *Then Jesus went with his disciples to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to them, 'Sit here while I go over there and pray.' He took Peter and the two sons of Zebedee along with him, and he began to be sorrowful and troubled. Then he said to them, 'My soul is*

*overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me.' Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, 'My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will.'*

These two examples describe the ultimate in obedience and it is obedience of this quality that we need to keep in view along our journey towards Christ-likeness.

### 3. We Demonstrate Faith.

In our Christ-like walk we increasingly demonstrate faith. Job is an example of enduring faith through troubled times. He lost his fortune, his children and his health and his response to all this, in relation to his faith in God is conveyed in just a few short words in Job 13:15 and I'm going to quote from the King James version of the Bible, which I think puts it best: *Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him.* It is this quality of faith that we are looking to acquire as we make progress towards conformance to His likeness.

### 4. We Exhibit Forgiveness

Also on our journey to become more Christ-like, we begin to exhibit more forgiveness. The need to develop a forgiving nature is very clear and expressed powerfully in Matthew 6 verse 15 (NIV). This is what it says: *But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.* With Him, forgiving includes choosing not to remember, and this is stated in Isaiah 43:25 (NIV) as follows: *I, even I, am he who blots out your transgressions, for my own sake, and remembers your sins no more.* This doesn't mean that the Lord erases sin from His memory because He is all knowing. It means that He makes a deliberate act of will to choose to respond to sinners as if He cannot remember their sin. This may be a tall order for us, but total forgiveness is what he requires of us even if forgetting may not be possible. We can however, choose to act towards the forgiven person as if we cannot remember what we had to forgive. This is a requirement even if the person who we need to forgive has not asked for our forgiveness. There's no biblical basis for requiring someone to ask for forgiveness before we can forgive. We have to remember the model of Jesus, who, while hanging on the cross, prayed to the Lord for forgiveness for those who were baying for his blood!

Forgiveness, however, does not mean placing oneself in the same situation to be hurt again, but it does mean that we need to take a spiritually discerning position which helps us to forgive those who have not asked for forgiveness. This position requires us to see the real culprit; that is, Satan working behind the scenes with his evil manipulations. When we understand this, people can be seen as both victims of his deception and perpetrators of his evil as opposed to being evil in themselves. With such clarity, we're then more able to forgive those who have

hurt us in some way and place the blame squarely where it belongs, on Satan and his demons. Note also, that as Christians, our training in asking God for forgiveness daily should enable us, more easily than non-Christians, to seek someone else's forgiveness when we have been the ones that have caused the hurt.

## 5. We Have Love

And in our walk, we progressively develop more love. The Lord God is the ultimate example of love. John 3:16 (NIV) says it all: *For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.* Paul also notes the centrality of love in our walk towards Christ in 1 Corinthians 13 verse 13 (NIV): *And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.*

Whatever we do in our Christian walk, it has to be motivated by love for our fellow human beings. Love in this sense means compassion for others and a desire to see that all come into right relationship with Jesus. Without this love, which God can and will deliver to us via his Holy Spirit, we are just going through the motions or as Paul puts it in 1 Corinthians 13 verse 1: *If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal.*

### Summary

OK now let's summarise. We are called upon to become more Christ-like in our walk with the Lord; that is, to increasingly conform to His likeness. For this purpose, God has gifted us with the Holy Spirit and his 'God breathed' Bible to enable us to gain full access to His wisdom. He's also given us access to spiritual discernment through this very same Spirit and through Bible wisdoms such as Ephesians 6:12 (NIV) which you will recall, if you have been following these messages, clearly states that *...our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.*

Through the Spirit and the word of God we are enabled to embark on our journey to Christ-likeness. Along the way, we progressively throw off the shackles of conformance to this world, become increasingly obedient to God's will, find ourselves being built up in faith, show a forgiving attitude to others and find we have been injected with a love for our fellow man that was not present when we were operating without Jesus at the centre of our lives.

Now for those who are watching this message and have not yet given their lives to the Lord, know that it's never too late. Why not take the leap of faith now and embark on this journey towards Jesus? The prize is great - eternal life in His company. If you would like support to do this and someone to walk with you,

then all you need to do is send an email to the address on the 'Contact Us' page, and we'll get back to you speedily [or the person who gave you this script].

I look forward to sharing another piece in the jigsaw next week, that when completed, will enable all who follow to be more Christ-like and to be able to demonstrate Christian character. So goodbye for now. I just trust that you will have some interesting conversations in your house churches, virtual churches and fellowship groups. I look forward to speaking to you again next week. Goodbye.

### **Discussion Questions**

1. The mind is mentioned as central to our journey towards Christ-likeness and also the target of the enemy's attacks. What does 'being transformed by the renewing of our minds' actually mean?
2. In our refusal to be conformed to this world, should we seek not to be thought of as 'odd'?
3. Obedience is central to our Christian walk. However, God sometimes ask us to be obedient when the very act of obedience goes against everything we want to do in the natural. What is likely to be the result if we are (a) obedient and (b) disobedient?
4. Job in Job 13:15 says *'Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him'*. This refers to a time when Job is suffering greatly for no apparent reason as far as he can see. Have you got the same type of trust as Job? Why or why not?
5. Of the five principles of Christ-likeness discussed in the message, which is the most challenging for you and have you found any ways of dealing with the challenge?

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