

Becoming Christ-Like in Moral Character: Becoming Christ-like requires “putting off” inappropriate behavior, and “putting on” righteous behavior.

Colossians 3:9-10: *“Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator.*

Ephesians 4:21-24 (NIV): *“when you heard about Christ and were taught in him in accordance with the truth that is in Jesus. ²² You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; ²³ to be made new in the attitude of your minds; ²⁴ and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.*

1 Thessalonians 5:12-22: *“Now we ask you, brothers and sisters, to acknowledge those who work hard among you, who care for you in the Lord and who admonish you. ¹³ Hold them in the highest regard in love because of their work. Live in peace with each other. ¹⁴ And we urge you, brothers and sisters, warn those who are idle and disruptive, encourage the disheartened, help the weak, be patient with everyone. ¹⁵ Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always strive to do what is good for each other and for everyone else. ¹⁶ Rejoice always, ¹⁷ pray continually, ¹⁸ give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus. ¹⁹ Do not quench the Spirit. ²⁰ Do not treat prophecies with contempt ²¹ but test them all; hold on to what is good, ²² reject every kind of evil.”*

Ephesians 5:1-2: *“Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. ² And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.”*

Galatians 5:22-23: *“the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.”*

Ephesians 5:3-4: *“But sexual immorality and all impurity or covetousness must not even be named among you, as is proper among saints. ⁴ Let there be no filthiness nor foolish talk nor crude joking, which are out of place, but instead let there be thanksgiving.”*

How Do We “Put Off” and “Put On”? Scripture tells us clearly the kind of things we are to eliminate from our lives and those things we are to add. The big question is how do you do that? How does one “put off” bad behavioral traits and “put on” good behavioral traits? How can thoughts and actions be controlled so that we can develop new patterns of thought, attitude, and behavior? From my personal experience, and I expect from yours, it isn’t easy. Many suggestions have been made as to how to accomplish this transformation. We will look at a scripturally backed method that has worked for many people.

How To Succeed in Changing Bad Habits? When we get really serious about changing our behavior, we try to focus our mind, screw up our will power to its highest level, set to work on a plan, and maybe make some progress. But then, just when we thought we had succeeded in changing our behavior, something happens and the bad behavior we thought we had conquered pops out again. Very frustrating!

The Righteousness Gap: The persistence of bad behavior highlights a gap which exists between what we know we ought to be and what we actually are – I call it “the righteousness gap.” How can we close our righteousness gap? How can we break bad habits of thought and behavior and develop new righteous habits?

The top-level answer is we must depend on the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit. But believers are required to do external things which cooperate with the Holy Spirit’s work of internal transformation. We are to “walk in step” with the Holy Spirit and neither “grieve” or “quench” Him. How do we do that?

An Approach which has Worked for Many: Many years ago I read Larry Christenson’s 1974 book **The Renewed Mind** (Bethany Fellowship, Inc). He makes three observations which had a powerful, life-changing, impact on me.

1. Within each believer, the conflict between their desire to “live by the Spirit” and the internal urgings of their “sinful nature” creates an ongoing struggle.
2. From Scripture we know some things necessary to salvation can only be done by God, but other things God enables believers to do and they must do them.
3. If we confuse the two, we get into trouble. Trying to do what only God can do is a losing prospect. Failing to do what God enables us to do is a problem.

Philippians 2:12-13 says believers are to “work out” their salvation for it is God who “works in” them “to will and to act according to His good purpose.” “Work out”

concerns what believers are to do. “Works in” concerns what God must do. How are we to understand these terms?

