

“CONFORMED TO THE IMAGE OF THE SON”  
Psalm 105:1-11, 45b, Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52, Romans 8:26-39  
July 25 & 26, 2020

Nathaniel Hawthorne tells this wonderful story. “In a pleasant, sunny valley surrounded by lofty mountains, lived a boy named Ernest. On the side of one of the mountains, in bold relief, nature had carved the features of a gigantic face. From the steps of his cottage, the boy used to gaze intently upon the stone face, for his mother had told him that some day a man would come to the valley who would look just like the Great Stone Face. His coming would bring joy and happiness to the entire community.

“Mother,’ said the boy, ‘I wish that it could speak, for it looks so kind that its voice must be pleasant. If I were to see a man with such a face, I should love him dearly.’ So, Ernest continued to gaze at the Great Stone Face for hours at a time.

“Several times the rumor spread that the long-looked-for benefactor was coming, but each time the man arrived, the rumor proved to be false. In the meantime, Ernest had grown into manhood, doing good wherever he could. The people in the village loved him. Everyone was his friend. And as he became an old man, Ernest was still looking for the arrival of the long-expected one.

“One day a poet came into the valley. He had heard the prophecy about the Great Stone Face, and at evening, when the sun was setting, he saw Ernest talking to some people. As the last rays of light flooded the massive outlines on the distant mountainside, they fell on Ernest’s face. The poet cried aloud, ‘Behold! Behold! Ernest himself is the likeness of the Great Stone Face.’

“Then all the people looked, and sure enough, they saw that what the poet said was true. By looking daily at the Great Stone Face, Ernest had become like it.

Hawthorne concludes, “If we gaze intently on Jesus as our Teacher and Example, we will become more like Him.”<sup>1</sup> How aptly spoken! When we focus on the life and teaching of anyone, we become like that person. The more time we spend with them, the more likely we will become like them.

When we give ourselves over to **following a master** our lives begin to mirror that person whom

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<sup>1</sup> (Brian Cavanaugh, T.O.R., *More Sower’s Seeds: Second Planting*, [New York: Paulist Press, 1992] pg. 40-41)

we are following. We have heard the news recently lifting up the life of John Lewis who worked with and walked alongside of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. The longer Lewis was with King, the more like King Lewis became. So for the rest of his life, then, John Lewis followed in King's footsteps working for racial justice and peace, not as a pastor, but as a representative to congress. And there are many more examples of how folks have followed another person and by doing so became just like them.

For good or for evil, our choice to follow someone draws us close to them. It is true, then, that when we intently study and watch and follow people, our actions and words and even our lives become conformed to their image. When we dedicate ourselves and give of ourselves to following a master, inevitably we will become like that person.

The Patriarchs of the Old Testament found this to be true. They followed the leading of the Lord their God, and the closer they came to the Lord, the more they acted and lived in ways that modeled His character. Psalm 105 lifts up Joseph, whom God used to save the people of Israel from famine and plague by sending him to Egypt ahead of all the struggles. He lived according to the ways of God and God rewarded him for it. He had “[*Gone*] to the Lord for help; and [*worshipped*] Him continually” (4).

And then we hear how God blessed Jacob as he followed God's instructions to go to Egypt to be saved from the famine. Though they started out small in number, God multiplied the people of Israel to the point that they were considered a threat to the Egyptians which lead the Pharaoh to enslave them.

And then the psalm also lifts up Moses and Aaron, whom God used to bring the people of Israel out of Egypt and into the Promised Land. These are but a few of those who sought out the Lord God to follow, and God used them in marvelous ways for His glory because they all followed Him and conformed their lives to His plan for life. They found the real value of conforming to the ways of God.

