

Little did I know that twenty years ago when we moved to Texas my snow skiing career would be over. I can't even remember the last time skied but I will never forget the first time. It was a traumatic and unforgettable experience... I think the most valuable lesson I learned about skiing is to let the mountain do the work. If you cooperate with the mountain then gravity becomes your friend and skiing becomes an exhilarating and pleasurable experience. If you fight the mountain gravity becomes your enemy and you will be frustrated and very, very sore.

Spiritual formation works in a similar way. If we try to make ourselves spiritual we will fail and inevitably fall. But if we cooperate with God we will not only succeed but we will find spiritual formation to be a satisfying and exhilarating experience. Let's review where we have been so far.

In our series on spiritual formation we spent a couple of weeks considering what God is like because our vision of God informs the direction of our lives. We become like that which we worship. We explored Isaiah's vision of God as well as the vision of God Jesus painted for us in the story of the Prodigal Son. Today I want to identify what may be the greatest impediment to our spiritual growth. It is the subtle but deceptive belief that spiritual formation is a direct result of my own human effort. The Bible says that **"by grace you are saved."** Only God can save and only God can sanctify (that's the theological word for spiritual formation). We can no more be sanctified through human effort than we can be saved. This is such an important and difficult lesson to accept that Jesus did something radical to get this message through. John 13...

Jesus enters an upper room for a final meal with His disciples. He knows that all their hopes and dreams will soon be shattered and the reality of facing the future without Him will be incomprehensible. They were losing more than a friend, they were about to lose their spiritual leader, their teacher. How will they be able to continue to learn and grow in their understanding of God's plan and purpose without Jesus? They are about to find out. The evening begins with an unexpected act... **vv. 4-5.**

I picture the disciples jockeying for position at the Passover meal. Preoccupied with their own importance, they rush up the stairs in pursuit of the prime seats. In first-century Israel, a person's position at the table reflected their importance. But in their enthusiasm the disciples forgot a very common custom—the foot washing. Reclining in oriental fashion, leaning on one elbow, feet radiating outward from the table, they take their places at the table. Jesus pushes himself up from His mat, takes off His outer garment, and wraps a towel around his waist. Resembling a menial slave, He begins to wash each of the disciples' feet.

The disciples are shocked into silence by this unexpected act. They would have been happy to wash His feet—it was common practice for students to wash the feet of their teacher—but they could not conceive of the Master washing their feet. This was a task reserved for the lowliest of servants. This one simple act summarizes Jesus' mission. In the words of one author, ***"Rising up from the Heavenly Banquet in intimate union....with the Father, He laid aside the garments of His glory, wrapped about His Divinity the towel of human nature....poured the laver of regeneration which is His blood, shed on the cross to redeem men, and began washing the souls of His disciples and followers through . . . His death"*** (Fulton Sheen, *Life Of Christ*, p. 283).

Peter demonstrates the pride of a self-directed life. Peter had been silent as Jesus washed his friends' feet, but when it was his turn, it was more than he could take. Peter displays a common response to God's grace: we are much more comfortable doing something for God rather than allowing God to do something for us. Our pride feeds on control. The humble embrace submission. **"God resists the proud but gives grace to the humble."** Human self-effort is antithetical to God's grace. Grace is "God doing for us what we cannot do for ourselves." Peter makes three common mistakes with respect to grace:

1. **Peter questions the grace of God...vv.6-7.** He could not conceive of Jesus washing his feet. He saw himself as unworthy of the loving attention of the Master.

2. **Peter rejects the grace of God...v.8.** When Jesus persists, Peter stubbornly refuses to accept His gracious gift. After all, those who serve Jesus should show their devotion by getting busy and DOING something. To sit and receive from the Lord appears lazy and presumptuous.

At this point Jesus stares into Peter's eyes and says, **"If I do not wash you, you have no part WITH me."** This was not a threat to reject Peter but a warning that unless we learn how to receive God's grace we will have no meaningful participation in His mission. Later this same night Jesus will tell His disciples, **"Apart from me, you can do nothing."** Unless we receive His grace to accomplish His purposes, we are more of a hindrance than a help to God's kingdom agenda. But Peter is not done yet.

3. **Peter misunderstands the grace of God...v.9.** Stung by Jesus' words, Peter changes his tune and says, "If that's the case then pour it on Lord. Give me a bath." Peter seems to have a knack for making mistakes in threes. Jesus explains that Peter is already clean because of his faith in God's saving grace, but disciples need to regularly receive the cleansing power of that grace.

When it comes to salvation we are totally dependent upon the grace of God. There is nothing we can do to earn eternal life. All we can do is receive what God has prepared for us. But when it comes to sanctification, or spiritual formation, we often forget all about grace. We quote Ephesians 2:8-9, **"For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God - not by works, so that no one can boast,"** but we forget v.10, **"For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do."** We are not to serve out of a dread sense of duty or obligation. Service should be a joyful experience as we partner with Jesus...**John 13:12-15.** Peter demonstrated the pride of a self-directed life but...

