

DARE
To Be
CHRISTLIKE

Why You Must and How You Can

STEPHEN P. SMITH

Exulon
ELITE

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Why You Must and How You Can
by STEPHEN P. SMITH

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Preface



“The greatest of these is love.”

1 Corinthians 13:13

GRANDPA ENTERED THE ROOM like an actor bursting onto the stage. His sick grandson was sitting up in bed, reluctantly anticipating grandpa’s arrival. The boy knew from experience he was about to be victimized by that annoying pinch of the cheek that grandparents like to give.

Grandpa did not disappoint. Cheek firmly squeezed between thumb and forefinger, he waggled his grandson’s face predictably, to the boy’s chagrin.

Grandpa handed his grandson a wrapped present. After opening his gift, all the grandson could muster was, “A book?” Yes, a book. But not just any book. The boy’s tepid reception of the gift did not deter Grandpa in the least. “This is a special book,” Grandpa replied enthusiastically. “It was the book my father used to read to me when I was sick, and I used to read it to your father. And today, I’m gonna read it to you.”

Would the story be interesting? Would it contain sports, adventure, excitement? When the boy voiced his skepticism, Grandpa offered assurance that it contained all these things and more.

“Doesn’t sound too bad. I’ll try and stay awake.” said the grandson. Grandpa then began reading aloud, “*The Princess Bride*, by S. Morgenstern.”

It wasn’t long before the boy had heard enough about the blossoming love between Buttercup and the Farm Boy. “Hold it, hold it. What is this? Are you trying to trick me? Where’s the sports? . . . Is this a kissing book?”

“Wait, just wait,” said Grandpa, extending his hand like a traffic cop.

“Well, when’s it get good?” came the impatient response from the grandson.

“Keep your shirt on. Let me read,” said Grandpa, determined to continue the story.¹

Investment Risk

I don’t know about you, but I am often like this boy when it comes to wading into a new book. Will I like this? Will it be worth my time? Will it put me to sleep? What benefit awaits me, if any?

I only know one way to find out—start reading. Or, in this case, continue reading. Only then will you know if this book is worth your time. My prayer is that you will continue, and that God will speak to you through its pages.

This is a book about love. (It’s not about kissing, though.) It’s a book about adventure—the adventure of a lifetime (or a lifetime adventure). It’s a book about the intrinsic power of love to transform a life. This book is about my journey. This book is about your journey. It’s about the lifelong pursuit of being conformed to the image and likeness of Jesus Christ.

Original Recipe?

Though I would never plagiarize another author’s work, I have no problem recycling the thoughts of others if it serves my purpose in making a point. Any source is acceptable as long as what they say aligns with the timeless truth of Scripture. Pierre Bayle, a seventeenth century philosopher and writer, once said, “There is not less wit nor less invention in applying rightly a thought one finds in a book, than in being the first author of that thought.”²

I suspect much of what you read in this book may not be new to you. I’m certainly not the first person to have a thought about the need for Christians to be more Christlike. Though I can’t claim

originality with respect to the subject matter, I do hope to present a fresh perspective. That said, if your point of view is such that people should only articulate original ideas and insights, then such logic would also suggest that people should only serve food they've prepared from their own recipes. But I question if anyone subscribes to such an approach when preparing meals.

In a way, I'm serving up something that's not entirely my own creation. You see, I feel as if I owe an eternal debt of gratitude to a person whose name I don't even know. On two separate occasions, separated by more than fifteen years, I found myself reading a book called *The Christlike Christian*. This now out-of-print book was written by an early twentieth century author who simply identified himself or herself as an Unknown Christian. The legacy this Christlike believer left behind has been a tool in the hands of the Holy Spirit to make me acutely aware of my shortcomings and need to pursue Christ more fully. And so it is that I thankfully and respectfully acknowledge the influence of the Unknown Christian upon my life, for much of what you will read in this book was inspired by this individual's writing.