**But it is wise to be careful whom you follow.** If we give our lives in the pursuit of following the wrong person, we could find ourselves on the wrong end of God's plan for the world. We could even end up fighting against God Himself! Romans 12:1-2 gives us some great guidance here. We are advised, “*So then...because of God's great mercy to us I appeal to you: Offer yourselves as a living*

*sacrifice to God, dedicated to His service and pleasing to Him. This is the true worship that you should offer. **Do not conform yourselves to the standards of this world**, but let God transform you inwardly by a complete change of your mind. Then you will be able to know the will of God – what is good and [what] is pleasing to Him and [what] is perfect.”* Paul assures us that following the ways of God are much greater than following the ways of this world, so it is important that we be careful as to whom we model our lives after.

In today’s Gospel lesson of Matthew 13, we hear **Jesus inviting us to seek the Kingdom of God**. Through the use of parables Jesus opens up our eyes to see the enormity of God’s Kingdom and invites us to become a part of it. In order that we might know why we should want to seek God’s kingdom, Jesus tells us a little bit about the surpassing value of following Him.

In the Parable of the Mustard Seed (Matt. 13:31-32), Jesus explains the difference that the Kingdom of God makes in the life of a person. When we seek to know the Lord and conform all of our ways to following Him, Jesus tells us that we grow in Him and the difference it makes in our life starts out small but becomes huge. It is noticeable to all those around us who will see it and then may be drawn close to us to find out what is going on. As we change our ways from following the world to following God, people will notice it. And though it will begin with the smallest thing in our life, maybe the way we speak, or maybe the things we don’t do any more, the closer we get to the Lord, our faith will increase and our lives will become changed in marvelous ways.

The same is true when we look at the Parable of the Yeast (13:33). As we begin to seek the Lord Jesus in our life, and strive to conform to His ways, things will begin to change inside of us, just like yeast makes changes in the dough of bread. We begin to look at things differently. We start seeing others in different ways. We gradually become less judgmental of others. We begin to love more, and the joy within us increases exponentially. As we focus on Jesus and grow closer to Him, the little changes in us begin to make gigantic differences within us. And soon, as we keep our focus on Jesus, our lives will become radically different than we were before.

Jesus then tells us what the value of seeking Him involves. In His Parable of the Hidden Treasure, Jesus lets us know that the Kingdom of God is worth all that we have, so that we might gain it for ourselves. The parable is about the treasure being worth everything we have in order to obtain it. To conform our lives to the image of Jesus means that the value of our life now increases many times over. The kingdom of heaven is of more value than the cost of discipleship, and those who know where the treasure really lies, completely abandon all else in order to gain access to it.

Similarly, in the Parable of the Pearl Jesus tells us that as we come to know the value of this great treasure before us, we become willing to pay the great price that it cost us in order to have it become ours. Everything we own, up to this time, does not compare with the value of that one fine pearl, and we begin to see all that we have is fair exchange in order to obtain it.

Jesus then tells us in the Parable of the Net, that we must make wise decisions lest we begin to follow the worthless and give up the good. The warning that comes to us is much like the Parable of the Weeds that I talked about last week, but it invites us to see that we will be judged based upon how God determines good and worthless, not how we value things. By conforming our lives after the image of Jesus, we become pleasing to God and we find worth to Him. And then, as we gain our place into the Kingdom of God by becoming more and more like Jesus, it then is our responsibility to begin to share that with those around us to help them make good choices, too.

But what does it really mean that we are to work at conforming to the likeness of the Son, Jesus? I invite you to listen to the way that the Apostle Paul puts it in Romans 8:26-39. I'm going to take this in two parts, so let's look at verses 26-30 first, and then in a bit, we'll look at the rest of the verses. (READ Romans 8:26-30)

Looking particularly at verse 29 we see that God has set us "*apart to become like His Son...*" God has called us to conform to the image of His Son so that we might stand out as living witnesses of disciples of Jesus. Yet, in order for us to become like Jesus, we need to look at the **characteristics of Jesus** - what makes Him worth conforming our lives to become like Him. Let's look at six

characteristics of Jesus that are important in our own lives.

