

Living a Life Controlled by Love

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher
Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio
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- Ephesians 4:21-5:2 ²¹You certainly heard about him, and as his followers you were taught the truth that is in Jesus. ²²So get rid of your old self, which made you live as you used to – the old self that was being destroyed by its deceitful desires. ²³Your hearts and minds must be made completely new, ²⁴and you must put on the new self, which is created in God's likeness and reveals itself in the true life that is upright and holy. ²⁵No more lying, then! Each of you must tell the truth to the other believer, because we are all members together in the body of Christ. ²⁶If you become angry, do not let your anger lead you into sin, and do not stay angry all day. ²⁷Don't give the Devil a chance. ²⁸If you used to rob, you must stop robbing and start working, in order to earn an honest living for yourself and to be able to help the poor. ²⁹Do not use harmful words, but only helpful words, the kind that build up and provide what is needed, so that what you say will do good to those who hear you. ³⁰And do not make God's Holy Spirit sad; for the Spirit is God's mark of ownership on you, a guarantee that the Day will come when God will set you free. ³¹Get rid of all bitterness, passion, and anger. No more shouting or insults, no more hateful feelings of any sort. ³²Instead, be kind and tender-hearted to one another, and forgive one another, as God has forgiven you through Christ. ^{5:1}Since you are God's dear children, you must try to be like him. ²Your life must be controlled by love, just as Christ loved us and gave his life for us as a sweet-smelling offering and sacrifice that pleases God.
- Sermon-in-a-sentence: Jesus urges us to allow love to control the thoughts and words and deeds of our lives.

It sounds like a scene from a 1930s movie. A fellow who was alcoholic had been living on the street. Because of the free dinner being offered by the Salvation Army mission, he went in one night – drunk, of course. He stayed for the service that followed. As it happened, at the end of the service he ended up responding to the preacher's invitation and went forward to accept Christ into his life.

He described what happened that night as the "big turnaround." And though it doesn't often happen this way, he didn't drink again after his trip to the altar. But he also said that in many ways, his conversion was just a starting point. While he accepted that his sins had been forgiven, he was the same self-centered, profane, bigoted, uncaring person he'd been – except that now, he was attending worship services regularly where he prayed and started listening for God. He said that he gradually realized there were things he needed to rethink, do differently, or take on if he was to continue following Jesus. There were also things that he needed to give up or, to use the vocabulary from Ephesians, to "put away." And so, little by little, he began to make those changes in how he lived and related to others.

He became a productive member of society and a solid Christian, but he never said he had "arrived." Rather, he said, he had a sense of where – and toward Whom – he was headed.

Few of us have such dramatic conversion stories, but being followers of Jesus doesn't mean we've automatically shed all our [unflattering] un-Christlike ways.¹

- For some, we might think about what we sometimes say while we're behind the wheel.
- We might think about the content of what we put out there for all to see in response to someone's post on Twitter or Facebook or Instagram.

¹ *Homiletics* July-August 2018, pp. 56-57

- With scholastic volleyball and soccer and football seasons about to start, we might reflect on what it is that we shout at the opponents when we're cheering on our favorite team... what we say about the officials supervising the contest.
- Perhaps we can bring to mind some passive-aggressive action we took toward a neighbor or a fellow shopper or a co-worker or classmate.
- When assessing how well we embody Christlike behaviors, we might even remember some of the things we've ever muttered under our breath at our kids or parents or spouse.

Of course, striving to live Christ-like lives is more than the expression on our face, or the words we choose.

But our words and our conduct are the most apparent demonstrations of how sincerely we are striving to follow the way of Jesus.

In his letter to the Christian fellowship in Ephesus, Turkey, Paul is suggesting a deliberate change in behavior. He urges the fledgling believers to "rid" themselves of former ways, to "stop" former behaviors, to cease using harmful words. And as a sort of corollary, the letter to the Colossians urges believers to "put on" or adopt certain uplifting behaviors like compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience."²

Those images of ridding oneself of *this* and putting on *that* might suggest that replacing unseemly behaviors with uplifting ones is as straight-forward as replacing a sweat-soaked shirt with a fresh one. But we know that making changes to innate behavior and long-standing habits isn't as simple as that. Nor is it at all likely that Paul meant "put on" in terms of *pretending* to be compassionate and patient, etc.

What are we to do? Paul's suggestion is that we immerse our lives in prayer. Now it may sound like a simplistic approach or even worn-out recommendation to say, "Whatever your struggle, just pray about it and everything will work out." And we know that prayer is not the magic wand that solves all problems; prayer is "not the kiss that makes the boo-boo all better."

But consider what prayer accomplishes within you. When you lift to God your fears, your struggles, your worries, your gratitude, you become more self-aware. You have a clearer grasp on just what's going on in your life. And as you become more self-aware by offering your life to God in prayer, you become more aware of how God is at work in you... and quite possibly how God is at work in the world through you. Offering yourself to God in prayer increases your self-awareness and your God-awareness, and being more aware of God's activity in your life helps you to grow more like Jesus in your thinking and your speech and your actions.

