

# Transformational Faith or Seinfeldian Spirituality?

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Psalm 40:1-8

For nearly the entire decade of the nineties the wildly popular sitcom, *Seinfeld*, ruled the airwaves. A poster child for postmodernity, the series rejected the very notion of any metanarrative, stringing together a series of mundane and often unrelated, zany incidents. It became famous as “the TV show about nothing.”

Sometimes something significant *almost* happened. Like the episode in which Jerry experiences a kind of conversion and becomes the good Jerry. He then sits down with his friend, George, and encourages him to talk about his true feelings. George is moved to tears as he shares his heart. Then the camera pans to a horrified Jerry, who stands up and backs away from the couch as he says, “Well, good luck with all that,” recoiling from the burden of intimacy and retreating once again into superficiality.

Only in the final episode does anything *really* change. The foursome observes a carjacking. Not only do they not intervene, but Kramer films the whole incident, and they walk away cracking jokes about the poor slob who lost his car. The victim, however, sees them and reports their behavior, and they are dragged into court to stand trial for violating a Good Samaritan law.

A long litany of witnesses from previous episodes testify about the callousness of the characters, who, in the end, are sentenced to a year in jail. The scene is reminiscent of Jean-Paul Sartre’s dark existentialist play, *No Exit*, which sentences its three thoughtless characters to a kind of hell—an afterlife together in a sealed room.

So, something does happen after all, a poetic justice that goes against the entire grain of the series—except that the characters still don’t get it. The 9-year run ends with the protagonists in a jail cell. George is talking about the buttons on his shirt and Kramer is pleased that he finally got the water out of his ear.

I was living overseas during the Seinfeld era, so I’m not a junkie, though I have seen a few of the interminable re-runs. And it can be very funny. But it is ultimately a tragic

comedy, as the writers acknowledge in the final episode, because the characters are stuck in an absurd loop in which nothing really changes.

The Bible is a very different kind of story. In the Bible things are constantly changing. There is a story line. There is a metanarrative. It is going somewhere. In the first eleven chapters of Genesis the world God created is ruined by human rebellion, and he then spends the rest of the book getting it back, culminating in the ultimate victory of God and his kingdom in the final pages.

But, while most Christians would affirm that God is changing the big picture, they can't point to much transformation that God is working either in their character or through them into the world or for them in the circumstances of life. Having assured our own eternal salvation, we become absorbed in the mundane and push the transcendent onto the back burner. And our religion becomes a big show about nothing—a Seinfeldian sameness in which we are neither transformed nor transforming. Only this time it's not funny.

Today we are beginning a series of messages that will focus on transformation from a variety of angles, and this first one looks at transformed circumstances. In Psalm 40 David had just had a significant transforming experience, and he is bubbling over. As we read his account, it provides an occasion for us to ask if we are, in fact, expecting and experiencing this same transforming dynamic.

Psalm 40:1-3

I waited patiently for the LORD;  
     he turned to me and heard my cry.  
<sup>2</sup> He lifted me out of the slimy pit,  
     out of the mud and mire;  
 he set my feet on a rock  
     and gave me a firm place to stand.  
<sup>3</sup> He put a new song in my mouth,  
     a hymn of praise to our God.  
 Many will see and fear the LORD  
     and put their trust in him.

We don't know exactly what sort of trouble God had rescued David from in this psalm. Some have suggested that it was a sickness that had him near death. Others think it was

an external threat to his kingdom. David certainly describes the experience in dramatic terms—but then again, this is poetry. In some ways I think it's better that David doesn't tell us the nature of the problem, because that makes it a bit easier for us to plug in our own circumstances and see how this transformational template can affect our own spiritual walk.

In these three verses we find three principles that govern our experience of personal transformation. The first one is this: *Transformation takes time*. When we think about divine deliverance, we have a tendency to think in terms of an immediate and miraculous rescue, some cathartic experience that vanquishes our troubles and sets us free. So, the last thing we might expect to hear, and maybe even the last thing we want to hear is what David tells us in v. 1, that he had to “wait patiently on the Lord.”

Waiting is boring. We want trouble-zapping, hallelujah-evoking, divine shock and awe. Maybe you're thinking, I've got enough faith to believe God for a solution right now. So, what is he waiting for? What in the heck am I waiting for? And, doesn't God seem kind of pokey for an omnipotent being?

Whatever David's crisis was, the fact that it required patience means that it must have lasted for some time. That's not good news for me, because I think David had more faith than I do. So, if David didn't have enough faith to prompt God into instant action, neither do I.

But maybe it's not about how much faith you have but how much more faith God wants you to have. You see, however much faith it takes to believe that God will change your circumstances, it takes *more* faith than that to keep on believing—that is, to wait. A flash of spiritual bravado is not so hard to come by, especially if you know the answer is right around the corner. But when that answer doesn't come right away, and when things get worse before they get better, then the true quality of your faith is tested. Faith factored by time.

Nobody chooses to wait. If you take your car in to get it fixed, and they say, “We can do this today. When would you like to pick it up?” You're not going to say, “Oh, why don't I just wait until next week to get it? That'll build character.” No, it's only when you show up at 5:45 PM and it's still up on a lift with various parts disassembled, and the mechanic is washing his hands getting ready to go home, that you realize you're going to have to

wait. And if you're like me, you won't be waiting very patiently. In the land of instant everything, patience is not a virtue, it is simply a coping strategy for the impotent.

We're pretty much consumers when it comes to prayer as well. We don't ask God for things with the expectation of waiting. We don't say, "No hurry on this one, Lord. I think I need to grow some more." It's only when the answer doesn't come immediately, and then when it doesn't come quickly, and then when it doesn't come in the short term that we begin to think about the long term and resign ourselves to waiting. This in spite of the fact that we *usually* have to wait for God's transforming work, and in spite of the fact that the unintended consequences of the wait can be just as important as the intended consequences of the change we're seeking.

When God's answer doesn't come right away, you start thinking to yourself, "At this rate I'll be dead or broke or friendless before God gets around to doing anything." And you feel yourself begin to panic. That panic is, of course, the opposite of patience. Panic sets in when we begin to extrapolate what terrible things could happen if current trends continue.

The God of the Bible, however, is not the God of continuing current trends. Our transformational God delights in turning the tide and turning the tables. When you feel panic coming on, it's time to change your prayer. Instead of asking for deliverance first and then patience if you can't have deliverance, ask for patience to keep believing until the deliverance comes.

