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[Colossians and transformation](#)

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**1st Sunday after Christmas-  
Colossians and transformation**

[1 Samuel 2:18-20, 26](#)

[Colossians 3:12-17](#)

[Luke 2:41-52](#)

We read in our Gospel lesson that Jesus “increased in wisdom and in years”. He sits in the temple among the teachers and is asking questions and giving answers. He is participating in learning the ways of the Law. There was a development in Jesus. He learned. His character developed. Jesus is at about the age when Jewish boys have their Bar Mitzvah. It is a time when they are considered to make a transition from boyhood to manhood. Before their Bar Mitzvah the sin boys commit is the responsibility of their parents. After their Bar Mitzvah it becomes their responsibility. So there is an expectation that not only will people grow older physically, but their character will develop. They will become wiser. They will develop virtue.

We read something similar about Samuel who lived in the Temple with the priest Eli. It says, “the boy Samuel continued to grow both in stature and in favor with the LORD and with the people”. That implies not only a physical growth, but also an emotional and physical development. If you grow in favor with God and with people that means there is a development of the virtues and a cutting off of vice that has taken place as his character has developed. If Jesus was in need of sitting among the teachers and learning then so are we. If Jesus and the prophet Samuel developed and matured, not only in body, but also in character and wisdom. That is the way we have been designed as human beings.

The theological word for this is “sanctification”, which is the process of becoming holy. Sometimes it is called “theosis”, which means becoming like God. Sometimes it is called “transformation” or “spiritual formation”. We might also talk about “discipleship”, which means something like 'apprentice'. They all mean basically the same thing. It means we grow and

develop into the people God is hoping we will become.

For some time I have been reflecting on a statement by a Christian teacher named Dallas Willard. He said that we have somehow come to the idea that we can be Christians without being disciples. That being a Christian is just a kind of label we attach to ourselves. Those who are really serious Christians, well they are the ones who are into discipleship, which involved Bible study, prayer, and other spiritual disciplines that help to shape our character. But, somehow we got the idea that this isn't for all Christians, only for those Christians who are really very serious. It's for super-Christians. Dallas Willard will point out that the word "Christian" is very rare in the Bible, but the word "disciple" occurs very often. Disciple implies learning. It implies an apprentice learning from a master. So we are expected to grow and develop in our spiritual lives.

The overall goal of God's mission is to bring human beings back into relationship with Him. Part of the restoration of this relationship is the restoration of the human being to holiness. We read in the Old Testament the command "be holy for I am holy" (Lev 19:2; 20:7) and it is quoted in the New Testament in Peter's first letter (1 Pet 1:14-16). In 1 Timothy 4:7 we read "Train yourself in godliness". It is said in many different ways but it is all over the New Testament. We are to be a holy people.

Sin gets in the way of our relationship with God and so Sin has to be dealt with and a process of holiness has to begin in order to have a healthy and growing relationship with God. Jesus dealt with sin on the cross and so there is a way in which we are considered holy as we accept what was done for us by Jesus. But that's just the beginning. When we accept what Jesus did we also accept a way of life. We cannot accept Jesus as our master and Lord and then ignore what he and his Apostles taught. Through these teachings, the life of the community, and the presence of the Holy Spirit we are invited to grow in holiness. God is holy and human beings are originally made in the image of God, so the restoration of the image of God in a human being is also a restoring of holiness. The Church was to be a training gym to help people grow in holiness as they develop a closer relationship with God. The closer we are to God the holier we will become- it's contagious. Being with God will shape you. Your character will be shaped and reflect the character of Jesus. That is the kind of people the Church can produce- people who have the character of Jesus.

The Church was a training gym so people could become like Jesus as they grew closer to God. It was a training gym so people could become the kind of people God originally intended us to be so that we will think as God meant us to think, feel as God intended us to feel, make choices as God would have us make choices, have relationships and behave as God would have us. Not because we are being controlled, but because we become who we truly were meant to be.

The Church can be a lot of things. We can treat it like a club where we meet with other like-minded people who act and look like us. We can treat it like a refuge from the world where we can escape the harshness of the world. We can treat it like many things, but its primary purpose is as a place where we grow in relationship with God and with others, and part of that is learning to grow in holiness. The Church hasn't always been very good at helping people this way. Sometimes the church has become a club and forgotten about its deeper call. This means that we are often left not really sure about what this training in holiness looks like- That is when we are Christians, but (strangely) not disciples.

This development won't happen without our planning for it and wanting it. God won't force this on us. In our reading from the letter to the Colossians, Paul implies that our intention and focus matter. He uses many words that are about our action. Holiness isn't something happens to us as we passively sit back. Holiness happens as we do what Paul is saying- "clothe yourselves" (3:12); "Bear with one another... forgive" (3:13); "let the word of Christ dwell... teach and admonish... sing" (3:16); "give thanks" (3:17). These are all things Paul is telling us to do. It involves our choices and our actions. Our decisions matter. We will not become holy by accident, or outside of our own decisions. We have to Intend to. We have to plan for it. We have to work at it.