So maybe we're not trying hard enough to become more Christlike... or ironically, maybe we're working too hard at it. That's what Presbyterian minister Joan S. Gray suggests in her book called *Sailboat Church*.³ She writes that many congregations, and many individuals in churches, are more focused on rowing than on sailing. Here's what she means.

When we row, we imagine that we have to do all the work, being responsible for keeping the ship moving in the right direction. But when we sail, we're opening ourselves to the movement and power of the wind. When we open ourselves to God in prayer we are opening ourselves to the power of the holy wind that is God's Spirit. (You may remember hearing that in Greek, the same word is used to mean wind and spirit.)

Not that we don't have to do any work at all; our intention to be more Christlike is supported by our deliberate efforts to emulate Jesus. But we don't need to try so hard to change ourselves; we can pray that God works God's desired change within us so that Christ's love is evident in us.

Some of us have been striving to become more Christlike for maybe seven or eight years, and others of us may have been striving for seven or eight decades. It's natural for us to become frustrated, even weary, of what we perceive as a lack of progress: we still snap at our kids from time to time; we still hold on to resentment rather than releasing someone through forgiveness; we still indulge ourselves on occasion rather than extending compassion or hospitality to others. Trying to live a life controlled by the love Jesus showed... it's hard. It's a constant struggle. It can even be discouraging. But in Jesus God stays with us, encouraging us to hang in there, to keep striving. Here's what that might feel like.

² Colossians 3:12

³ Gray, Joan S. *Sailboat Church: helping your congregation rethink its mission and practice*. Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014

There's a legend about the famous Polish composer-pianist, Paderewski (1860-1941), that [probably isn't true according to his biographers, but still], hear the legend for the point it makes.

It refers to one of Paderewski's concert tours in America. Those were always high-dress occasions — tuxedos and long evening dresses, high-society extravaganzas. Present in the audience one evening was a mother with her 9-year-old son. The mother hoped that seeing and hearing Paderewski at the keyboard would encourage him to practice the piano himself. So, against the boy's wishes, he had come. But growing weary of waiting for the performance to begin, he squirmed in his seat.

As the mother turned to talk with friends, her son slipped away from her side, drawn to the ebony concert grand Steinway piano and its leather tufted stool on the stage. Without much notice from the audience, the boy sat down at the stool, placed his fingers on the keyboard and began to play "Chopsticks." The crowd suddenly went silent as hundreds of frowning faces turned in his direction. Someone yelled, "Get that boy away from there!" and others shouted their disapproval.

Backstage, Paderewski overheard the sounds and quickly moved onto the stage. Saying nothing, he stooped over behind the boy, reached around both sides, and began to improvise a countermelody to harmonize with "Chopsticks." As the two of them played together before the now fascinated crowd, Paderewski whispered in the boy's ear, "Keep going. Don't quit, son. Keep on playing."

And so it is with us. We hammer away on our project to speak virtuously and live a holy life, and sometimes it seems we do no better than a 9-year-old pounding away at "Chopsticks." And about the time we conclude we'll never get it right, along comes the Master — Jesus — who leans over and whispers: "Keep going; don't quit. Keep on going."

And his touch, added to our effort, turns the whole performance into something that can bless those around us.⁴

As we heard in Ephesians Chapter 5 Paul urged, "Since you are God's dear children, you must try to be like [God]. Your life must be controlled by love, just as Christ loved us...."⁵

When our lives are controlled by love, we find we are called to:

- volunteer at the local school;
- visit or call someone struggling with loneliness;
- help people register to vote;
- greet a new neighbor;
- offer some babysitting to an overwhelmed friend;
- seek out ways to ease other's hardship or grief;
- learn about and respond to the plight of people in prison, or living the grueling life of a refugee, or struggling because they're out of work.

When our lives are controlled by love we are called to act in love.

And we heard this morning that scripture calls us to the action of prayer... praying that we will invite God to mold us into the servants God would have us be — servants whose attitudes and actions look a lot like Jesus. Let's do that now

God of Gentle Persistence: Our instincts can be helpful at times and hurtful at others. We hear you calling us to allow our lives to be controlled not by our instinctive reactions but by your dependable love.

Where we would be selfish, enlarge our heart with generosity.

Where we would exclude, expand our view of the human family.

Where we might lash out in anger, give us pause to appreciate the other point of view.

And where we can bridge walls that separate, give us arms to offer a helping hand and a sincere embrace.

May our thoughts and words and deeds be controlled by the love of Jesus alive within us. Amen.

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⁴ *Homiletics* July-August 2018, pp. 58

⁵ Ephesians 5:1-2a Good News Translation (emphasis added)