And then keep asking. Patient faith is not just asking God once and then sitting there heaving petulant sighs until he finally gets around to acting. When God responded to David—which was some extended time after the king had begun crying out for help—v. 1 says that God heard David's cry. Which indicates that David was still calling out to the Lord. His was a patient waiting, but it was also active waiting. He didn't try to take the place of God, but neither did he just say "Qué será, será."

There are several practical reasons why it might take God a while to transform your circumstances. Often he answers our calls for help, not in one fell swoop of miraculous deliverance, but providentially—that is, through arranging circumstances in a way that meets your need. If you find yourself in debt God could drop a lot of money in your lap or he could provide a better job. If he works in the latter, providential way, it might take a long time to pay off the debt. But one is no less God's provision than the other.

When God does choose to transform your circumstances miraculously, it could still take a while, because he often coordinates the timing to highlight his intervention. Have you ever noticed how often God comes through at the last minute?

When we were serving as missionaries, one autumn our family was split up. Cindi and Jennifer had gone back to Spain for the start of school in mid-September after spending the summer in the US, and I had stayed on until mid-November to do more fund raising. Our account was in arrears and we could not resume the ministry until after the deficit was erased. I had finished all my meetings with churches and individuals, but I was still \$4,500 short. And I was scheduled to leave the next week.

We had been separated for six weeks, and I was anxious to get home. But I called Cindi at the end of the week and tell her that if I didn't get the money by Sunday I'd have to change my ticket and just stay on until the money came in. So, we were both praying that the money would come from somewhere, but frankly didn't know where.

I went to church on Sunday morning. Out of the blue somebody walked up and handed me a check for \$2,000. That was wonderful, but I was still \$2,500 short, and the clock was ticking. Still praying, I went back to worship on Sunday evening. After the service, a couple told me that God had laid on their hearts to help, and they handed me a check for—guess how much? Without knowing how much I needed they had written the check for \$2,500!

Now, you've got to admit that that makes a lot more compelling story than if the money had just come in incrementally over five months—even though in either case it would have been God's provision. This way, however, my faith was stretched in the process. And I saw once again how God times his help to highlight his power.

Another reason why God delays his response is specifically to build our faith. When the answer is not immediate, second and third options come into play. Look at v. 4. "Blessed is the one who trusts in the LORD, who *does not* look to the proud, to those who turn aside to false gods." Implicit in David's statement is the fact that he had to overcome the temptation to take matters into his own hands or to trust in someone or something other than God.

David's experience showed him God's goodness, but he learned much more than that during his time of waiting. Jump ahead into verse 6. "Sacrifice and offering you did not desire—but my ears you have opened—burnt offerings and sin offerings you did not require."

David discovered that God was not looking for a formulaic response. This was not a circumstance that could be resolved by offering a bigger or better sacrifice. The delay was not on account of his sins, so he couldn't speed it up by repentance. David had no bargaining leverage with God.

Rather, God was drawing his child into a deeper and qualitatively more intimate relationship. In verses 7-8 David relates how God's transformational experiences cause us to assimilate his Word in such a way that our very identity becomes intertwined with his desires for us. "Then I said, 'Here I am, I have come—it is written about me in the scroll. I desire to do your will, my God; your law is within my heart.'" David's waiting process allowed time for this inner transformation to ferment in a way that it would not and could not have done, had he simply summoned God like a genie from a bottle.

God is not inattentive. It doesn't take him long to recognize our need. And it wouldn't take him long to do something about that need—if that were his only concern. But because he is doing something very necessary *in* us at the same time he is doing something very necessary *for* us, the transformation of our circumstances must often await the transformation of ourselves. Because our external distress serves as a motivation to seriously seek the Lord.

The second principle of circumstantial transformation comes in verse 2. And that is this: *Real change is possible*. You are not consigned to a Seinfeldian existence, a succession of insignificant incidents that add up to absurdity. Both your inner world and your external circumstances are significant. You can experience real change on both fronts. And the two transformations, internal and external, are woven together in the same divine dynamic.

Psalm 40:2 begins: "He lifted me out of the slimy pit, out of the mud and mire." We don't know what David was going through, but clearly it was serious—and, judging by this description, not too pleasant. This term "slimy pit" is kind of a tricky term, but a literal translation would be something like "pit of desolation." The NIV translators have chosen to render the term as "*slimy* pit," probably to emphasize the parallelism with "mud and

mire” in the second line. But regardless of the exact meaning of the expression, the pit in question is almost certainly the pit of the grave or *sheol*. The mud and slime indicate being stuck and possibly even sinking in a quicksand-like fashion.

David is not describing his physical location, however, but the state of his mind and his circumstances. Using a more modern metaphor, we might say that he had one foot in the grave, or, less delicately, that he was in very deep doo-doo.

Perhaps you’ve been there. Perhaps you know this state of mind, this set of circumstances, this sense of helpless dread. Maybe you’re feeling it right now. Perhaps a relationship is unraveling, and you feel powerless to make it right. Perhaps your health is out of control. Perhaps your finances or your career are on a downward spiral. Perhaps some other set of circumstances has you trapped. Well, I’ve got good news for you. Real change is possible.

Both circumstantially and emotionally David was slip-slidin’ away. And apparently that situation lasted for some time. But now, at long last, David says in the last part of verse 2: “He set my feet on a rock and gave me a firm place to stand.” On a rock. Secure as opposed to threatened. Stable as opposed to out of control.

What happened? He had a rescuer, someone stronger than himself, who pulled him to safety.

As believers, we are not victims of our circumstances, because God is in control. In fact, even unpleasant circumstances are pushing us in the direction God wants us to go—toward him. God uses our struggles to catapult us to greater levels of spiritual maturity, and in doing so we actually rise above our circumstances.

Therefore, your future is not limited by your own, natural means. Real change is possible, because God is faithful and willing and able to intervene on your behalf. But only if you will wait patiently on him.

My friend, Woody, was kind of a hillbilly. He had a high school education, but not a great one. Noun-verb agreement never quite agreed with him. After a stint in the military, he found himself working on the production line at General Motors.

The renegade son of a Pentecostal preacher, Woody was running from God. But his wife was a godly woman, and Woody's children started going to Sunday school on the church bus. And eventually God got a hold of Woody too.

His character began to change, but his circumstances still left a lot to be desired. An accident with a rotor tiller left his leg badly mangled. He missed a lot of work, and finances dried up.

