

Fight for Your Life: Personal (Part 3)

Romans 12:2

One of the questions people are always interested in is what about extraordinarily skilled and successful people has gotten them to their level of achievement. I read a book a few years back that was entirely about exploring this question and it gave a variety of answers. Some of it depends on what family you are born into, some of it depends on natural gifting and IQ, and some of it even depends on when you were born. But, all of those who attain a high level of skill in a particular area have one thing in common. They worked very hard to harness their abilities and to cultivate that particular skill. Whether Bill Gates at computer programming or the Beatles at playing together as a band, everyone who has become a master at his or her skill has put the hours in.

The author of this book said that in general those who become truly world class at something must put in 10,000 hours of practice to reach that level of achievement. 10,000 hours of practice means 20 hours of work a week for 10 years. The bottom line is that natural gifting, high IQ, or being born to successful parents does not mean you will be able to master a particular skill. It takes training and work.

We've been talking over the last couple of weeks about the importance of fighting sin in our personal lives and trying to help us with some strategies for how to actually begin the fight against sin. Our first three strategies were: Be Who You Are, Expose the Lies of Sin, and Cultivate a New Affection.

But here's the bottom line this morning. It takes effort to make this happen. It takes work. It's not legalistic to say that as we'll see. There must come a point for each of us where we decide that sin is nasty enough and Christ is glorious enough that we are going to give the pursuit of holiness everything we have. The Apostle Paul understood this. Listen to Philippians 3:12-14.

This is why our last personal strategy this morning is:

4. Pursue Christ-like Character

Now, the way I want to go about this during our time this morning is to approach this strategy in 3 parts with each of these words making up a part of our study. So,

by the end of this morning hopefully we will have a better grasp on what it actually means to pursue Christ-like effort. Let's start with the first word, **pursue**.

Let me make it clear this morning that we aren't leaving behind all that we've talked about the 3 previous weeks concerning the work of Christ through the gospel. We talked about how the only way we can fight sin is to be freed from our enslavement to sin through the work of Jesus Christ. We aren't ditching the gospel when we talk about pursuit this morning. We aren't moving from the work of God in us to our own efforts. This pursuit is not some overbearing burden that I am going to lay on you this morning.

I think the trouble here is that we often think of grace as the opposite of effort. So, we think, I am saved by God's gracious gift and according to Ephesians 2:9 that grace is "not as a result of works, so that no one may boast." But there's a massive difference in working to earn God's favor and working because I am motivated by God's favor. In fact, listen to the very next verse, Ephesians 2:10. We are His workmanship, created for good works. When we are truly saved by grace, we are so overwhelmed by that grace and so changed by that grace that we put all our determination and energy into pursuing the one who gave us that grace.

Listen to how Paul puts this elsewhere. Philippians 2:12-13. Work out your own salvation. What is Paul saying? Be Who You Are. Do the work of recognizing your spiritual state in Christ. Expose the lies of sin and learn to love Christ with all you have. But all of that takes intentionality on your part. But, as you are putting in the effort understand that God is actually working in you according to verse 13. That's the amazing thing about grace. When you work long and hard in pursuit of God you look back and understand that it was actually God at work in you to bring you to want to pursue and to actually do the work of pursuing.

Here's the reality of grace. Grace is not lazy. Grace is not ambivalent about sin. True grace is fanatical in its pursuit. But, what does that pursuit actually look like? What direction is the pursuit aimed? That's the second part of this strategy. Pursue **Christ-likeness**.

All the work and effort that we put forth that is motivated by the grace we have received through the gospel aims at Christ-likeness. Think back to the garden of Eden for a moment. God created Adam and Eve without sin and designed them to

live in a certain way. They were to live in loving relationship with God and one another and to reflect God as they ruled over creation. They were to be a round peg going into a round hole. There was an appropriateness and fittingness to how Adam and Eve were to live and what they were to be.

Instead, Adam and Eve decided to try to be square pegs going into a round hole. They went against God's good design and were tragically broken. They could no longer live as humans were intended to live. According to God's plan Jesus Christ came and was that round peg in the round hole. If you want to see how God designed humans to live, look at Jesus. How do we know this? Listen to Colossians 3:9-10. He is the true image of God. He truly reflects God the way Adam and Eve were supposed to.

What does this mean for us? It means, Jesus is the end goal of our fight against sin and pursuit of holiness. He lived the way God designed humans to live and we want to emulate Him. We want to be like him. Ephesians 4:13 says it this way. So, not only is Jesus the means of our salvation, He is the goal of our salvation, the restoration of God's original design for us.

So, if all of our effort goes into the pursuit of growing to look more like Jesus, what exactly does that mean? This is our 3rd part of this strategy. We are to pursue Christ-like **character**.

You may not hear the word character a lot but I like the word because it speaks to who a person is and not just the actions they do. Character is the sum total of your characteristics. So, in order to pursue Christ-like character we don't just change our actions. We literally become different people at the deepest level. Everything about us changes to reflect and resemble Jesus. Our actions, our thought patterns, our loves, our desires, our passions, our reactions, our values. Everything. Pursuing Christ-like character means strangling the old self to death and putting on the new self in all of life.

But we don't often think of the goal of the Christian life as putting on the new self. Instead, we tend to think of the Christian life as a very rules based reality where we just have to NOT disobey. We are legalists at heart. We find purpose and meaning in the prohibitions. We think of the Christian life in terms of what we can and can't do.