The Christlike Christian was last published by Zondervan Publishing House in 1988. The original date of publication for this work is not known. However, it was published in 1960 as part of the Zondervan Clarion Classics series, ISBN 0-310-33461-6. This book is currently out of print and in public domain. No further information could be obtained from HarperCollins Christian Publishing (Zondervan and Thomas Nelson) concerning the original date of publication for this work.

Introduction: An Epic Enigma



“A problem well stated is a problem half solved.”¹

Charles F. Kettering, inventor and engineer (1876–1958)

INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY (IT) has been my profession for more than thirty years, and I have spent nearly half my career with an upscale women’s specialty retail corporation. In the summer of 2010—after eighteen months of requirements gathering, design, development, and testing—we deployed new websites for our brands. The sites were launched prematurely, creating a maelstrom of functional and performance-related issues that resulted in numerous troubleshooting calls for our IT staff.

Our IT department then was under the direction of a man whose critical thinking and problem-solving skills were second to none. On several troubleshooting calls I witnessed his ability to gather input and observations from multiple sources regarding complex issues and articulate a summary of those artifacts so well that it truly gave a sense you were halfway to having the problem solved by the time the call ended.

I admire people who can do that. It’s not one of my strengths. However, it is no great feat to articulate the problem this book addresses: *claiming to be a Christian but bearing little resemblance to the Christ we profess to follow*. I’m obviously not referring to our physical appearance, but rather how we model the character of Christ.

Jesus said, “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9). Imagine how God-glorifying it would be if we could humbly and truthfully proclaim, “If you’ve seen me, you’ve seen Jesus.” Is such a notion an arrogant, foolish, or presumptuous pipe dream? Not only is such a notion *possible*, it is our *responsibility* as

believers in Jesus Christ to represent well the character that Christ Himself embodied during His brief incarnation upon the earth.

Paul thought it was possible. “Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ,” he told the believers in Corinth (1 Corinthians 11:1). He said to the church at Philippi, “What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me—practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you” (Philippians 4:9).

Was Paul arrogant to presume his life could be imitated as a model for Christlikeness? I don’t think so. This is something all believers in Jesus should aspire to. Christianity is not just some weekend activity tacked on to everything else in our lives. This is our life. Or is it?

Mirror, Mirror, on the Wall

It is reasonably safe to say I’ve lost close to three hundred pounds in my lifetime. Lose 30 pounds, gain 35. Lose 32, gain 30. Rinse, repeat. These days my weight stays consistently between 185 and 195 pounds, but it’s been as high as 240.

On those occasions when my weight has ballooned, I can recall standing in front of my bathroom mirror thinking to myself, *There’s a better physique in there, Steve, and you would look and feel so much better if you got yourself in the gym and stopped eating so much of the wrong kinds of food.*

Paul exhorted Timothy, his son in the faith, with these words, “Exercise yourself toward godliness. For bodily exercise profits a little, but godliness is profitable for all things” (1 Timothy 4:7–8 NKJV).

As Christians, we sometimes fail to reflect the perfect image of Christ within us. As Paul told Timothy, we must exercise ourselves toward godliness in order to remove the surrounding fatty tissue of those things in our lives that obscure the handsome physique of our Beloved, Christ Jesus.

Christlike Christian?

The expression “Christlike Christian” sounds to me like something from the Department of Redundancy Department, yet that is the premise of this book—becoming a Christlike Christian. Now, if there is such a thing as a Christlike Christian, then it’s logical to conclude there exists the opposite—an un-Christlike Christian. Where I come from, we would call this an *enigma*: “a puzzling or inexplicable occurrence or situation; a person of puzzling or contradictory character.”² It’s an enigma to call myself a Christian and not be Christlike in my conversation and manner of living.