But God was not done with Woody. His leg finally healed, and he returned to work, where he began to prosper, receiving various promotions. Before his early retirement Woody had achieved the highest level of management to which he could aspire without a college degree. They took him to Detroit to tell the big boys how he did it.

Woody became a fervent witness for Christ as well. And he got interested in international missions, becoming the missions director at my home church. Along the way he raised large sums of money for mission projects and was instrumental in launching a denominational church-planting movement in Vietnam, returning on several occasions to the land where he had served as a soldier in another life.

Is real change possible in Christ? Absolutely. In your eternal destiny? Certainly. In your character? You bet. But also in your circumstances. Like Woody, God wants to take you somewhere you have never been before. And he wants to do it in a way that leaves no doubt that it is his work.

It is this transformational dynamic that truly makes you a contagious Christian. We taught an adult Christian education class here last year on how to be a contagious Christian. It was a really helpful exercise, but it was mostly about how to spread the contagion rather than about becoming contagious in the first place. To be a contagious Christian you not only need to care about others, you not only need to be able to articulate the Christian message, you need to be experiencing God's transformation in your own life.

That's where I think the wheels sometimes fall off our Christian witness. There is nothing compelling taking place in our own lives that others can see and that we can't help but share. We fall into a Seinfeldian spirituality. A lot of pious activity that amounts to too very little.



Look at David's experience in v. 3. "He put a *new* song in my mouth, a hymn of praise to our God."

The new song that God put in his heart may be metaphorical, like we say we have a song in our heart when we're very happy. But notice that the "new song" is paralleled by the "hymn of praise" in the next line. That makes me think that David's "new song" might have been actual music. The fact that it is in his mouth and that many will see what God has done for him and find themselves changed tells us that he's not just thinking happy thoughts; he is also communicating how he feels about his experience.

When we are moved by what God has done for us, our creativity is engaged. We find ourselves looking for a new means of expression, a new wineskin, for the fresh outpouring of God's grace. I know that when my own creative expression of worship dries up, it usually signifies a corresponding hum-drumness in my experience of God. If you find yourself in a Seinfeldian spiritual slump, you're unlikely to have any fresh new ideas about how to express your moribund faith. So, checking your enthusiasm for worship is a good way to take your spiritual temperature.

According to the end of v. 3, the result of this transformational dynamic is that many will perceive, both through the evident change and our reaction to it, that something important is happening. "Many will see and fear the LORD and put their trust in him."

They will be drawn to this dynamic, because all of us, at some level, long for a touch from God. Those are the people that David is talking about, those who will fear the Lord, those who will gain a new respect for the power of God. Because of what he's doing in you and me. And, because of what they see, they will put their trust in him.

There is a kind of epilogue to the story I told you earlier about God's last-minute provision of \$4,500. Cindi was back in Spain, anxious for me to return and concerned with all the what-ifs. One day she was in the home of an unconverted friend named Virginia, talking out her troubles as the other woman worked in the kitchen. Finally, Virginia stopped her short. "If your God is as powerful as you keep saying, then what's \$4,500? Stop your bellyaching and have a little faith."

Cindi was pretty embarrassed. The connection she was having so much trouble making was patently obvious to her friend. A transformational God ought to be capable of transforming such a circumstance. Not surprisingly, God's eventual provision did prove

to be a powerful testimony to her. I don't know whether she has as yet put her faith in Christ, but this is the kind of moment that sticks with you until all the pieces of your faith journey come together.

As a congregation, we are looking to be more effective in our outreach. But if that outreach is to have an impact it must flow out of a transformational experience. If we are not being transformed, both inwardly and outwardly, then our contact with others will simply inoculate them against the power of God rather than draw them into it.

If you're like me, when you look back over the broad sweep of your personal history, you can see that God has, indeed, shown up. And, yet, if you're like me you're also concerned that God does not show up in your experience as often as you'd like. It sometimes feels like too much Seinfeldian sameness—and too little transformation.

How can this new year and beyond be different? How can we see God transform us and our circumstances and our world in new and wonderful ways? Well, God much more often shows up where he's most expected than where he's least expected. If we want to see God's power unleashed, we must expect God to change us and to change our circumstances. Not just hope or wish, but actually *expect*. So, we must invite him to intervene. And keep on expecting. And keep on inviting. Until he does.

“I waited patiently on the Lord,” says David, “and he turned to me and heard my cry.” That's what I want, and I hope that you do too. Not just a New Year's resolution that depends on my willpower and probably won't make it out of January, but a resolution in this New Year to seek God's transforming power in my life and in our life together.

So, let's not settle for some Seinfeldian spirituality, some much ado about nothing. Rather, let's invite God to do his transforming work, whatever it takes. So that something really will change, so that we might experience a fresh infusion of divine joy, and so that others might see and put their trust in the God who shows up.

# **That's What It's All About**

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**Mt. 28:18-20**

Throughout the centuries, philosophers have struggled to answer this fundamental question: “What’s it all about?”

Not all cultures are equally curious about ultimate meaning, however. The French, oui. Ancient Greece, oh yeah. In fact, their philosophers were rock stars.

By contrast, here in America our rock stars are, well, rock stars. We’re not overly preoccupied such esoteric falderal. We’re less concerned with what it’s all about and more concerned with how many cupholders it has.

There was one American, however, who boldly went where no one else cared to go. One man who did his darndest to answer this age-old question. His name was Larry LaPrise.

Now, if you’re like most people, that name will not ring a bell. But you know Larry LaPrise’s work. I guarantee it. It goes something like this:

[Scott singing] “You put your right arm in, you take your right arm out, you put your right arm in, and you shake it all about. You do the hokey-pokey and you turn yourself around. That’s is what it’s all about.”

Another of our noted philosophers, Jimmy Buffett, got right to the heart of the matter for the postmodern generation, when he asked: “Maybe it's all too simple for our brains to figure it out. What if the hokey pokey is all it really is about?” Hmm... kind of makes you proud to be an American, doesn’t it?

With all due deference to these one-line wonders, I’m not particularly fond of reductionist language myself—you know, trying to sum up the meaning of life, the universe, and everything in a single phrase. Because you’re almost certain to leave out something really important.

But there are certain pithy sayings that summarize seminal truths, that at least highlight important aspects of “what it’s all about.” Like, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind. And love your neighbor as yourself.” Those 28 words say a lot about the fundamental nature of relationships.