Paul gives further insight in Galatians 5:16, ***“So I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh.”*** By the “flesh” he means our “sin nature.” Martin Luther’s astute comment on this verse is believers should follow the Spirit as our guide and resist the flesh, for *that is all we are able to do*. He means we cannot rid our self of sinful desires, but, through the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit, we can resist those desires. We see that truth in 1 Corinthians 10:13: ***“No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it.”***

Ability to “not gratify” the desires of our sin nature is an important insight. We can’t stop sinful desires from coming into our mind. But we can choose to not gratify those desires. Becoming Christlike in our moral nature requires necessary things only God can do, and things we are enabled to do and should do. One obvious thing only God can do is regenerate, bring forth “new spiritual life.” Another is changing our heart or the essence of our inner being. Trying in our power to do things only God can do is a great error. Failing to do what we can and should do is a great error. As the Holy Spirit “works in” us transforming us into a moral likeness of Christ, we are to “work out” that which we have been enabled to do. God does the necessary things we cannot do.

Understanding The Necessary Division of Labor in Transformation: We need to know more about how God intends the labor of transformation to be divided. Psalm 51, Colossians 3, and other passages help in develop that understanding. Psalm 51 is David’s plea to God for restoration after his sin with Bathsheba and the killing of her husband.

God’s Essential Part in Transformation: Psalm 51 provides insight.

Psalm 51:6-12

⁶Behold, you delight in truth in the inward being,
and you teach me wisdom in the secret heart.

⁷ Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;
wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.

⁸ Let me hear joy and gladness;
let the bones that you have broken rejoice.

⁹ Hide your face from my sins,
and blot out all my iniquities.

¹⁰ Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and renew a right spirit within me.

¹¹ Cast me not away from your presence,
and take not your Holy Spirit from me.

¹² Restore to me the joy of your salvation,
and uphold me with a willing spirit.

In these verses, it is God who acts and David who is acted upon. God teaches David wisdom in his inner being. It is God alone who can create within David a clean heart and renew within him a right spirit. It is God's renewed affirmation of salvation that brings David joy. It is God who teaches, renews, and cleanses of sin washing David so that he is morally as white as snow. All changes taking place deep within the center of David's being or our being is God's work. He changes our essence.

Believer's Part in Transformation: Colossians 3 provides an illustration of things believers are enabled and required to do in support of transformation.

Colossians 3:12-14: *“Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, ¹³ bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. ¹⁴ And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.”*

The believer is to “put on” the Christ-like qualities of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. The believer is to put on love over all the other virtues, binding them together in perfect unity. “Putting on” Christ-like qualities means behaving as though you genuinely have that moral quality in your inner being. Developing the genuine inner quality requires a change in our essence and that is

God's work. Outward behavior consistent with having the desired moral qualities is our work and is enabled by the Holy Spirit.

Building Forms of Righteousness: Putting the two pieces together, we can develop a useful analogy for a believer's part in transformation into Christ-likeness. (1.) God enables and requires the believer to put on the outward form of Christ-likeness. (2.) God works the necessary inward change in the believer producing within their inner-most being the reality simulated by the outward form.

This is a structured process. The steps in building structures out of concrete provides an analogy. Temporary external forms are constructed defining the shape and volume of the structure. The temporary forms are rough in appearance, but externally resemble the desired structure. A mixture of cement, gravel, sand, and water is poured into the forms. The mixture cures and solidifies. The temporary forms are removed and there is the desired structure, strong and functional.

In becoming Christ-like believers can build outward forms, by "putting on" the outward signs of righteousness. The forms are rough and unfinished. God must pour the genuine essence of Christ-likeness into the forms. Believers can "put on" the outward form of compassion, kindness, humility, and the other qualities required. Only God can change the heart, causing an internal change making the outward qualities genuine by producing the inward reality in the heart. God promises to do that if we build the outward forms.

At times, believers must deal with people who are unpleasant. We may not want to be patient and kind to such persons. We may in fact be furious and angry, feeling a strong desire to "get even." But because we want to be obedient and pleasing to God, we refuse to gratify our anger or desire to "get even" and instead strive to be patient and kind. To do this we act in ways consistent with patience and kindness. In doing this we go against our "feelings" and act in obedience to God.

We obediently carry out outward forms of patience and kindness trusting God will pour true inward patience and kindness into the outward forms we build. We cannot eliminate sinful desires, but we can refuse to gratify those desires.