First let us consider how loving Jesus is. As the Son of God, Jesus did not have to humble Himself to become like us. He did not have to give up His divine nature to take on human flesh. Yet out of His great love for us, knowing that that was the only way for us to be able to find forgiveness for our sins, Jesus willingly stepped down from His place at the Father's right hand to become like us in every way except for sin. That way He could tell us about the greatness of God and bring us to Him.

When Jesus was with us here on the earth, He didn't just look out for His own interests, but He touched the lives of the people around Him, healing them, restoring them, forgiving them, and renewing them into the image of God. Jesus saw the needs of the people and met them in astounding ways. He loved us enough to bring us back into a right relationship with God the Father. He loves each one of us so much and desires that we be with Him forever (John 3:16). The greatest need of all humanity is for the salvation of our souls through the forgiving of our sin.

Second, as we consider Jesus' generosity in giving His life as a ransom for many (Mark 10:45), we see that He gave His all so that we could live eternally with Him in the Father's house. Jesus **gave** us His all so that we could **receive** His all as we live for Him. His whole life was focused on giving us salvation so we could be with Him as we claim Him as our Savior and Lord.

Third, we look at Jesus' obedience. Jesus never did anything on His own initiative, but followed God the Father's plan for saving us, even to the point of going to the cross for us (Philippians 2:8). Jesus obeyed all the commands given to us in the Scriptures, AND He obeyed all of the commands of the Father so that He could truly be the Savior of the world.

Fourth, in all His ways, Jesus was holy, conforming to the demands of the Law, yet bringing God's full intention of the Law to us so that we could likewise follow the Law. There was no sin in the life of Jesus; He was perfect in every way, conforming to the nature of His Father. Being sinless, there was nothing true in the condemnation made by the leaders of the Temple against Jesus. Everything said of Him at the "trials" before the Sanhedrin and before Pilate was manufactured and manipulated to make

it seem like Jesus was a law breaker, a sinner, a criminal. But there was nothing sinful in His life, not even in His words. He was perfect in all His ways.

Fifth, Jesus was completely self-less. Nothing Jesus did was for His own glory, His own reputation, His own position of power, or for His own benefit. Jesus often met with the crowds of people following Him. The people demanded so much attention which caused Jesus to give up His own time of mourning the death of a friend (Matthew 14:13) to heal them. He gave up eating meals (John 4:31-34) in order to do the work of His Father. He gave up sleep (Mark 1:35) in order to get quiet time with the Father. He gave up His busy time schedule (Mark 10:46-52) to give a man back his sight. He gave up His reputation as a Rabbi (John 8:1-11) in order to prevent a woman from being stoned to death by an angry mob. Jesus selflessly gave of Himself to open up the eyes of the people to see Him as He really is – the Messiah, come to set God’s people free.

And sixth, Jesus was a prayerful man. Even though He was God in the flesh, Jesus relied upon seeking the Father’s will for His life. He was bound to doing His Father’s will, so as He shared our humanness, Jesus relied on prayer to keep His connection with the Father. Even in the most difficult times of His life, Jesus went to the Father for guidance and reassurance. The night spent in prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane guided Jesus to not depend upon His own human strength, but to open Himself up to become vulnerable to pain and death, even death on the cross.

By taking these six characteristics into our own lifestyle, we are able to begin to conform into the likeness of Jesus. Love in us leads us to give of ourselves for the sake of others. Obedience to God’s Word brings us into the holiness of God. Selflessness in meeting the needs of others drives us to stay in contact with God through prayer. These, and other of Jesus’ characteristics, are valuable to have in our own lives so that as we practice them, and rely upon them and give ourselves to the service of God through them, we show ourselves to be more and more like Jesus.

But a big question here is “**What do we gain by conforming to the image of Jesus?**” Let me read the rest of our Scripture lesson of Romans 8:31-39. (READ Romans 8:31-39) When we conform

ourselves into the likeness of Jesus, we find God's love and protection in a deeper and more powerful way. Paul asks 5 questions to help us understand the depth of the benefits we get by following Jesus.