We’re going to look at another aspect of what it’s all about today from the standpoint of our Christian mission. And that comes from a passage in Matthew’s gospel, chapter 28, verses 18-20. This is sometimes called the Great Commission, and it summarizes the basic principles for the expansion of God’s kingdom through the Church. While these verses do not purport to tell us what *everything* is all about, there’s no denying their strategic centrality.

Let me paraphrase these verses, emphasizing the all-encompassing nature of the language. “*All* authority has been given to me over *all* creation. Therefore, go and make disciples in *all* nations, baptizing them and teaching them to obey *all* the things I have commanded you. And, in this effort, I am with you at *all* times and for *all* time.”

I count six specific references to *all* in these three verses, and they represent four different senses in which this Great Commission is *all*-encompassing. So, let’s take the next few minutes to find out what it’s *all* about when it comes to the worldwide mission of the Church.

First, our mission is a Kingdom mission. Verses 19 and 20 are well-known. But you really need v. 18 as well to understand the true nature of what we are called to do.

Why are we to take the gospel to the whole wide world? We could offer a number of different reasons, all legitimate. For example, that people are lost or that God loves them so much. But those are not the reasons given here. This rationale is based on the strategic goals of God’s kingdom. Verse 18 makes two universal claims that become the foundation for verses 19 and 20.

Jesus begins with the words “all authority.” There is a sense in which Christ always had authority, even as God in the flesh. But he set aside his ruling function when he became human, so that he might demonstrate a life lived in dependence on the Father. Now, however, as a result of his faithful humility, he is claiming his right to universal sovereignty as the long-awaited Son of Man.

Dan. 7:13 says: “There before me was a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory, and sovereign power; all nations and peoples of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.”

This is precisely the authority that Christ is claiming at the end of Matthew’s gospel. Dan. 7 says that that authority is *given* to him. Mt. 28:18 says the same thing—that this authority is *given* to him. Philippians 2:9 confirms that fact: “Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and *gave* him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow in heaven and on earth and under the earth.”

The Son, then, becomes the mediatorial king. He is both a ruler and a reconciler. He reconciles us to a holy God by his sacrificial death. He rules over a universal kingdom. And he claims all authority.

So, Christ’s *right* to rule, is already, right now all-encompassing. It cannot increase. But his *effective* reign, the kingdom over which he exercises control, is still in a building phase. As Heb. 2:7-9 says, beginning with a quote from Psalm 110: “You made him a little lower than the angels; you crowned him with glory and honor and put everything under his feet.’ In putting everything under him, God left nothing that is not subject to him. Yet at present we do not see everything subject to him. But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honor because he suffered death.”

Jesus makes two claims. That he has absolute authority. And that he has that absolute authority everywhere. Not only over the people and institutions of this world but over the spiritual forces that govern them. Every knee must bow, that is, all must worship and obey him, precisely because the Father has made him Lord of all.

The disciples anticipated an absolute, messianic monarch. They expected a ruler who would establish a universal empire and subjugate all the nations of the earth. But they were looking for a kingdom with, you know, a little pomp and circumstance—maybe a palace, maybe a cushy job for those on his right and left, maybe a horse-drawn limo for his homies.

But not some kind of spiritual something or other. Not some kind of kingdom kit, where all you really get is a mandate suitable for framing, but you have to go out and build it yourself. Not some kind of Monty Python-esque invisible kingdom that requires imagination to see it. Their world headquarters doesn't even have any walls, for crying out loud. And, yet, they ultimately find Jesus' audacious claims believable, as evidenced by the fact that they risk and ultimately lose their lives to carry out this mandate.

Jesus is enthroned as the all-authoritative ruler of all. And what are the implications of that all-encompassing kingdom? The word *therefore* that opens verse 19 points us to the answer. The second *all* is that our mission is to all people.

What gives us the right to invade people's space and tell them that they must accept Jesus as Lord? Very simple. He *is* Lord, and he told us to do so. Precisely because he is Lord over all, he has the right to rule over their lives. Repentance is not an opportunity that may or may not be right for you. Discipleship is not an option that can be ignored with impunity.

We are sent to all nations, because following Jesus is incumbent on everyone. In the first verse of Matthew's gospel, Jesus is called the son of Abraham—the one through whom God promised to bless all nations way back in Genesis. And, even though his ministry was focused on the nation of Israel, from the very beginning—when the wise men came from the East to honor the infant king—the event we celebrate on this very Sunday of Epiphany, it was clear that Christ's ministry was destined to have a worldwide impact.

“All nations” does not mean *nation-states* in the modern, political sense. These are all *peoples*, definable groups based on heritage and common ancestry and culture. Often the term is used to refer to just the non-Jewish nations. But here the command is based on Christ's universal sovereignty, and since the Jews are already being targeted, this is just a way of saying that they should go to everyone everywhere.

So, what exactly is our mission to all people? Technically, there is only one command in this verse, only one Greek imperative—to make disciples. And what does that mean?

A disciple is a follower or learner. The term is used to describe one who becomes the apprentice of a master, like the disciple of a great artist or a skilled craftsman. So, we are commanded to do more than just evangelism narrowly defined. Evangelism is necessary to complete this mission, but the goal is not merely to make converts but to make

disciples, to bring people beyond a point of commitment into a lifestyle of following the thoughts and actions of Jesus.

The word translated “go” is technically a participle, like *baptizing* and *teaching* that follow. Some have jumped on that fact that to try to say that it means “while you are going.” That fulfilling the Great Commission is not a matter of intentionally creating opportunities to share Christ or of moving to another culture to spread the gospel. You just go about your everyday activities, and while you are going, you’ll be a witness.

Now, it’s true that evangelism can and should be a lifestyle. And it’s true that grammatically the phrase could be translated “while you are going.” And it is undoubtedly true that such a conclusion seems attractive to those who don’t want to go out of their way, let alone out of their country, to make disciples.

But there are at least three reasons why that is most certainly not the meaning of this verse. First, the meaning of a participle depends on the principle verb to which it is connected. When it is governed by an imperative, it often takes on the force of a command.

Imagine a set of instructions that reads, “Cutting only the red and green wires, deactivate the bomb.” Now, even though the word *cutting* is grammatically subordinate to the main command, which is to deactivate the bomb, cutting those wires and only those wires is not just incidental information. Functionally, it is the real imperative—because if you cut the right wires the bomb is effectively deactivated. You can’t just do it as you happen to have scissors in your hand or whenever the cutting urge strikes you. You’ve got to be intentional and do it before the clock ticks down to zero.

