

## Session #4 – Modeling My Character after Christ – Going Deeper

### Premise

We live as Christians to empty ourselves (even forfeiting advantages) so that others can be lifted. God gives grace to the humble but opposes the proud.

### Key Scripture Passages

#### Phil 2:5-8

- <sup>5</sup> In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:  
<sup>6</sup> Who, being in very nature God,  
did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;  
<sup>7</sup> rather, he made himself nothing  
by taking the very nature of a servant,  
being made in human likeness.  
<sup>8</sup> And being found in appearance as a man,  
he humbled himself  
by becoming obedient to death—  
even death on a cross!

**James 4:6** – But he gives us more grace. That is why Scripture says: “God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble.”

**1 Peter 5:5b** – God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble.

### We Are Constantly Changing

Emptying myself, even forfeiting advantages, so that others can be lifted up sounds so hard to do! In some ways, having the mindset of Christ seems impossible to achieve. Taking on the nature of a servant and humbling myself seems so unnatural.

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How do we get there?

As the story goes, humorist and actor Charlie Chaplin entered himself into “Charlie Chaplin Look-Alike” contests throughout the country over the course of a few years and was never able to take better than third place. As you can imagine, a philosopher might enjoy an afternoon pondering how this could happen; “How could so many Chaplin enthusiasts miss the original version of him right under their noses?”

At some point, the characterization of Chaplin in the public’s eye became different than Charlie Chaplin the person. This might be an illustration of character in motion. Perhaps a person’s character is always in motion and Chaplin’s character was being transformed beyond his public persona.

Here’s a related thought: we are never not being shaped into something new, for better or worse. The philosopher Heraclitus said: “You cannot step into the same river twice.” That is because the river is always changing. Perhaps, like the river, we never meet the same person twice, not even ourselves.

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When we were young, we might have heard from the cranky teacher or unhinged coach or frustrated parent: “You’ll never change!” The fact is that we are always changing, for better or worse. Furthermore, we may be changing for the good in one

area of our lives while changing for the bad in another area. A person can emerge from unhealthy vices and habits and, over time, resemble someone quite new altogether. Or, we can go the other way.

The fact that we are always changing can be good or bad: day by day, whether we intend to or not, we are being re-rendered into a new form of who we were and are one step closer to who we are going to become.

### Made In God's Image

One of the subtle insights from the creation story in Genesis 1 gives us some initial thoughts of who human beings are. In verses 26-27 it reads:

Then God said, "Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness..." So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.

An examination of the array of origin stories from secular ancient literature reveals the dichotomy between the God/human relationship as portrayed in the Bible versus the portrayal of the gods/human relationships in secular ancient literature. We are so familiar with the Genesis account that we often miss how revolutionary its conclusions are. While most ancient sources suggested that humans were a noise nuisance to the gods or that humans only existed to entertain the gods, Genesis says that humans are "fashioned into God's image and likeness."

From the beginning, humans were meant to be *mistaken*, in some safe and small way, for Yahweh, the God who created them.

This idea would have dazzled the initial audience. The Genesis account suggests that the whole world is a temple built by God, a place where God's handiwork is on display for all to see. Romans 1:20a says: "For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities – his eternal power and divine nature – have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made ..."

And within that temple of Creation, among the birds and animals, among the waters and the dry ground, and below the lights that govern night and day are these unique creatures who resemble their Creator. From the beginning, humans were meant to be *mistaken*, in some safe and small way, for Yahweh, the God who created them.

Sure, Christian teachings tell us that humans are "fallen" and have a "sinful nature," but that doesn't negate the grand idea that God intended on having humans share life and mission with Him. Martin Luther said of Christian human beings that we are: *simulustus et peccator*; simultaneously sinner and saint.

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The idea that we get from the New Testament for this process is *grace*.