Actually, something we don't often talk about is that we are always being shaped spiritually. Everything you do, every thought you have, shapes your soul. Sitting in front of the TV. Shopping. Talking to friends. Reading the newspaper. It all shapes us. No one ever handed to a tract to convince us of consumerism. No, we just hear advertising and engage in ritual actions (like shopping, looking at flyers, watching commercials, etc.) that have an effect on our souls until we become consumers through and through. To relax we shop. We become convinced that the next toy or house or car or whatever will make our loves better. As we participate in the life of consumerism our soul is shaped and we become consumers. So anything we engage in has an

effect on our souls.

That is why we need to be very intentional about what is causing the shaping. If we don't decide, then there are forces in our world that will decide for us and they will begin shaping our souls.

As disciples, we are apprentices learning from our master, Jesus. He teaches us how to live. We imitate him. We "put on Christ". We try to have our mind match the mind of Christ (Phil 2:5). We allow the "word of Christ to dwell in us" (Col 3:6). We imitate Christ's forgiveness. In our passage today we read, "Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive" (3:13). This sounds a lot like forgive us as we have forgiven, from the Lord's Prayer. So our transformation is into becoming more Christ-like.

Another way of talking about this is "sainthood". To be Christ-like is to become a saint. We are saints by virtue of our baptism, but that is really just a statement of the road we are on- it also implies a destination. We are saints, but we also "become" saints. There was a man named Léon Bloy who once wrote, "Life holds only one tragedy: not to have been a saint". Becoming a saint is what happens when we say "yes" to God's promptings in everything we do. It is when we, as disciples and apprentices, actually follow through on the way our master teaches us to think and live.

In our Colossians reading, Paul uses the symbolism of baptism. In the early days when a person was baptized they would have taken off their old clothes and then gone into the water to be baptized. When the person came out they would have been given a white robe. The robe a priest wears is symbolic of this kind of a garment. A priest puts on the garment of a baptized person. It is white to symbolize being washed and made clean. Paul uses these ritual actions to make a spiritual point.

Before our reading (Col 3:1-11), Paul talks about all the things we take off- the old garment: "sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry." (3:5) ... he goes on- "anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk... [lying], seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator" (3:8-10). Paul is describing all these things as a

garment. He tells us to get rid of the old garment, the old self, the non-Christian, non-baptized self. And now he's going to tell us to put on the new garment- the new self, the Christian, baptized garment. He tells us, "clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience" (3:12). He is describing what a baptized, Christian life is supposed to look like. He is describing the clothing of a disciple of Jesus.

Notice how communal these things are. Does compassion make any sense outside of encounters with community? Can you practice compassion without the help of another living creature? How about kindness? Can we practice kindness without someone to be kind to? To be humble is to know who you are before others. It is to see yourself through God's eyes. But you really only know how humble you are when you encounter other people. What about meekness or gentleness? You can really only practice it with others. Patience can best be learned in the midst of community, especially when someone in the community is annoying you. Can we learn to be forgiving people without others in the community wronging us? The virtues described here are very community centered.

Paul gives particular emphasis on "love" in our reading. That is really the overarching character trait he is speaking about. All those things he described before (compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience) are really what love looks like as it encounters the community (see 1 Cor 13).

Once in a while I bump into people who say "well I don't have to go to church to be a Christian" and I guess I get what they are saying, but then I wonder how they are learning the things we have just described. When we are forced into community with people different than us- different temperaments, different incomes, different generations, then our training as disciples has a particular edge to it. That would be more difficult to find outside the church.

When all these virtues work together and we have learned to love the way Paul describes, then the result is harmony or Peace in the community. That is when we experience the unity of the Body of Christ. That is when the unnecessary divisions drop away (gentile or Jew, Slave or free, etc). If we hope to be able to be peacemakers in the world, as Jesus commands us, we have to be able to do it first in our own church.

The end response, is the thing that marks the saint as much as love and peace, and that is thankfulness. Gratitude is the air the saint breathes. The saint prays, “you have given me so much, O God- I ask but one thing more, a grateful heart”. The communion meal is called a Eucharist, which means thanksgiving. The meal is sometimes called the great thanksgiving. Everything we experience can be received in thanksgiving- even the trials that eventually teach us patience, humility, and forgiveness. If we can set our hearts right we can see it all as training us for holiness, which is the kindest most loving things God can do- train us for holiness.

Paul encourages us to take off that old garment and throw it in the trash. Let’s train as apprentices of Jesus- and therefore train ourselves in holiness. This doesn’t mean we never mess up. Of course we will, and we will have to be patient with each other, but the overall trajectory of our lives will be towards holiness. We will know our progress particularly in community, and particularly when our character is challenged. But as we train and cooperate with the Holy Spirit the more the character of Jesus will shine through us and even in (especially in) our struggles God will shine through us. AMEN