It is, however, the context of this command that really lets us know that “going,” intentionally putting yourself in a position to make disciples everywhere, is a must. Jesus is talking to first-century Palestinian Jews, and if you are a first-century Palestinian Jew, you will not make disciples of all nations in the course of your everyday activities, because your everyday going and coming will not take you to Gentile nations. The disciple-making in view here must be intentional, or it simply won’t happen, in the first century or the twenty-first century.

Over the course of history, this commission has sometimes been misunderstood. It is not a command to subjugate nations in the name of Christianity, imposing a culture and

*Christianizing* the population. To read the verse that way is to ignore the nature of the kingdom we are propagating. Jesus' kingdom was not of this world. It did not come by force of arms. He announces his reign and persuades people to join him in it by becoming his followers. Because loving commitment cannot be forced. Following Christ is an obligation, yes, but it is offered as an invitation.

It is not an imperialistic imposition to take the gospel to another culture. It certainly could be done in that spirit, but it need not be done that way, if those doing the missionary work are informed and sensitive, and if they go in the spirit of Jesus. Actually, quite the contrary is true—to refrain from obeying this Great Commission is the ultimate act of cultural egocentricity. The Good News did not originate with us. It is God's gift to the human race, and sometime someone crossed a barrier in order for us to hear it. So, for us to sit here and enjoy the blessings of Christ's kingdom, as if it were our own personal patrimony, is not respect for other cultures. It is a reprehensible disrespect for the value of people who are created in the image of God and for whom Christ died.

We have seen thus far that our mission finds its origins in Christ's all-encompassing kingdom. That's why our mission is directed to *all* nations. But our mission also means teaching Christ's disciples *all* the things he has communicated to us.

If all you wanted was to put people under God's control, you could just conquer them. If all you wanted was to bring them into a relationship with God, you could just evangelize. But the disciple-making that Christ commands us to do is more holistic. Our mission is to make the disciples like the master, to make the subjects like the king.

This transformation does not happen by magic. Becoming like Christ requires knowing what Christ is like, and that knowledge is not intuitive. It must be learned, and therefore it must be taught. A few quick observations about this training portion of our mission.

We are not just teaching content. It's not simply a list of theological truths. It's not a self-help curriculum. The verse doesn't say to teach them everything I've told you. It says to teach them to *obey* everything I have *commanded* you. Obeying every command is quite different than simply understanding every concept.

What churches typically do, including this one, is to give people information and encourage them to put it to good use. But teaching someone to obey requires far more accountability than we are prepared to handle. Teaching someone to obey requires not



only telling them what to do but modeling that behavior. And observing whether or not they do it right. And if not, correcting them and repeating the lesson. I don't know what the answer to that is; the problem just dawned on me this week, while reading this passage. But I think the modern church has a disconnect here.

Notice as well that this teaching must be Christ-centered. There are lots of things that are interesting to know about, to which Christian thought can make a contribution. And all of these are worthwhile. But in our pursuit of them we cannot abandon the life and teachings of Jesus and the apostolic interpretation of their implications.

Though every generation of believers builds on the last, every generation must re-visit those things that Jesus taught us for itself. Otherwise our point of departure becomes the latest spin about everything he commanded us rather than—everything he commanded us. And at that point our collective conversation turns into a game of theological telephone, which, after a few iterations, doesn't sound anything like what Jesus said in the first place.

When Christ says *everything* I have commanded you, he sets the parameters for our spiritual curriculum. We cannot just teach the parts we think are least challenging or most challenging. We cannot just concentrate on those aspects of discipleship that define our tradition or those that are most likely to attract new members.

Speaking of teaching everything, what happened to other important aspects of our Christian mission, like justice? Well, though justice is not specifically emphasized here, it, too, certainly flows from Christ's announcement of his authority to rule. His values are to be prophetically proclaimed, even to those who do not acknowledge his Lordship. But this passage is not a laundry list of all of the things that are important to God. Though many applications could be made from Christ's universal rule, only one is in view here—a strategic summons to Church expansion.

There is, however, an interesting relationship between the expansion of the Church and the institution of justice in human society. The best long-term response to injustice in any society is the contextualized testimony of a righteous Church. Of course, we can and should fight injustice from afar in places where the Church is weak or non-existent. But outsiders have inherent limitations, and nothing incarnates God's values like his kingdom people who are living them. Weaken the missionary effort and you lose the long-term battle for justice. Period.

Our final *all* in discovering what it's all about tells us that our mission has permanent, 24/7, *always*-available support.

People don't like being sent on a mission without support. You may remember Donald Rumsfeld's infamous December, 2004 town hall meeting with the troops in Iraq. Yes, that's the one in which Army Specialist Thomas Wilson of the Tennessee National Guard asked: "Why do we soldiers have to dig through local landfills for pieces of scrap metal and compromised ballistic glass to uparmor our vehicles?" Oops! The question drew loud cheers from the 2,300 in attendance. People don't like to be sent on a mission without support.

Christ has sent us on a mission to make disciples across his vast domain. He knows it's hard, so he's made a significant promise of support. First, notice what he promises to do. "I am with you," he says. What does that mean? Well, when things are tough it's nice to know that somebody else understands, that somebody else cares, that somebody else is tracking with us. And God does that. But that kind of solidarity doesn't begin to exhaust the power of this promise.

Imagine that it actually gets cold and snowy sometime this winter. You are driving along in the dark, and your car suddenly sputters and then dies. Fortunately, you are not alone. Your spouse is with you. That makes you feel better. Unfortunately, your spouse has no more idea than you do how to fix the car. Sure, misery loves company, but about now you'd trade your incompetent company for a greasy, ill-mannered mechanic.

When God gives people difficult assignments in Scripture, the mission often comes with the promise that he will be "with" them. But that doesn't mean that he'll be stuck just like you are. He's not just moral support who's in the same predicament as you. He's more than a shoulder to cry on. He can fix it.

When Jacob had to return to his homeland and face Esau, God promised, "I will be *with you*." When God called Moses to lead the nation out of Egypt, he said, "I will be *with you*." When Joshua was tasked with taking Israel into the promised land, God repeated, "I will be *with you*." When Gideon hesitated to face the Midianites, God said, "No problem, I will be *with you*."

That doesn't mean that God will put his arm around them and say, "Good game," when they get your butts kicked. When he says that he will be *with them* in this context, he means that he will intervene supernaturally to insure their success. Don't think that Jesus didn't know his Old Testament. He knew exactly what this promise implied. And when he promised to be "with" us in this epic mission, he was promising to supernaturally energize our efforts, so that the gates of hell cannot stand against us.