1) He starts by asking, "*If God is for us, who can be against us*" (8:31)? When we come over to God's side, when we give ourselves over to doing the will of God the Father, God promises to protect us. But let's look at the question, "Who is against us?"

Now, we can easily answer that question by saying that certainly Satan is against us when we belong to God. We become His enemies. The World will certainly be against us, too, since it is governed by the darkness of Satan. When we show ourselves to be servants of the Light of Jesus, the darkness surrounding us will begin to war against us to try to put out our light and make us dark, too. And the ungodly will be against us, since our ways will be so radically different than their ways. But of all of these, is there anyone who can truly defeat us if we are conformed to the likeness of Jesus? NO!

2) Then Paul asks another rhetorical question, "*...will He not also freely give us all things*" (8:32)? If God gave us His own Son, Jesus, what else might He be willing to give to us? When we conform to the likeness of Jesus, we become God's children, and God is delighted with us when we are a part of His family. So God gives abundantly to those who are in His family. Maybe not the riches of the world, but rather the fruit of the Holy Spirit: "...love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control" (Galatians 5:22). What more could we need than these?

3) Paul goes on to ask, "*Who will accuse God's chosen people*" (8:33)? Yes, Satan will accuse us, the world will accuse us, and the ungodly will accuse us. But they did the same thing to Jesus. BUT "*God himself declares [us] not guilty!*" when we are conforming ourselves to the likeness of Jesus. God overrules any other authority, so who cares what the rest say. God pronounces us innocent when we accept Jesus as our Savior and He rejoices when we become like Him.

4) And Paul asks, "*Who, then, will condemn [us]*" (8:34)? We get the same answer as the other questions – Satan, the world, and the ungodly - will try to condemn us, but again, God's authority is greater than any of theirs, so God overrules their condemnation. In fact, Jesus "*...is at the right side of*

*God, pleading with Him for us!*” When we conform our lives after the likeness of Jesus, we become His sisters and brothers, and His blood, shed from the cross, wipes away any condemnation from us.

5) Paul questions then, *“Who, then can separate us from the love of Christ”* (8:35-39)? He goes on to list a whole bunch of stuff that we might think could possibly take away the love of Jesus from us; trouble, hardship, persecution, hunger, poverty, danger and death. But NONE OF THESE THINGS can separate us from the love of Jesus. Rather, Paul tells us, *“No, in all these things we have complete victory through Him who loved us”* (8:37)! Nothing can separate us from the love of Jesus. Instead, when we are conformed to His likeness, we have complete victory in Jesus!

Now, I don’t know about you, but all of these things make me WANT to conform to the likeness of Jesus. Where else can we get any of these things? Nowhere! They are only found in Jesus Christ. So for us to conform ourselves after the likeness of Jesus Christ is rewarding beyond all things.

This leads me to one last point. “In ancient times a king decided to find and honor the greatest person among his subjects. A man of wealth and property was singled out. Another was praised for her healing powers, another for his wisdom and knowledge of the law. Still another was lauded for his business acumen. Many other successful people were brought to the palace, and it became evident that the task of choosing the greatest would be difficult.

“Finally, the last candidate stood before the king. It was a woman. Her hair was white. Her eyes shined with the light of knowledge, understanding and love. ‘Who is this?’ asked the king. ‘What has she done?’ ‘You have seen and heard all the others,’ said the king’s aid. ‘This is their teacher!’

“The people applauded and the king came down from his throne to honor her.”<sup>2</sup>

When we conform our lives after the likeness of the Son, God the Father is pleased to give honor to our Teacher and Master, Jesus Christ, for He is the One who makes us right in the sight of God. He is the One who deserves all our praise, all our honor and all the glory of God. And it is only right that we live like Him! AMEN! Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> (Brian Cavanaugh, T.O.R., *The Sower’s Seeds*, [New York: Paulist Press, 1990] pg. 79)