### Grace: the Giving and Receiving of Gifts

Grace is not only the primary means that enables a person to relate to God, it also empowers the believer to obey God. In Titus 2, Paul says that grace not only "offers salvation to all people," but it also "teaches us to say 'No' to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in

this present age.” (v.11-12) As Jesus prepares to return to Earth to this type of grace-empowered people, His grace creates the eagerness within us to follow God’s ways and to prepare for His reappearing.

All-in-all, grace is not just a means for God’s love to embrace sinners (His gift to us), grace is also the power for sinners to become people who are eager to please God. Grace is activated in the believer’s life by the power of the Holy Spirit. In this regard, grace and the Holy Spirit are synonymous.

In his book *Paul and the Gift*, John Barclay explains the way gifts were given in the ancient context of the Bible. Since one of the primary meanings of “grace” is “gift,” it is important for us to understand the practice of gift-giving from the world of the Bible in order to understand what an ancient writer like Paul would have meant when he referred to it.

Giving a gift “with no strings attached” was not common in the ancient world. It probably emerged in its most altruistic form of gift-giving in later civilizations. In Paul’s world, gift-giving assumed response, reciprocity, and honor from the gift receiver (beneficiary) towards the gift giver (benefactor). In other words, there *were* strings attached.

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In the ancient world, a person of great means might give gifts to the less fortunate, especially as significant needs emerged. For example, a community that needed an improved water duct system for sanitation and water supply might make requests to a benefactor, a wealthy person with great means, to fund a project to help their community. If the benefactor came to the aid of the community and funded the construction project, the community (the beneficiary) would expect that they would reciprocate that generosity with support to the benefactor when called upon.

This general idea of giving and receiving is at work in one of the most well known passages in the New Testament concerning grace: Ephesians 2:1-10, where Paul says that our salvation is a gift from God. At first glance, grace is in contrast with works. However, grace and works actually play off one another in this passage.

To be sure, Paul says that we are saved by “grace through faith ... this is not of ourselves ... it is the gift of God.” (Ephesians 2:8) With the understanding that the ancient world would have had regarding gifts, we can more fully understand that God is the benefactor, providing salvation from His own supply. We are the beneficiaries of this grace. Since we are powerless to provide for our own salvation, we needed it from a benefactor if ever we were going to receive it.

This means that no one of the Earth can claim salvation outside of God’s great gift. Paul says, “not by works, so that no one can boast.” (Ephesians 2:9) Thinking of the water duct example from above, imagine how odd it would have been for one family in the village to claim that they provided the water duct system when it was obviously the “work” of an outside benefactor. The rest of the community would have clearly understood the fallacy and impossibility of such a claim.

It’s important to recognize that “works” (Ephesians 2:9) is not meant to be considered a negative thing for Paul in this passage. What *is* most important in this verse is *who* can claim to be the one who provided the gift (work) of salvation (not us!).

It’s important to hold this thought in our minds because Paul will use a form of the word “work” two more times in the next verse. The use of “works” will be in the

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“positive” and not the negative. So, say it with me: “works are not bad.” Ok, now we can read Ephesians 2:10.

## God’s Masterpiece

“For we are God’s handiwork,” Paul says. We are a work of God. And that work is not plain vanilla. Some English translations use the word “masterpiece” here. We are a work that is being completed with great care and imagination. We are not one-like-many-others. We are a “1/1.” We are each – one of a kind.

The original language carries the idea of “poem” with this word “handiwork.” We don’t have to be poetry enthusiasts to understand what being “God’s poem” might mean. Poetry is a literary form that stokes beauty, wonder, and contemplation. When a person writes a poem (or a song) they intend to convey deep feelings and pervasive meaning to their audience.

We can put it this way, “I am God’s poem, not God’s powerpoint presentation.” Powerpoint presentations convey straight-forward facts, summaries, and action items. They tend to be quantitative. Poems convey truth in the form of beauty. They are more qualitative. There’s a reason that someone might write a poem or sing a song to someone they love. It would seem weird and totally out of context if someone proposed to their fiancé with a 15-slide powerpoint presentation.