"I am with you *always*," he says. God's tech support office doesn't close at 5:00 PM or five minutes before you need help, whichever comes first. It's 24/7. And it doesn't run out in 90 days or a year. Not only is it continuous, it is also permanent. He is with us "until the end of the age." Until the job is done.

If he needs to be with us in the accomplishment of this mission until the end of the age, then that tells us how long this mission will last. This was not just the assignment of a few dazzled disciples on a mountain in Galilee. It is the mission of *all* the Church for *all* time. But, ultimately, it is not just the mission of the Church, but the mission of the risen and reigning Christ. And that is our hope and our strong assurance.

This worldwide disciple-making mission requires a worldwide missionary effort. That has always been a major emphasis here at this church. And we want to strengthen it even further, not because we are especially clever or because it's our niche identity, but because it is the mission to which Christ has called us. A significant number of our people have gone personally to other parts of the world. And others are in the pipeline, praise God.

This is the lifeblood of our missionary outreach—when we go ourselves. Every believer should take the opportunity at some point to see what God is doing around the world. Every believer should seriously consider how God might use his or her gifts in that enterprise. And every believer must step up and send those God calls to go to other peoples.

Knowing the plan of God, sharing the heart of God, answering the call of God to claim that which rightly belongs to him. That, brothers and sisters, is what it's all about.

# **The Opposite of Racism**

**Delivered at Washington Community Church  
January 14, 2007**

Starting on Dec. 31 and continuing through this month of January, we are engaged in a series of messages on transformation. So, it is especially appropriate at this time of year, when we remember one of our country's most transformational leaders, that we apply this principle of transformation to his greatest passion. For no one before or since Martin Luther King, Jr. has expounded so clearly what America would and could and should look like if we were to turn the bright lights of righteousness on the sin of racism.

Martin Luther King understood the principle of transformation, but he did not invent it. Much of it he learned from Jesus himself. You see, the ministry of Jesus was characterized by notable and undeniable transformations. You remember when he healed a man who was blind since birth. That presented a huge PR problem for the Pharisees. They went to the formerly blind man and said, "Give glory to God. This man is a sinner." To which he replied, "I don't know whether he's a sinner or not; all I know is that once I was blind but now I can see." Touché. There was no explaining away that transformation, because he had become the opposite of what he had been.

Jesus invited himself to the home of a diminutive and dishonest tax collector named Zacchaeus. But Zacchaeus welcomed Jesus and became his disciple. Then he repaid everyone four times what he had cheated them out of, and, in addition, he gave half his goods to the poor. Prompting Jesus to comment that on that day salvation had come to the house of Zacchaeus. And who could deny it? The tax collector had become the opposite of what he had been.

There was once a committed religious zealot named Saul, whose passion was that of persecuting Christians, putting them in jail and even seeing them executed. But one day Jesus met him on the Damascus road, and everything changed. He changed from persecutor to promoter, becoming arguably the greatest missionary who ever lived. He even changed his name. A Christian-hater named Saul became the Apostle Paul—and in the process became the opposite of what he had been.

Times have changed. Centuries have come and gone. But God is still in the transforming business. Romans 12:2 urges us not to be conformed to this world, which would be the

path of least resistance, but to be transformed by the renewing of our minds. Some transformations are instantaneous, while others, like this one, involve a process. But what makes the experience transformational is not how fast it is but how complete it is. In fact, the Greek verb used to describe this transformation in Romans 12:2 is *metamorphoō*. God is out to accomplish a metamorphosis in us, to transform us from sinners to saints.

This transformational dynamic is part and parcel of the Christian life. Eph. 4:28 says, “Those who have been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with their own hands, that they may have something to share with those in need.”

But just when has this thief been transformed? When he doesn’t steal for a week or month or a year? No. Transformation occurs when the thief becomes the opposite of what he used to be. Not only is he no longer stealing, but he’s working hard and contributing to the welfare of others. We are truly transformed only when we become the opposite of what we used to be, replacing one set of attitudes and behaviors with another.

The God who desires to transform us also desires to use us—his people, his Church, his transformed humanity—to transform the world around us. As we saw last week, Christ has been exalted to the throne of the universe, and we are called to bring every individual under his rule. The Lordship of Christ, however, also extends over humanity in its societal relationships. And we must be God’s transformational tool in this arena as well.

So, just how does God use us to prophetically proclaim his justice to a wider world? Well, we have both an individual and collective voice. So, we can tell people about God’s moral standards. But we also speak powerfully to issues of societal righteousness through the example of our redeemed community. As we model God’s message in our congregational life, we become a living witness to God’s goodness and a precursor of Christ’s eternal kingdom to come. My mind often goes back to the acceptance the Nickel Mines Amish community extended to the family of the man who murdered their daughters. It spoke far more powerfully than any sermon ever could.

We are, therefore, a transformational community, called to be transformed and then to transform—to turn people and communities of people into something very different than what they used to be. But, bringing the focus back to today’s topic in particular, what would a transformed community look like when it comes to race relations? What is the opposite of racism?

“Oh, that’s an easy one,” you say. The opposite of racism is anti-racism, and we’ve got it. This congregation is an official affiliate of the Damascus Road Anti-Racism do-gooders society. We done denounced that devilish deed.

But watch out. As Shakespeare said, “Methinks thou dost denounce too much.” Or something like that. We are reminded from time to time by the unfortunate failings of Christian leaders, that the most vehement denouncers of evil can at one and the same time be the most active perpetrators of that same evil. Denouncing racism has its place, but denouncing racism is not the opposite of engaging in racism; it is merely the opposite of affirming racism.

Don’t get me wrong. I’m overjoyed about our Damascus Road emphasis. And you should know that our group is way out ahead of almost everyone else involved in this program. But my point is just this: if talk is cheap, anti-racism talk is after-Christmas sale cheap. Since almost everyone decries racism but few do anything about it, the law of supply and demand makes meaningful action a valuable commodity.

Do you know what the opposite of *esculent* is? Probably not, but that’s okay. It’s a rather rare word, and if you’ve never even heard the word, then it’s hard to come up with an antonym. If I told you that *esculent* meant *edible*, then it would be easy to come up with its opposite, which would be, of course, anything I cook that hasn’t been prepared ahead of time by someone else.