Frankly, we have all been those who, at some point in our walk with Jesus Christ, have borne little resemblance to the Savior we profess to love and serve. I am painfully aware of a few specific occasions in my past when I publicly behaved in a manner that was anything but Christlike, and I hoped that no one in proximity knew I professed to be a Christian. Sadly, I resembled those of whom the Unknown Christian spoke:



“If we could only keep all the un-Christlike Christians out of sight, the greatest hindrance to the triumph of the gospel would be gone.”
—Unknown Christian



“If we could only keep all the un-Christlike Christians out of sight, the greatest hindrance to the triumph of the gospel would be gone.”

So said an old saint. Now that is a very arresting remark—and it is very true!

Yet we read it with great trepidation. It throws us back upon ourselves. And every one of us begins to ask himself a little fearfully: “Where should I be?” Am I so unlike the Lord Jesus that it would

advance His cause if I were hidden away from my fellow man?³

Caveat Emptor

In some areas of my life I still fall short of Christlikeness. For those who know me well, this is not exactly breaking news. Although *caveat emptor* may sound like something my wife fixed for dinner last night, it is Latin for “Let the buyer beware.”⁴ So in the interest of full disclosure, *I am not yet Christlike*. I am one who is pursuing Christlikeness by the empowering grace of God, and writing as one who sees through a glass darkly, yet has confidence in the promises of a faithful and loving Father who has committed Himself to perfect that which concerns me—and every person who has taken hold of the grace of God that brings salvation (Titus 2:11).

James issues a sobering caution for those who would venture to instruct others. He writes, “Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness” (James 3:1). This implies that those who teach should exemplify their teaching. This is quite an imposing thought to me—because I know me! I know how far short of Christlikeness I fall on occasion. However, I will not be less likely to have to give an account of my own pursuit of Christlikeness if I choose not to write on this subject. I am still just as accountable to be like Him whether I exhort others to be so or not. And if you call yourself a Christian, you are just as accountable to pursue Christlikeness whether you continue reading this book or not.

Christians in Crisis

If you’ve been on this earth long, you have no doubt experienced some crisis in your life. This book was not written to *create* a crisis in your life, but to help you *recognize* the crisis that already exists. The website Dictionary.com provides a handful of definitions for the word *crisis*, but these two are the most germane to this topic (emphasis added):

crisis⁵

- noun.

1. a stage in a sequence of events at which the trend of all future events, especially for better or for worse, is determined; *turning point*.
2. a condition of instability or danger, as in social, economic, political, or international affairs, *leading to a decisive change*.

I do not think it's a stretch to include *spiritual* affairs in the list of things that may lead to decisive change. It's not God's will for Christians to meander aimlessly through life, carried along by every wind of doctrine, having no real sense of direction or purpose. He wants His children to be like Him, and yet it's altogether too easy for us to be content in the same daily routine, oblivious to how our lives affect those around us. The crisis that exists in every Christian's life is to recognize the need for decisive change. To recognize that too often my life looks like *this*, and Christ looks like *that*. One of these things is not like the other.



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Statement of Purpose

I believe mission statements serve to provide focus for any worthwhile endeavor, so naturally I developed one for this book:

To challenge and convict, to encourage and inspire; to give the reader hope that becoming Christlike is not simply a noble pursuit, but possible through the grace of God at work in every believer's life.

This book is going to challenge you. It may ruffle your feathers. You may not always like—or agree with—what you read, but Ralph Waldo Emerson once said, “Our chief want in life is somebody who shall make us do what we can.”⁶ Oswald Chambers put it this way:

In dealing with other people, our stance should always be to drive them toward making a decision of their will. That is how surrendering to God begins. Not often, but every once in a while, God brings us to a major turning point—a great crossroads in our life. From that point we either go toward a more and more slow, lazy, and useless Christian life, or we become more and more on fire, giving our utmost for His highest—our best for His glory.⁷

I certainly cannot *make* you be like Jesus—or even desire to be like Him—but my assumption is that you are reading this book because you *do* want to be like Him. You may already have a raging fire inside of you to become more like Jesus. Or, you may have never given it much thought. Still yet, you may find within yourself the cooling embers remnant of a bygone flame. Regardless of your situation, this book contains the inspirational insight to assist in igniting a flame—or fanning one that already exists—so that your *profession* of Christ is elevated to a *possession* of Christlikeness.