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So, God conveys His love to the world around us by offering His people as his masterpiece, the crowning achievement of His Creation. In this context, if Fred is a sincere follower of Jesus, in the vernacular we might say: “Fred is the spittin’ image of his daddy!” That’s because Fred reflects (in some ways) the image of God. To be truly human in the way God created us is to reflect God’s glory. 2 Corinthians 3:18 says: “And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.”

But wait ... there’s more. Paul continues, “For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.” (Ephesians 2:10) Here is where the ancient gift giving comes into full view: God serves as a benefactor to give us the salvation that we could not give to ourselves and, in response, we venture out into His world, enacting that same type of redemptive goodness in a virtually infinite number of unique ways. And here is the really awesome part ... God’s grace not only empowers us to become believers, it empowers us to walk out the faith as we venture out into His creation.

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Only in this way can we enjoy the life of God: we are rescued from our sin and transformed into the lovely creatures that convey God’s love to the world. And since we are so shaped by this loving act of God, we respond with loving acts in return. And, as we do that, our character gradually becomes more and more like Christ.

## The Awkward Dinner Party

Jesus said as much at the end of an awkward dinner party. In Luke 7, we read that Jesus was invited to a party hosted by Simon the Pharisee. (note: Pharisees were the well-informed religious teachers of their day. They studied Israel’s scriptures and eagerly wanted to do what they said, but at the same time they tended to place more emphasis on following rules than on loving people.) Simon probably lived in an

average house in a common Galilean village. Much like urban city centers in our day, people lived close to one another. In the Galilean culture of the day, doors into these homes were normally open so it is safe to assume that invited guests and curious non-invited guests may have crammed into Simon's house.

We learn later in the passage that Simon's hospitality towards Jesus was underwhelming, which in that culture would have been very noticeable and rude. In contrast, a "sinful woman" showed extraordinary (and let's be honest, bizarre) affection towards Jesus. This must have been awkward for all in the room; it certainly was for Simon who suggested that if Jesus was a "prophet, he would know who is touching him and what kind of woman she is, that she is a sinner." (Luke 7:39)

In response, Jesus shared a story with Simon that led to an important truth: those who are aware of the gift of forgiveness that they have received will, in turn, love much. Those who are forgiven much will love much. Bottom line ... their character will change for the better.

In keeping with the common understanding of gift giving and receiving of Jesus' time, which we discussed earlier, the Lord *does* have expectations of us. He has called us to be disciples of Jesus, to walk in the way of the Master. As a gracious master, He empowers us by His grace to respond with gratitude. When we rightly reckon with the great gift that has been given to us, we respond with displays of love towards others. This is the transformation process.

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Which brings us back to Charlie Chaplin and the look-alike contests. We can't know if he was a better person or a worse person than his public persona. He was definitely a *different* person.

At its core, Christianity is a religion of redemption, making me into a *different* (and better) person in a lifelong process of discipleship. As we cooperate with the work of the Holy Spirit, God's grace is at work within us changing us from one degree of glory to the next into the likeness of Christ. And as that happens, our character becomes more and more like Christ.

Who are you becoming?

### Going Deeper Reflections

1. Read the gospel of Mark and pay attention to the character of Christ as he interacts with others. Make a list of the character qualities of Jesus as you read, and pray that the Holy Spirit would highlight a few areas where you can be more like him.
2. How was Jesus' life visibly different from the lives of the Pharisees and religious leaders around him? Does your life more closely resemble the life of Jesus, or the life of a Pharisee?
3. Jesus lived in a time when everyone wore sandals and walked dirt roads. Thus, washing feet was a dirty and disgusting, although necessary, act. Ask the Holy Spirit to reveal to you a modern-day equivalent to washing someone's dirty feet and who you might apply that understanding to.