In the same way, in order to answer the question, “What is the opposite of racism?” we must have some notion of what *racism* means. *Racism* is a problematic term, not because it doesn’t mean anything, but because its connotation overwhelms its denotation. As you probably know, words have both a denotation and connotation. The denotation is dictionary definition, the reality the word points to. But the connotation includes the nuances, the emotional baggage associated with the word.

Even though *slender* and *skinny* could both legitimately describe the same person’s form, the connotation of one is obviously much more positive than the other. An inexpensive product could be the same as a cheap one, but inexpensive goods are, nevertheless, more desirable than cheap ones. Almost all the four-letter words that make people blush have a more acceptable alternative that actually denotes the same thing. But the alternatives do not have the same connotation.

Because the word *racism* suggests images of cone-hatted, white-sheeted, cross-burning, blood-drooling, epithet-spewing, lynch mobsters; quite understandably not a lot of people are going to identify with that image. And, so, as terms go, *racism* is kind of a stink bomb. Still, you notice that I have used the term *racism* thirteen times already today. That's because we don't have another word that covers the exact same semantic range. So, having at least acknowledged the power of this connotation, let's pretend that we can lay it aside momentarily and talk for a moment about what *racism* denotes.

I'm not going to offer a definition of racism *per se*. In my experience, people do not use definitions of racism to understand racism better. They use definitions of racism to engage in semantic arguments about how racism should be defined. And I'm not interested in getting stuck in that infinite loop this morning. But I did look at more than twenty definitions of racism in preparation for this message, and while some of them were obviously wrong, because I didn't agree with them at all, there were two themes that appeared in the vast majority of those definitions.

The first is that racism assigns values of superiority and inferiority to people based on racial identification. And the second is that these values support a social system of stigmatization and oppression. So, there is both an attitudinal aspect and an institutional aspect to racism. It has to do with the way we feel about people, and it has to do with the systemic ways we treat them. You can wordsmith it in any number of ways, but most definitions recognize these two principle elements. And, since that's what most often comes to most people's minds when we use the term, that's how I'm going to use it today.

Before we can answer the question, "What is the opposite of racism?" a couple of foundational observations about the state of racism in America today. First, we need to recognize that this country has a legacy of racism. Much of our early economy was based on slave labor, and we have a long history of both racial ill-will and institutionalized forms of discrimination. However our individual or cultural lenses may nuance that historical fact, there is no way to responsibly deny that a legacy of racism does exist.

The second point is this: important but incomplete progress has been made in combating racism. There are those axe grinders who would have us believe that hardly anything has changed. Well, that message may serve their agenda, but it does not serve the truth. And then there are those who feel that we have put this problem behind us, that racism is no longer a systemic problem but resides merely the personal prejudices of certain cultural

Neanderthals. People on the receiving end of racism don't typically hold this view, because they are forced to deal with a reality that others can conveniently relegate to history.

So, we still have a problem in both our attitudes and in our institutions. We cannot ignore this problem into oblivion. To admit that its legacy lingers is a threat to our sense of self-decency. And, yet, admit it we must. No society can embrace an evil such as racism without paying a price, and no society can excise such an evil without paying a price. That price begins with facing both the past and the present of the problem.

Racism does not disappear just because of the passage of time. Racism does not disappear just because we are sorry. Racism does not disappear just because we're "workin' hard." Racism doesn't disappear just because we denounce it. Racism doesn't disappear just because we change our laws. Racism doesn't disappear just because we compensate for its consequences. Racism doesn't disappear just because we build a memorial to Martin Luther King. Racism, like any other sinful condition that God desires to transform, will disappear when, and only when, it is replaced by its opposite.

But what is the opposite of racism? Well, racism involves an assumption of superiority and a projection of inferiority. Transformation, then, means replacing those attitudes with equality and love and meekness and affirmation. And racism involves social systems characterized by stigmatization and oppression of those we perceive as different. A just society, then, must create a community defined by mutual submission and solidarity, protection and opportunity.

In order for transformation to occur, what *is* must be replaced by what *ought* to be. Which sounds simple enough, doesn't it? Maybe simple, but certainly not easy. In fact, before we can change America, we must begin by creating a template for transformation on a smaller scale, demonstrating the legitimacy and value of God's way. And that transformation must begin with the household of God, with the Church.

The Church (big C) is where the transforming power resides. That's where we should find a sensitivity to God's righteousness. That's where we find people indwelt with the Holy Spirit. And if the Church can live out the opposite of racism, three things will happen. First, God will be glorified. Second, we will offer a practical illustration to others of what it means to live as God intended. And, last but certainly not least, we will gain



prophetic credibility.

Frankly, we don't have that much credibility right now. Why would anybody listen to the Church about race, until we're at least as transformational on this subject as the US military? And to get there we'd have some catching up to do. "Ah, but the military has an advantage, you might say. They can make rules and impose those standards." True. But we have the Holy Spirit, for crying out loud! And if that's not more powerful than rules, then we ought to just chuck this New Covenant thing and go back to the law.

Historically, despite some noble exceptions, the Church has alternatively prostituted its theology to the institution of slavery, looked the other way during decades of discrimination, dragged its feet through the civil rights movement, ignored the problem once the external stimulus was removed, and finally settled for something resembling "separate but equal" in church life. It's pretty hard to be part of the problem and part of the solution to the problem at the same time. And, yet, God still desires to display his transforming power through the Church. But how?

I believe the impetus will not come initially from the Church (big C) but from a (small c) church or churches. Perhaps a church that is younger than much of this history. Perhaps a church with a truly anti-racist identity. Perhaps a church that has already made some hard-won progress on this issue. Perhaps a church that is unafraid to swim against the current. Perhaps a church like ours.

At this juncture in the history of our nation God is looking for a model home for his transforming kingdom values—a staging ground for the opposite of racism. To prove that such a transformation is possible and to show what it looks like.

Obviously, these lofty goals are more easily recognized than realized. As we have noted, such a transformation will be a process, not an immediate healing. And, yet, even to be in that process is transformational, as long as we are seriously and realistically pursuing the opposite of racism.

One of my biggest pet peeves when I watch football, which I frequently do, is third-down strategy. Could be any team, but we'll call them the Minnesota Mennonites just to make it interesting. The ball is on their own 30 yard-line. It's third and seven, a passing situation. They come up to the line, a determined bunch united by eerily similar last names. The quarterback takes the snap, and with his patented buggy-whip delivery, zings

the ball to a wide-open receiver—four yards down the field. He is tackled immediately. So, the punting unit comes on.