The Ultimate Pursuit

This book was written to help the reader become Christlike. That said, it admittedly falls short of addressing every aspect of how Jesus lived. Consequently, there are a number of significant omissions. If we were to attempt to cover every aspect of the life of Christ and its application to the Christian, this would quickly become a tedious and unbearable tome. Based on Paul’s admonition to the church in Corinth, our primary focus is on the qualities of love listed in 1 Corinthians 13, which most aptly describe the superlative Person of Jesus Christ. For as the Nicene Creed reminds us,

Christ is “very God of very God,” and God is love. Paul begins this passage on love with these arresting statements:

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing. (1 Corinthians 13:1–3)

Do we grasp the weight of these words, or have we seen and heard them so often that they’ve become little more than some prosaic poetry to frame and hang on a wall as decoration? On the contrary, do they not hit us squarely between the eyes?

An untold number of books have been written for the Christian Living genre, each one designed to help us in some aspect of our walk with Christ. Pick any subject you like or any facet of Christian living; they all take a back seat to love.

The point here is that I may possess many Christlike qualities, but if I’m not walking in love, I am still falling short of the ultimate goal. Paul told Timothy the goal of his instruction was *love* from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith (1 Timothy 1:5).

When such love becomes seamlessly woven into the fabric of our lives, it not only causes people to recognize that we have been with Jesus, but our hope is that He will be so lifted up in the eyes of all who know us that they too will be drawn to Him. Therefore, my hope for you is that in the process of reading this book you will experience that psychological moment, or turning point, that inspires and urges you onward in your pursuit of Christlikeness as you discover how to extend grace and walk in love.

For Further Study

“Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ.”

1 Corinthians 11:1

1. What problem does this book address?
2. What does the author state is the responsibility of believers in Jesus Christ? Share with the group* why you either agree or disagree with this statement.
3. Describe the enigma mentioned in the introduction.
4. What quote from *The Christlike Christian* suggests how the greatest hindrance to the triumph of the gospel would be remedied?
5. Share how the following question impacts you personally: “Am I so unlike the Lord Jesus that it would advance His cause if I were hidden away from my fellow man?”
6. Describe the crisis that exists in every Christian’s life.
7. In your own words, summarize the distinction between professing to be Christlike and actually possessing Christlikeness.

*Possible alternatives to group study include writing your thoughts in a journal or sharing them with a close friend or family member.

Part 1

The Realization

realize¹ [ree-uh-lahyz]

—noun

1. *to grasp or understand clearly....*
3. *to bring vividly to the mind.*

1

Once Upon a Word...



“They began to be sorrowful and to say to him one after another, ‘Is it I?’”

Mark 14:19

“**W**HAT DOES THE WORD *caviling* mean?” she asked, lowering her book just enough to reveal the puzzled expression on her face.

“I don’t know. Read it in context,” I replied, welcoming the challenge of inferring the word’s meaning from the surrounding text.

“Okay,” she said.

Since I have a natural affinity for learning new words, I listened closely as she began reading the text aloud, “Such enquiries as these urgently demand our attention; and if we have been at all given to caviling, let us now turn our critical abilities to a service so much more profitable. Let us be peace-makers, and endeavor to lead others both by our precept and example.”¹

“Well,” I said, “it sounds to me like the word may have something to do with being critical of others. I’ll look it up on Dictionary.com.”

My wife, Mindy, and I were spending a few days in her brother’s cabin in Gatlinburg, Tennessee, the week before Thanksgiving, 2010. She was immersed in her daily devotional time when she came across this word while reading Charles Spurgeon’s *Morning by Morning*. If I have learned nothing else in more than thirty-seven years of marriage, it is that Mindy is committed to her daily devotional time with Christ. Sometimes I think she would

rather lose an arm than give up that time with Jesus. It's one of the things I admire most about her.