Jesus demonstrates the power of a God-centered life. The force behind Jesus' act of humility is found in v. 3. His willingness to remove His rabbi robe was based on accurate knowledge of His true identity. Settling the issue of our true identity is crucial to our spiritual formation. We read that Jesus knew 3 things:

1. **He knew where He came from.** One of the most stirring messages I have ever heard came from my high school Senior English teacher. Mr. Guzman was passionately pro-life and his farewell lecture to his students was legendary. I will never forget his opening words. "Seventeen

or eighteen years ago, a miracle took place. Out of millions of possible combinations of eggs and sperm cells, God chose one egg from your mother and one sperm cell from your father and produced you. You were conceived in the mind of God long before you were conceived in your mother's womb." He went on to tell us that every life is precious and bestowed with God-given value. He told us how much he loved each one of us and how proud he was of us. There was not a dry eye in the room. Somehow, just knowing that our birth was not accidental, that God was directly involved in our birth filled us with a sense of destiny and purpose. Jesus, more than anyone else on the planet, knew where He came from.

2. **He knew where He was going...back to God.** The Greek word used of Jesus' departure is sometimes translated "to pass over," as in **John 5:24: "Truly, truly, I say to you, he who hears My word, and believes Him who sent Me, has eternal life, and does not come into judgment, but has passed out of (NIV: "crossed over from") death into life."** Jesus knew that death is simply a crossing over from one form of life (bios) to another, more abundant life (zoe).

3. **He knew that He had been given all things.** Jesus had all the resources of the Father at His disposal. Now you may think, "I know where I came from and I know where I'm going but I don't have the resources Jesus had." Well think again.

- **2 Pet 1:3 says, "His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness."**
- **Rom 8:32 says, "He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?"**
- **Eph 1:3 says, "praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ."**

When we consider the context of Jesus' act of loving service His behavior becomes even more impressive. Chapter 12 contains some of the saddest words in scripture, **"Nevertheless many even of the rulers believed in Him, but because of the Pharisees they were not confessing Him, for fear that they would be put out of the synagogue; for they loved the approval of men rather than the approval of God" (John 12:42–43).** Once we accept the fact that God has secured our past, present, and future, we can resist the inclination to seek the approval of men and forget about our own worldly status. Then we can take up the basin and towel and serve. Settling the issue of our identity in Christ is crucial to our spiritual formation.

God's goal for our lives is to make us less like Peter and more like Jesus. We all start out like Peter – self-conscious, self-absorbed, self-important, self-sufficient full of self-interest as well as self-doubt. We inherited this preoccupation with self from our forefathers – Adam and Eve. It is a hereditary disease. Do you remember the first thing Adam and Eve did after they fell from grace and became conscious of the disruption in their relationship with God? **Genesis 3:7 says, "they sewed fig leaves together and made (for) themselves loin coverings."** They tried to solve the problem in their own way. A few verses later we learn that fig-leaf solutions will never do. There is not human solution to this problem so **Genesis 3:21 says, "The LORD God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife, and clothed them."** Fig leaf solutions are not sufficient to solve our problem.

When I desperately try to keep all the rules I am reaching for a fig leaf.
When I think that by doing some good deed that God loves me more I am reaching for a fig leaf.
When my identity depends on friendships with influential people I am reaching for a fig leaf.
When I go to church, read the Bible, pray and tithe thinking God will be impressed, I am reaching for a fig leaf.
When I recycle, save the whales, feed the hungry children thinking I will be rewarded, I am reaching for a fig leaf.

Spiritual formation is impossible until we renounce our fig leaf solutions and allow Christ to be formed in us. Peter learned that God's objective for our lives is that we would be "partakers of His divine nature." In his second letter he wrote, **"His divine power has granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness, through the true knowledge of Him who called us by His own glory and excellence. ⁴ For by these He has granted to us His precious and magnificent promises, so that by them you may become *partakers of the divine nature*, having escaped the corruption that is in the world by lust."** 2 Peter 1:3-4

You cannot make yourself more spiritual. You can only surrender your self-will and receive the grace of God. He who "caused us to be born again" is also the direct cause of our sanctification. Listen to Peter again: In **1 Peter 1:1-4** he writes to those **"who are chosen ² according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, by the sanctifying work of the Spirit, to obey Jesus Christ and be sprinkled with His blood: May grace and peace be yours in the fullest measure. ³ Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, ⁴ to *obtain* an inheritance *which is imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away, reserved in heaven for you.*"**

God's sanctifying work begins at salvation. In theological terms you can't separate justification from regeneration. The day we put our trust in Jesus, God's only provision for our sin, we begin a metamorphosis. Once we acknowledge that we are powerless to change God begins to change us. The one who created us creates within us His divine nature. All we can do is cooperate with the process and that's what we will begin to talk about in a couple of weeks. Let's close this morning in silence as we look at the screens and consider what God says about you. Let Him love you. Let Him change you. Just sit in awe of Him and let your words be few...