We make a big mistake if, with the best of intentions, we try to do God's job of changing our heart, which we cannot do, and ignore the job of proper behavior, which we can do. As we repeatedly refuse to gratify sinful desires and instead outwardly

behave as God would have us behave, God will change our innermost being so that our outward behavior and inward reality match.

Example: Christianson cites a true story of a woman who rushed into an early marriage to get out of a bad home situation. She did not love the man she married. Soon she felt herself trapped in the marriage. At some point she realized her husband was a good man and deserved something better than an unloving wife. She began to outwardly act as if she loved him, fixing his favorite meals, and acting loving toward him at all times. Some years later, one of their teen-age children said “Mom, all the kids say we sure are lucky because you and Dad like each so much.” Hearing it from their child, the woman realized she did truly love her husband. She had built the outward form of love and God had honored her efforts by producing genuine love for her husband in her innermost being.

The Role of Faith in Building Forms: It would be pointless to “put on” the outward form of a virtue without believing our faithful God will use those obedient actions to work the genuine virtue in us. We trust that God through our obedience will create the reality of a new attitude in our heart. We realize obediently putting on the outward conformity to patience will never be as beautiful, true, or strong as the real thing. It is not intended to be – it is simply our active expression of faith God will use our obedience to form in us genuine “patience” which is beautiful and true.

Galatians 5:16: *“But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh.”* Note, this verse doesn’t say our sinful nature will not generate sinful desires. It will. What it does say is that if we live by the Spirit we will not gratify sinful desires, meaning we won’t allow them outward expression.

If someone offends us, our sin nature will stir up a desire to lash out at the offender. Carefully notice, the verse doesn’t say **don’t feel that way**, or **that’s a terrible way for a Christian to feel**. You can’t stop such feelings coming into your mind. What it says you can do is refuse to gratify the desires. Don’t speak those cutting words. Don’t use your fists. Don’t devise a plan to get even with the offender.

If we do the temporary work of building outward forms of Christlike attitudes. God will do the inward lasting transformation! When all is done, the temporary forms are gone and what remains is God’s genuine workmanship. Our transformation into Christ-likeness is truly a work of God’s grace. Yet, He graciously enables us to take part in that work. We can cooperate with the Holy Spirit by building outward forms, trusting God will replace the temporary with His reality.

The Importance of Honesty: It may seem to some that using “outward forms” is hypocrisy. If we say kind words or act in a thoughtful and nice way – when our feelings are just the opposite – doesn’t that make us hypocrites? Not in this case!

Hypocrites are people who pretend to be something they are not. In building outward forms, we admit we are doing things against our natural inclination. What we do is in obedience to God. We are honest before Him. We build outward forms of obedience when we would prefer not to, and we trust God to use those forms to work in us that which is pleasing to Him (Hebrews 13:21).

When we study the works of Christ, we discover He often required persons receiving a miracle to participate by doing some outward thing. Jesus put wet clay on a blind man’s eyes and told him to wash in the nearby pool – when, in faith, he did as he was told, the miracle was complete, and he could see. A man with a withered arm was told to stretch out his arm – just what he could not do – in faith he tried, and the miracle was complete – his arm stretched out.

The miracle of a sinner becoming like Christ is similar. We are by nature, sinners. To become righteous requires God’s intervention. As in the miracles we have mentioned, we are required to participate in becoming morally like Him. We must participate in the glorious miracle of transforming a sinner into an image of Christ. Building forms is one way we can participate. Try to do the righteous thing even if you don’t feel like it or don’t think you can. Refuse to gratify sinful urges even when that is your greatest desire. God will not let us be tempted beyond what we can bear, and when we are tempted He will also provide a way out (1Corinthians 10:13).

We walk by faith, not by feelings or desires. We trust in the promises of God. As we strive to conform our outward behavior to God’s righteousness, we trust He will transform our inner being, making our thoughts and motivations genuinely like Christ’s. We cannot suppress our feelings, but we can control their outward expression. The feelings themselves we leave to God.

Philippians 1:6: *“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.”*

What’s next? Christian Ethics.