While waiting for the definition, I continued my attempt to derive the meaning of the word based on Spurgeon's context. Ah, finally, I was able to type it in: c-a-v-i-l-i-n-g.

cavil² [kav-uh-l]

—verb (used without object)

1. *to raise irritating and trivial objections; find fault with unnecessarily.*

A lump formed in my throat. “Okay, dear, here it is. It means to raise irritating and trivial objections; to find fault with unnecessarily.”

We looked at each other and after a momentary pause, I said, “Hmm” and she said, “Hmm.”

The mildly amusing but awkward silence was palpable.

As I would later come to understand, that awkward moment was a bit of an epiphany, or what I call a “Nathan moment.” For that is when the Holy Spirit opened my eyes and convicted me of what had been a longstanding, recurring pattern of injurious comments and remarks to my wife about things that should be of no consequence.

For example, there had been a tug-of-war between us for years over Mindy's splashing of water around the sink—any sink, no, *every* sink... or so it seemed. She was like a bird in a bird bath. When I would point this out, she would get annoyed with me because to her it wasn't a big deal, and I would get annoyed with her for not seeing my point of view—that water is corrosive, it leaves behind stains over time, and why couldn't she just wipe it up anyway?



*As I would later
come to understand,
that awkward
moment was a bit
of an epiphany,
or what I call a
“Nathan moment.”*



To be clear, I never shared any of my “observations” with a mean spirit. I was just convinced there was a better way, so I persistently tried to convince her that my way was better. Little did I realize that I was the one who needed to learn a better way.

Exam Time

It’s easy to see things in others that need to change, especially when that is what you are looking for. Jesus said we should not worry about the speck in our friend’s eye when we have a log in our own (Matthew 7:3–5). We would be better off if we spent more time examining ourselves instead of niggling others, not to mention the added bonus that we would not be such a bother.

Jesus did not forbid us to help our friends with speck extraction, but His point is that our primary focus should be on log extraction. Galatians tells us, “Pay careful attention to *your own work*. . . . For we are each responsible for *our own conduct*” (Galatians 6:4–5 NLT, emphasis added).

When speaking of people who commend themselves, Paul told the Corinthians that those who measure and compare themselves to others are unwise to do so (2 Corinthians 10:12). We should not make the mistake of comparing ourselves to others, for we can always find someone of lesser character to justify our manner of living. In doing so, we become like the self-righteous Pharisee who prayed, “I thank you, God, that I am not a sinner like everyone else. For I don’t cheat, I don’t sin, and I don’t commit adultery. I’m certainly not like that tax collector!” (Luke 18:11 NLT). If only we had the self-awareness of the extortionist tax collector who recognized his sin and beat his breast, pleading for the mercy of God (Luke 18:13)!

It is the humble and contrite who acknowledge and accept responsibility for their sin once the Holy Spirit has opened their eyes. And only by God’s Spirit do we experience grace to evoke the conviction and repentance necessary to produce lasting change.

“Is It I?”

At the Last Supper, Jesus stunned His disciples by declaring that one of them would betray Him. Each man in turn asked, “Is it I?” (Mark 14:19). Do we “betray” Christ by a life that belies His likeness? Do we have the humility to at least ask, as the disciples did, “Is it I?”

Sometimes we just don’t see it. A classic illustration is the story of David and Bathsheba as chronicled in 2 Samuel 11:1–12:7. David eyes a beautiful woman bathing on a rooftop. Abusing his kingly power, he summons her to his bedchamber. When she becomes pregnant, he tries to cover his sin by bringing her husband, Uriah, home from battle to sleep with her. When Uriah refuses to lie with his wife while his comrades remain in harm’s way, David sends him back to the troops with a letter instructing Joab to put him closest to the fray and “draw back from him, that he may be struck down, and die” (2 Samuel 11:15).

