

The Transformer

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Well, of all the Halloween costumes I saw this year, there was one that was without a doubt the best. There was one little kid—maybe around four-years-old—who was a transformer. Now, don't think plastic-prefabricated-corporate-costume. *No!* This little boy's outfit had been handcrafted by his dad, whom I got to talk with while our kids were trick-or-treating.

I was like, *Man...that's the best costume.* And, then, he proceeded to tell me how much time and energy went into making it. He thought maybe it would be quick, but it wasn't. He had to get the plans off the internet and cut and fold all of the pieces. They had to be connected in just the right places to fit together in just the right ways. It was a long labor of love for him to make that costume. The good news, however, is that, in the end, his son absolutely adored being a transformer.

Now, I imagine there were times the boy took part of the unfinished costume and tried it on. I imagine that during the process he was impatient for that costume to be finished, when it wasn't yet finished. I imagine that it felt to him like Halloween would never come—that he'd never get to be a transformer. Don't you think?

Well, the Christian life can feel like that sometimes. We can feel like that boy. We can wonder when the Lord will be finished with us—with our transformation, with our holiness. We can wonder when we will be made perfect like our Lord Jesus. We can wonder why it's taking so long.

And, friends, this is what Paul addresses in today's text.

Philippians 3:15-19

¹⁵ All of us, then, who are mature should take such a view of things. And if on some point you think differently, that too God will make clear to you. ¹⁶ Only let us live up to what we have already attained.

¹⁷ Join together in following my example, brothers and sisters, and just as you have us as a model, keep your eyes on those who live as we do. ¹⁸ For, as I have often told you before and now tell you again even with tears, many live as enemies of the

cross of Christ. ¹⁹ Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is set on earthly things.

As we study today's passage, we'll learn two things about the Christian life. We'll learn (1st) What the Christian life *isn't*; then, (2nd) What the Christian life *is*. So, what life as a believer is not and, then, what life as a believer is.

Let's look at each of these in turn.

1. What the Christian life *isn't* (vv. 15-16).

Now, to understand where Paul starts here, we need to recall where he finished in last week's passage. In the text just before this one, he was telling the Philippians (and us) how he strives to reach the goal of Christlikeness—to have more and more of Christ in his life. Yet, he doesn't want to confuse anyone. He's not there just yet. So, Paul tells us this.

Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have...it (3:12-13).

During the history of the church, there've been many perfectionist movements or holiness movements. Typically, these movements believe a realized sinlessness is possible in this lifetime—that people can become totally sanctified before death. They, consequently, encourage believers to pursue holiness and even expect holiness if they are faithful enough.

Almost every major Christian tradition has had such holiness movements—Catholics and Protestants, Lutherans and Pentecostals. It's been widespread.

In fact, some scholars believe Paul was writing this very section in Philippians against such a holiness theology, which may've been gaining favor in some churches around the ancient world. Perhaps, the false teachers who were telling congregations that they needed to add works, like circumcision, to faith in Jesus in order to be saved were also telling them those works would help them to become absolutely perfect—totally holy...*in this lifetime!*

Note that Paul begins today's passage—after telling us that he's not perfect—with an appeal, to those who are *mature* believers, to take the exact same worldview, which he has, concerning personal perfection. Look again at what he says.

All of us, then, who are mature should take such a view of things (v. 15).

We shouldn't think of ourselves as having arrived at perfection in Christ Jesus. Rather, our maturity should humble us. We should recognize how far we have to go. We should recognize how great and holy our Savior really is. It's like Paul is tapping into that old, educational adage—*The more you know, the more you know how much you don't know.*

The more mature in Christ you are, the more you realize how mature in Christ you aren't. Isn't that how it works? Shouldn't that breed a beautiful humility in us?

Friends, the Christian life isn't about realized perfection. It isn't about shiny, spotless people gathering together on Sundays so as to bask in the undeniable glory of their perfect, little lives.

To believe that would be to believe a lie! A hellish lie!

Look, every single church pictured in the New Testament was a glorious mess. And, every single church since then *has been* and *is* a glorious mess. Why is that? Well, it's because we haven't arrived yet; we've not reached realized perfection yet. The church isn't a luxury hotel. It's more akin to a lowly hospital. I really appreciate how Tim Keller expresses this in his book, *The Reason for God*. He says this.

*The mistaken belief that a person must 'clean up' his or her own life in order to merit God's presence is not Christianity. This means, though, that the church will be filled with immature and broken people who still have a long way to go emotionally, morally, and spiritually. As the saying has it: "The church is a hospital for sinners, not a museum for saints."*¹

Friends, if you're here today and you're broken and messy...just know this—so am I. So is everyone sitting around you. There are no perfect people in this church or any other church for that matter. But, because that's the case, this is the right place

¹ Tim Keller, *The Reason for God*, 53-54.

for you. This is the place to find healing and hope. This is the place for forgiveness. Again, the church is the right place for you.

As a pastor, I encounter all kinds of folks who are looking for a church family. Do you know which of them I get most excited about? The ones who own their mess! The ones who know they have nothing to offer and everything to gain! The broken and humble ones! Friends...God's moving in them already (e.g. J & G)!

Well, that's what the Christian life isn't—living perfection, realized-holiness. Let's move now to our second point.

2. What the Christian life is (vv. 17-19).

Here's what Paul says about how all of us—who haven't arrived at perfection or holiness—should live. This is simple, practical advice.

