

## The Good and Beautiful God: God Transforms

June 19, 2022 Sermon by Stephen Portner

### 2 Cor. 5:16-21

*<sup>16</sup> So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. <sup>17</sup> Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here! <sup>18</sup> All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: <sup>19</sup> that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. <sup>20</sup> We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. <sup>21</sup> God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.*

Making pickles is an apt analogy to the way we grow as disciples. To make a pickle we first need to get a cucumber. Then we need to create the brine and vinegar solution for soaking the cucumber. If we dip the cucumber in the solution and quickly pull it out, all we will have is a baptized cucumber. In order for it to become a pickle, it needs to soak in the brine for six weeks or so. Slowly and imperceptibly, the solution works its way into the cucumber, changing it to a pickle.

Making pickles takes six weeks, but making an apprentice of Jesus takes much longer.<sup>1</sup>

God is able to transform our lives, but it takes time, much like it takes for a cucumber to become a pickle. Unfortunately, too many people are satisfied with being more like a "baptized cucumber." They want to spend as little time as possible being immersed in knowing God and in the things of God. And then they wonder why their lives do not change. They expect immediate results but do not want to put the effort into getting there.

The emerging picture from studies is that ten thousand hours of practice is required to achieve the level of mastery associated with being a world-class expert in anything ...In study after study of composers, basketball players, chess players, master criminals and what have you, this number comes up again and again. ...It

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<sup>1</sup> James Bryan Smith, *The Good and Beautiful God*, pp. 185-186.

seems that it takes the brain this long to assimilate all that it needs to know and achieve true mastery.

...To become proficient at something takes a lot of time. But if someone wants to be exceptional, they need to put in ten thousand hours of practice. Please don't be discouraged by this! I share it only to put the process of transformation into proper perspective. Many Christians hope that within a few months of starting a Bible study or beginning a new prayer practice, they will see dramatic change. When they see little change, they usually feel they did something wrong or didn't try hard enough and discouragement sets in.

The truth is this: whatever we do to change, even the smallest steps, have an effect on us.<sup>2</sup>

The more we participate in spiritual disciplines, such as prayer and reading God's word, as well as continually inviting the Holy Spirit to come alongside of us and renovate our soul, the more we will see transformation in our lives. "Change is slow, but it does take place. For many of you the change is already beginning. God is doing a new work in you and you know it."<sup>3</sup> When I return from vacation the second week in July, we will be introducing some spiritual practices, including soul-training exercises in the bulletins, which will help you in growing deeper in your relationship with Jesus Christ. We have been hearing these past few months about our good and beautiful God. Now, it will be time to take the next step and explore what it will mean for you to have a good and beautiful life in your connection with God.

Christians—those who have accepted Jesus as Lord and strive to follow him—find themselves in a conflict. We know that sin is wrong and would never say, "I am intending to sin today." And yet we find ourselves sinning time and again, perhaps not in the so-called big ways, but in "small" ones (white lies, coveting a neighbor's possessions, excessive worry, judging others). We are not as we ought to be.<sup>4</sup>

The problem is that we carry around with us a false narrative that we are primarily sinners. When some well-meaning Christian says that we are also "saints," we tend to scoff at the idea, and think, "Who? Me? A saint? What a joke."

The narrative of "I am an awful sinner" must be replaced by the narrative that says, "In Christ I am no longer to be defined by sin. I have been reconciled. Sin has been defeated."

Jesus not only forgives the sin of all people for all time, he broke the power of sin

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., pp. 186-187.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 187.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 151.

itself. This does not mean that everyone is saved. Only those who call upon his name experience that forgiveness.

God not only wants us to be reconciled, he wants to transform us. He not only took away the *guilt* of sin but also the *power* of sin. Those who are Christ-followers not only receive the merit of his work on the cross but actually participate, by faith, in the crucifixion. Regarding this Paul says: "We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin" (Rom. 6:6). We are not only forgiven, we have participated in Christ's death and resurrection. I am not trying to live a sinless life like Jesus. Jesus, who lived a sinless life, is now living in me.

The phrase *in Christ* or *in the Lord* occurs 164 times in Paul's epistles. Shouldn't this fact lead us to ask what it means to be "in Christ"? It gets overshadowed, I believe, by the dominant narrative that says, Jesus is over there, and sinful me is over here. The New Testament does not set Jesus apart from his followers. Rather, those who put their confidence in Jesus are also inhabited by him. Christians are people Christ dwells in.

Christians are not merely forgiven sinners but a new species: persons indwelt by Jesus, possessing the same eternal life that he has. The New Testament is unambiguous on this issue.<sup>5</sup>

I realize that any analogy is imperfect, but Christians often use the butterfly as an analogy of our new life in Christ.

The butterfly was once a caterpillar, a worm. It could only crawl, and could not fly. But it goes into a cocoon—a chrysalis, in which the root word, appropriately, is 'Christ.' And it emerges a butterfly, completely transformed. The old has passed. The new has arrived. It was once weighed down by gravity; now it can fly. Christians were once under the reign of sin, but now we can live in freedom.

...As a Christ-follower, you are completely reconciled to God. God is no longer dealing with you on the basis of your sin. You are forgiven forever. You're also a completely new creation—your old nature has died, and now you have been made alive with Christ. Finally, ...Jesus defeated death by rising again, and he has imparted that new, eternal life to you. You are a completely new person who is able to experience heaven now and will be fully glorified on your final breath in this life. That seems like a good and beautiful gift, which could only come from a good and beautiful God.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., pp. 153-154.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., pp. 155-156.

John Wesley pointed out that we continue to sin because we still live in a world that is diametrically opposed to the truth of God. John Wesley said that “sin remains, but does not reign.” It is not that we are immune to sin, for if we are not cautious, sin “tears away the shield of weak believers, deprives them of their faith, and so leaves them exposed to all the assaults of the world, the flesh, and the devil.” “Of course, the best way to prevent the temptation from defeating us is to cling to the indwelling Christ. Jesus said we need to abide in him.”<sup>7</sup>

In John 15:4-5 Jesus said, “<sup>4</sup> Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. <sup>5</sup> I am the vine; you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. (NRSV)

John of Kronstadt “was a nineteenth century Russian Orthodox priest at a time when alcohol abuse was rampant. None of the priests ventured out of their churches to help the people. They waited for people to come to them. John, compelled by love, went out into the streets. People said he would lift the hungover, foul-smelling people from the gutter, cradle them in his arms and say to them, ‘This is beneath your dignity. You were meant to house the fullness of God.’ I love that phrase: *you were meant to house the fullness of God*. That describes you and me. Knowing that this is our true identity is the secret to walking in holiness.”<sup>8</sup>

You see, our brokenness is not what defines us. It is the indwelling of Christ in each of us that defines us. We need to keep soaking ourselves in that identity. We don’t want to be like baptized cucumbers. We want to be “pickled” in the fullness of Christ in us. Christ is in the business of transformation. He changes you from someone who is ruled over by the power of sin to one who is ruled over by the indwelling Christ. He takes us broken vessels and mends us together with his grace. We truly have a good and beautiful God who desires us to live a good and beautiful life in his name.

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 158.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 162.