After Uriah is slain in battle, the prophet Nathan comes to David and tells him of a rich man with many flocks and herds who refuses to slaughter one of his own animals for a wayfaring traveler, but instead takes the only lamb of a poor man to prepare for his guest. When David hears this he is enraged:

Then David’s anger was greatly kindled against the man, and he said to Nathan, “As the Lord lives, the man who has done this deserves to die, and he shall restore the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing, and because he had no pity.” Nathan said to David, “You are the man!” (2 Samuel 12:5–7a)

Yes, it is I. I am the man.

Are *you* the man—or woman?

Everyone Needs a Nathan Moment

You may not be given to caviling. You may struggle with something entirely different. You could be a longstanding member of Club Envy or the ever popular Boastmasters. Maybe you allow yourself that occasional use of profanity—because it makes you seem more like “one of the guys.” Maybe you have a petulant, grumpy disposition that wears people out. Perhaps you harbor bitterness toward someone and cannot forgive them.

Need I go on? There’s no need to produce a comprehensive list. The Holy Spirit knows and sees everything. He used one single word to jolt me into an awareness of un-Christlike behavior. Has He shined the penetrating light of God’s Word into your soul to reveal an area of your life that is bringing dishonor to the name of Jesus Christ?

Don’t shy away from your Nathan moment. Recognize it, embrace it, and let it propel you in your pursuit of Christlikeness as it did me. Like the seven churches mentioned in the opening chapters of the book of Revelation, we too need to hear what the Spirit is saying to us. What is the Spirit saying? He could be saying, “You are the man!”

For Further Study

“Why do you see the speck that is in your brother’s eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye?”

Matthew 7:3

1. Why is it unwise to measure and compare ourselves to others?
2. Whose work are we called to examine?
3. What is a Nathan moment, and what is the significance of experiencing such a moment? Share with the group when you experienced a Nathan moment and how it affected you.
4. What is required to acknowledge and accept responsibility for sin in your life?
5. How/When does a Nathan moment occur?
6. The author suggests that everyone needs a Nathan moment. Share with the group why you either agree or disagree with this premise.

2

Aiming, Not Claiming



“We make it our aim . . . to be well pleasing to Him.”
2 Corinthians 5:9 (NKJV)

I AM NOT A MARKSMAN, nor do I own a firearm. I have never been a hunter of any sort, so I don't have a bow and arrow either. But I have tossed horseshoes and I own golf clubs. What do these have in common? In the hands of the user, they are all designed to accomplish the same goal: hit a target.

How strange would it be for someone to go deer hunting and shoot at anything other than deer? Who takes a firearm to a firing range and shoots at something other than a designated target? And what sense would it make for me to play golf and not focus on a target with every shot?

The answer, of course, is that it makes absolutely no sense to engage in any of these activities without aiming at the appropriate target, yet that is exactly what we do as Christians. We say we want to be like Jesus, but our lives too often testify to little more than a perfunctory pursuit of Him. We live



We say we want to be like Jesus, but our lives too often testify to little more than a perfunctory pursuit of Him.

We live as if simply going to church and reading our Bibles is the secret to becoming a Christlike man or woman.



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Going to church, reading the Bible—you can even throw in supplemental devotional readings and daily prayer—all are worthy disciplines for growth in godliness, but in themselves they do not guarantee a transformation from a life governed by self to a life governed by Christ. In fact, it is dangerously possible that these very things may give us an appearance of godliness (2 Timothy 3:5) without the power of a changed life, especially if they become an end in themselves rather than a means to pursuing and possessing Christ.

So how do we ensure that our Bible reading, prayer, and church attendance, etc. result in more than just a form of godliness? We don't. We can't. We will do well to remember these words from chapter 1 of John's gospel:

But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God. (John 1:12–13)

If I can't become a child of God through blood lineage or fleshly efforts, I certainly cannot become Christlike by such means.