Join together in following my example, brothers and sisters, and just as you have us as a model, keep your eyes on those who live as we do. For, as I have often told you before...even with tears, many live as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is set on earthly things (vv. 17-19).

You've probably seen some period-piece with an infantry or cavalry charge into battle—a scene where all the soldiers follow bravely after a commanding officer into harm's way. If the filmmakers have done a good job of depicting it on screen, then it's a chaotic and messy affair. Battles are chaotic and messy.

Think about *Saving Private Ryan* for instance. When you watch them charge onto the beaches of Normandy, it's a disorganized mess. That charge is full of chaos. In the end, the best thing for the soldiers to do is to fasten their eyes on some officer and follow after him. And, when Tom Hanks's character rallies his men to safety, it's with the simple call to follow him—to do what he does.

This is precisely what Paul's rallying cry is here. He tells the church to follow after him. He tells the Philippians to use Timothy, Epaphroditus, and him as models when it comes to how they should act among those “who live as enemies of the cross of Christ” (v. 18). And, furthermore, Paul tells the Philippians to follow the example set by those among them—those in their local congregation—who live like he does. This is a passage full of commands to follow good, Christlike examples.

And, friends, this is something we find throughout the Bible.

Hebrews 13:7—Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith.

3 John verse 11—Dear friend, do not imitate what is evil but what is good. Anyone who does what is good is from God. Anyone who does what is evil has not seen God.

Luke 6:40—[Jesus says,] The student is not above the teacher, but everyone who is fully trained will be like their teacher.

Friends, the encouragements and commands to follow-after and imitate others as they follow-after and imitate Christ are all over the Bible. This is an essential part of what it means to live as a believer. The Christian life is a life of healthy imitation. Largely, we learn to live Christlike lives by living with and following the example of other believers.

If you're a Christian, isn't this how you learned to follow Jesus?

I was recently asked to compose a letter for one of my professors at seminary who was about to retire. They wanted to put a book of such letters together for him in order to bless and thank him for his many years of faithful service. This is a man who has written or edited scores of books, who has taught courses around the globe, and who has had an incredibly positive influence on tens of thousands of Christians in various countries around the world.

So, I began thinking about what I should write to him. What was most valuable to me? What was most influential to me? His books? His lessons in the classroom? What about his life and work shaped me the most?

Do you know what I settled on in the end? It wasn't the many books of his which I had read. It wasn't his classroom lectures. I ended up thanking this professor for how he had prayed in our advisee group and how he had opened-up the Scriptures with us during devotions there. You see, watching him pray taught me how to pray. And, watching him lead devotionals taught me how to have a healthy devotional life of my own. Aren't those the most important lessons?

Friends, it was his model in the end that most helped to transform me!

Paul warns us that there are many bad examples whom we might be tempted to imitate in this life—those people whose “god is their stomach” and whose minds are “set on earthly things” (v. 19). To counter these examples, he tells the Philippians (and us) to follow godly, Christlike examples.

Friends, who are those people who’ve shaped you? Thank the Lord for them! Who are the people who are a Christlike example for you now? Follow after them! And, who looks to you for guidance? Set your sights on Christ Jesus and lead them! You won’t lead perfectly. Yet, you *are called* to fight and charge and lead.

So, what is the Christian life? It’s a messy battle for more and more of Christ in us and, also, in our Christian brothers and sisters. I like what Rev. Lyman Abbott (what a great name...*Lyman*) had to say about being a real follower of Jesus Christ—about how messy Christian discipleship is. He puts it this way.

What is a Christian? Not a man who is perfectly conformed to the image of Christ, who does all that Christ would have him do, and never does anything that Christ would not have him do (certainly that man would be a Christian if he could be found...). A Christian is one who is following after Christ; who is conforming himself to Christ; who is still doing the things he [Christ] would not do and leaving undone the things he [Christ] would do; who still has to battle within himself against appetite and pride and corruption, and yet who is making a brave battle [of it].²

As a pastor, nothing gives me more encouragement than when I meet someone who is battling against sin. As a pastor, I expect sin. I know we’re all terrible sinners. Sin isn’t the question. Sin isn’t a surprise. The real question is—*Are you battling it?* Are you fighting against the god of your stomach? Are you combatting your longing for worldly things? Or, are you just giving in?

Friends, when I see someone battling against sin, I am certain Christ is there. I am sure that the Holy Spirit is at work in that person. Why else would they fight? The world isn’t telling them to fight against sinful desires. The world is telling each of us to embrace our desires—to say yes to our wants, to do whatever it is we please. Whether it’s food or money or sex or possessions, we’re told to go after it if we can.

² Lyman Abbott, *Problems of Life: Selections from the Writings of Rev. Lyman Abbott*, page number unknown.

You can here echoes of Eden; you can hear the serpent's voice whispering to you—
“Did God really say, ‘You must not...?’” (Genesis 3:1).

No! There's no reason—*apart from God's work in us!*—to battle against sins. And, this is the Christian life. Like that little boy waiting on his Halloween costume, we wait-on and long-for and work-toward the day when we'll be gloriously changed. Piece by piece, we work to put on Christ. Knowing that if we're trying to do that, then it's proof that God is at work in us—proof that we are in Christ!

And, he—who's begun such an incredible work in you—will without a doubt see his work to completion (Philippians 1:6). The Lord will transform you.