Imagine that you are a youth soccer coach and you are coaching 6-7-year olds. Imagine if on the first day of practice you got up and said, ok kids, I'm going to teach you how to play soccer. Don't kick the ball out of bounds, don't touch it with your hands, and don't tackle the other players. Ok, let's play. Then you spent the rest of your hour-long practice warning the kids against breaking the rules. The kids would probably give up pretty quickly and if any made it to the end of the season they really wouldn't have become soccer players.

Instead, what do you do to develop soccer players? You want them to acquire skills so that they can respond in a game situation by knowing exactly what to do. Of course, they all know they can't touch the ball with their hands, but you only have to say that when kids pick the ball up. Most of the practice time is spent passing the ball back and forth, dribbling it and shooting the ball at the goal. The training is what gives them the skills to actually become soccer players.

I think this is exactly how we need to think of the Christian life. The goal is Christ-like character. The means of reaching that goal is not just avoiding breaking the commandments. The means is the acquisition of Christ-like virtues and over time those virtues will change the person you are to more closely resemble Jesus.

Why do I say virtue? A virtue of character is like a skill for a soccer player. If you can pass the ball correctly with the right part of your foot, you can do that in any given situation on the field. Here's how one author defined virtue:

"An enduring pattern of feeling and thought, choice and action and perception." - Phillip Cary

He describes virtues as "enduring patterns." I think maybe a better word for that is a habit. We tend to think of habits as something we DO over and over again, like brushing your teeth every morning and before bed. But habits are formed in our feelings, thoughts, choices, and perceptions as well. And this is the part where we are really starting to get to the heart of pursuing Christ-likeness.

Christlikeness extends to all of these areas as well. It's a complete change of your actions, yes, but also how you think, feel and perceive the world. And these new virtues are put on and last. They become who you are. The Puritan Thomas Watson put it like this:

"The blush of godliness is not enough to distinguish a Christian, but godliness must be the temper and complexion of the soul. Godliness is a fixed thing. There is a great deal of difference between a stake in the hedge and a tree in the garden. A stake rots and moulders, but a tree, having life in it, abides and flourishes. When godliness has taken root in the soul, it abides to eternity: 'his seed remaineth in him' (1 John 3:9). Godliness being engraved in the heart by the Holy Ghost, as with the point of a diamond, can never be erased." - Thomas Watson

So, our faith is not just about avoiding sin, but to really avoid sin we have to become who we are in Christ by the positive acquisition of virtues.

Now, maybe a big question in your mind is what specific virtues we are to grow in? It's nice to say "look like Jesus" but what does that practically mean?

Obviously the gospels are a great place to go and in the Epistles Paul spells out the qualities of the new life repeatedly, but let me just give you 3 places to go and dive into.

First, the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-7. This passage is near and dear to my heart and I have spent a lot of time in it, but the basic idea is that Jesus is teaching his followers how to live well by growing in virtues of righteousness. The Sermon on the Mount teaches us how to be "whole" or "mature" as disciples and it touches on nearly every area of life from marriage, to money, to anxiety, to inter-personal relationships. The Sermon on the Mount is the greatest collection of ethical instruction ever put together and it's meant to form followers of Christ into the image of Christ.

Second, the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:16-26. Tim Keller had this to say about the Fruit of the Spirit in this passage.

"The Spirit-fueled development of Christ-like character is liberating, because it brings us closer to being the people we were designed to be, the people our Spirit-renewed hearts want us to be." - Tim Keller

Last, Colossians 3:1-17. You've got the objective reality of our Union with Christ in verses 1-4, the command to put to death worldly vices in verses 5-11, and the command to put on Christ-like virtues in verses 12-17. It's everything we've been discussing in this series on how to fight sin.

So, spend time in those 3 passages to see what Christ-likeness looks like, but how specifically do we begin to train ourselves in virtue? To answer that, let's turn to Romans 12:2. This is a very familiar passage to you and verses 1 and 2 are tied together. But, I want to go directly to Paul's instructions in verse 2. I think here he's giving the practical nuts and bolts of how change happens.

On the one hand we are not to be conformed by the world. This is an ever-present and subtle danger for each of us. The world around us works on us to try to form and shape us. Think of an assembly line of little plastic toys. All the toys are formed by the machinery so that they look the same. The world is trying to force us into its mold. But instead of allowing this shaping to take place, we are to be "transformed." The idea here is that the essential element of who we are on the inside becomes different. Virtues are developed. New patterns of thought, action, and perception take control.

The question is, how does this transformation take place? Look at verse 2. When Paul speaks of the renewal of the mind here he's not just saying that what we think about should be different. He's saying that our disposition or way of seeing the world must be fundamentally altered. We must put different lenses in the frame. What lenses?

You obviously know that Romans 12:1 uses the word therefore to tie Paul's instructions here to what goes before. We often tie his instructions to everything in chapters 1-12 and while that's not wrong, it's a little hard to get our arms around. Instead, let's just focus on the verse right before 12:1, 11:36. Our perception is made new when we begin to realize that everything is from him, through him, and to him. He is the beginning, the sustaining power, and the ultimate purpose.

Our minds are renewed as we over and over again come to grips with this reality. And as we are changed and new virtues of thought, action, choice, and feeling begin to develop then the end of verse 2 happens. When you grow more and more Christ-like then you will be equipped to "discern" what is good, acceptable, and perfect in all circumstances of life.

What Paul is describing here is like a soccer player developing skills and stepping onto the field and being able to use his skills in a variety of situations as they come up. He knows what to do because He has been trained. You see, we too

often boil making the right choices in life and doing the right thing down to a decision made in the moment. In reality, knowing the right way to act is more about developing virtues that bring us to look like Jesus. Then we will resemble Him in daily life.

But of course, none of this comes “naturally” to us. It requires grace empowered effort. It requires us to pursue Christ-like character.