Willfully Aim

At this point, we must ask whether it's even possible for a man or woman to become Christlike this side of heaven. Many would claim it's not possible and may even assert it is presumptuous and prideful to suppose otherwise. They see this as unattainable as scaling a mountain twice the height of Everest.

I, however, happen to believe that a Christlike life *is* possible. Am I claiming to have attained it? Absolutely not. Am I claiming I will attain it? That is not my primary concern. What is far more important is that I am *aiming* to be like Christ, and that I have

made a decision to be intentional in my pursuit of Him. To some, this may sound as if I'm trying to accomplish this through sheer power or force of will—the very approach I've stated is flawed. Not so. Allow me to illustrate.

No one gets out of bed to go to work in the morning without choosing to do so. We don't accidentally stand on our feet and commence with the activities of our day. Rather, we make a decision to get up and get going—even if we don't have much pep at first!

Does the fact that I choose to get out of bed guarantee I will be successful in getting to work on time and being productive that day? Hardly, but getting out of bed is a prerequisite to making it to work and being successful. So *choice* is important. It's not everything, but it is nonetheless an integral part of the total equation. We see this in Joshua's challenge to the Israelites, "*choose* this day whom you will serve" (Joshua 24:15, emphasis added).

Paul shared a similar mind-set, as seen in his epistle to the church at Philippi:

Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 3:12–14)

Paul was matter of fact in his admission that he had not yet *obtained*, but he was equally unapologetic in his intention to pursue and "press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus." I believe he was speaking of becoming Christlike. Could there be any higher call? Oswald Chambers states, "The

—*Oswald Chambers*

only proper goal of life is that we manifest the Son of God.”¹ He goes on to say,

Beware of thinking of our Lord as only a teacher. If Jesus Christ is only a teacher, then all He can do is frustrate me by setting a standard before me I cannot attain. What is the point of presenting me with such a lofty ideal if I cannot possibly come close to reaching it? I would be happier if I never knew it. What good is there in telling me to be what I can never be—to be “pure in heart” (Matthew 5:8), to do more than my duty, or to be completely devoted to God? I must know Jesus Christ as my Savior before His teaching has any meaning for me other than that of a lofty ideal which only leads to despair. But when I am born again by the Spirit of God, I know that Jesus Christ did not come only to teach—*He came to make me what He teaches I should be*. The redemption means that Jesus Christ can place within anyone the same nature that ruled His own life, and all the standards God gives us are based on that nature.²

A Threefold Cord

Once I choose to be intentional in my pursuit of Christlikeness, the next step is to understand and embrace the healthy tension that co-exists between grace, faith, and works. I know I cannot will myself to be Christlike and I also know I can’t just sit back and do nothing and expect to be transformed into His image. This creates a healthy tension. On one hand I am compelled to do something to become Christlike, but on the other hand I know it must be the work of God. So what’s a person to do? What do *I* do?

Ecclesiastes 4:12 states, “a threefold cord is not quickly broken.” This is because the individual strands, when woven together, form a much stronger union than when each is separate. With respect to becoming Christlike, I see a synergistic opportunity when *grace*, *faith*, and *works* combine to form a strong, threefold cord.

Much like the threefold cord, this triad of grace, faith, and works produces a total effect greater than the sum of its individual parts. Sovereign grace works in us to abandon all reliance on ourselves, implicitly trusting God to complete the work He started in us at conversion, as we also “*work out* [our] own salvation with fear and trembling” (Philippians 2:12, emphasis added).

Let’s take a brief look at each of the strands that seamlessly intertwine to produce this three-stranded cord of grace, faith, and works.

1. **Grace** — “Apart from me, you can do nothing” (John 15:5).

We must not only acknowledge, but unequivocally accept, the fact that we cannot achieve Christlikeness on our own. It is completely beyond our reach. Grace, however, is the ability that God provides to do what I am otherwise unable to do in my own strength, wisdom, and understanding. Paul understood this:

For our boast is this, the testimony of our conscience, that we behaved in the world with simplicity and godly sincerity, not by earthly wisdom but *by the grace of God*. (2 Corinthians 1:12 emphasis added)

2. **Faith** — “Without faith it is impossible to please God” (Hebrews 11:6 NIV).

If our goal is to be well pleasing to God—which we assume a Christlike life would accomplish—then we must exercise faith in the promises of God, which are said to make us “partakers of the divine nature” (2 Peter 1:4).

In his opening remarks to the Philippians, Paul writes, “And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ” (Philippians 1:6). He continues this thought in chapter 2, “For it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure” (v. 13). Without question, it would be pleasing to God if all of His children were living paragons of the exquisite character and virtue of Jesus Christ. With so many “great and precious promises” designed to make us

like Him, how can we not be convinced that becoming Christlike is indeed possible? The challenge we face lies in our ability to answer the same probing question that Jesus asked two blind men, “Do you believe that I am able to do this?” (Matthew 9:28).

3. Works — “Faith apart from works is dead” (James 2:26).

It’s clear from the context of James 2:14–26 that a solitary faith is a useless faith. Unless it is complemented by works, faith is as worthless as a blueprint without a builder. Verse 22 says Abraham’s faith was completed by his works. Works are to faith as execution is to a plan. And although we just read “it is God who works in [us],” we are responsible for the doing. Oswald Chambers aptly describes the difference between God’s work and our work in his explanation of Peter’s admonition to “add to our faith virtue” (2 Peter 1:5 NKJV):

—∞—

*“Our work only
begins where God’s
grace has laid the
foundation.”³*

—Oswald Chambers

—∞—

Add means that we have to do something. We are in danger of forgetting that we cannot do what God does, and that God will not do what we can do. We cannot save nor sanctify ourselves—God does that. But God will not give us good habits or character, and He will not force us to walk correctly before Him. We have to do all that ourselves. We must “work out” our “own salvation” which God has worked *in* us (Philippians 2:12). *Add* means that we must get into the habit of doing things, and in the initial stages that is difficult. To take the initiative is to make a beginning—to instruct yourself in the way you must go. . . . We have to take the initiative where we *are*, not where we have not yet been.⁴

It’s so true it bears repeating, “*Add* means that *we* have to do something,” and “We have to take the initiative *where we are*, not where we have not yet been.”⁵

Time for a Golf Lesson

In *Putting Like a Genius*, Dr. Bob Rotella, sports psychologist and author, addresses the importance of being precise in picking your target when on the putting surface. When facing long putts, many golfers will say, “I just want to get this within a three to four foot circle of the hole.” It has been proven that this approach will often leave you five to six feet from the hole, whereas if you say, “I am going to try to sink this putt,” you will be more likely to get within that three to four foot circle (if not closer).

Other times, like when hitting an approach shot, it is wiser—after factoring in the risk/reward—to hit into the *fat of the green* rather than take *dead aim* at the flag stick. But such logic does not apply in our pursuit of Christlikeness. The risk we take is in *not* aiming to be like Him, and the loss incurred is that the world potentially sees a misrepresentation of Jesus Christ. Conversely, the reward for *aiming* is that the world has a better chance of seeing a truer representation of the Savior who gave Himself for them so that they, too, might have life. Let us, therefore, purpose in our hearts to take dead aim at apprehending that for which we were apprehended—Christlikeness!

For Further Study

*“Not that I have already obtained this
or am already perfect...”*

Philippians 3:12

1. State why you agree or disagree with the premise that it is possible to be Christlike.
2. What does the author state is more important than whether or not we actually attain Christlikeness?
3. Why is choice important as it pertains to pursuing Christlikeness?
4. What three strands come together to form a strong, threefold cord?
5. Describe the healthy tension that exists between the strands in the threefold cord, and how this helps us in our pursuit of becoming like Christ.
6. What does it mean to “aim” to be like Christ, and why is that significant in the life of the Christian?

Notes



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