This scenario, minus the Mennonite-isms, is repeated every weekend on umpteen occasions. But if you need seven yards for a first down, why throw it to somebody who's only four yards downfield and is going to be tackled immediately? And if you are that receiver, why are you only four yards downfield? The pass attempt makes sense, even if you don't always complete it, if you are at least trying to make a first down. But why expend the effort in a designed failure?

When it comes to confronting racism, nothing less than transformation will do. Nothing less than transformation will inspire us. Nothing less than transformation will spark a movement. Nothing less than transformation will prove God's point. Nothing less than transformation is really worth doing. If we can be satisfied with a merely marginal improvement that doesn't amount to transformation, then just bring on the punting team.

To be such a church requires a commitment, not just to God and to his ideals, but to one another and to those whom God will add to our number. To a self-sacrificing love that mimics Christ's example. To the hard work of listening and learning. To the sharing of both influence and responsibility. We have not yet achieved this transformation, but the opposite of racism is within our grasp, if we believe that it is our calling and continue undaunted toward the goal.

Turn with me if you will to Acts chapter 3. Let's read verses 1-10: "One day Peter and John were going up to the temple at the time of prayer—at three in the afternoon. <sup>2</sup> Now a man who was lame from birth was being carried to the temple gate called Beautiful, where he was put every day to beg from those going into the temple courts. <sup>3</sup> When he saw Peter and John about to enter, he asked them for money. <sup>4</sup> Peter looked straight at him, as did John. Then Peter said, "Look at us!" <sup>5</sup> So the man gave them his attention, expecting to get something from them.

<sup>6</sup> Then Peter said, "Silver or gold I do not have, but what I do have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk." <sup>7</sup> Taking him by the right hand, he helped him up, and instantly the man's feet and ankles became strong. <sup>8</sup> He jumped to his feet and began to walk. Then he went with them into the temple courts, walking and jumping, and praising God. <sup>9</sup> When all the people saw him walking and praising God, <sup>10</sup> they recognized him as the same man who used to sit begging at the temple gate called Beautiful, and they were filled with wonder and amazement at what had happened to him.

In next chapter, Acts chapter four, the Jewish ruling council, the Sanhedrin, is assembled, still doing damage control on the fallout from this miracle. Notice the impact it made. In verse 16 they comment that everybody knows that Peter and John have done an “outstanding miracle” and that they “cannot deny it.”

I regret to inform you that when you called me as pastor you didn't get much of a miracle worker. It's not that I don't believe in miracles. I do. It's not that I don't pray for miracles. I do. It's just that I've been in ministry long enough to know that's not the way God typically works through me.

But I do believe that God has called me to work at least one miracle. To show what the opposite of racism means in the context of a local church. It seems kind of lame to say that I need your help to do a miracle, but as I said, I'm not very good at them.

But because of our expressed ideals, because of our history, because of the head start we already have, because of our location, because of my own calling, but ultimately because of the power and the expressed will of God, I believe that we can be a flagship for God's transforming power—to show the Church and to show the world the opposite of racism. Not even if Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King rose from the dead on the same day could there be a more outstanding, more undeniable miracle. Not in this America. We can be the opposite of racism.

(Scott singing) We shall overcome, we shall overcome, we shall overcome someday.  
Deep in my heart, I do believe, we shall overcome some day.

# **The Freedom of Forgiveness**

**Delivered at Washington Community Fellowship**

**January 21, 2007**

**Luke 7:36-50**

I am a prison inmate serving my 29<sup>th</sup> year of incarceration. This is my story—a story of bondage and, finally, of freedom.

Ever since I was a small child, my life seemed to be filled with torment. I had seizures. Sometimes I started screaming for no reason at all. I was plagued by bouts of severe depression. My parents and teachers could neither reach me nor control me. I felt dark forces come over me in the middle of the night. I contemplated suicide.

After my mother's death, my father somehow pushed me through high school. Then, after three years in the Army I found myself alone in New York City. I made friends who were heavily involved in the occult, something that had always fascinated me. I began to read the Satanic Bible and engage in occult practices. Something evil entered my mind.

Eventually I crossed that invisible line of no return. After years of torment I became the criminal that, at the time, it seemed as if it was my destiny to become. Six people lost their lives. Many others suffered at my hand, and will continue to suffer for a lifetime.

In 1978 I was sentenced to about 365 consecutive years, virtually burying me alive behind prison walls.

When I first entered the prison system I was placed in isolation. I was then sent to a psychiatric hospital because I was declared temporarily insane. I almost lost my life when another inmate cut my throat.

Ten years into my prison sentence and feeling despondent and without hope, another inmate named Rick came up to me one day as I was walking the prison yard on a cold winter's night. He introduced himself and began to tell me that Jesus Christ loved me and wanted to forgive me. I mocked him because I did not think that God would ever forgive me or that He would want anything to do with me.

Still this man persisted and we became friends. He kept reminding me that no matter what a person did, Christ stood ready to forgive. He gave me a Gideon's Pocket

Testament and asked me to read the Psalms. I did. Every night. And the Lord began quietly melting my stone-cold heart.

One evening I was reading Psalm 34. I came upon the 6<sup>th</sup> verse, which says, "this poor man cried, and the Lord heard him, and saved him from all his troubles". It was at that moment, in 1987, that I began to pour out my heart to God. Everything seemed to hit me at once—the guilt for what I had done... the disgust at what I had become. Late that night in my cold cell, I got down on my knees and I began to cry out to Jesus Christ.

I told Him that I was sick and tired of doing evil. I asked Jesus to forgive me for all my sins. Some time later I got up, and it felt as if a very heavy but invisible chain that had bound me for so many years was broken. A peace flooded over me. I did not understand what was happening. But in my heart I just knew that my life, somehow, was going to be different.

Since that time I have worked in the Special Needs Unit of the prison, where men who have various emotional and coping problems are housed. I pray with them, read Scripture, and just show them brotherly love. I have also worked as the Chaplain's clerk, and I have a letter writing ministry. In addition, the Lord has opened ways for me to share God's love and forgiveness with millions via several nationally televised interviews.

My name is David Berkowitz. They call me Son of Sam, but I am now a Son of God. God's forgiveness broke the chains of mental anguish and sin that had me bound. Even in behind bars I enjoy the freedom of forgiveness.

David Berkowitz was one of America's most notorious mass murderers. And his testimony introduces our fourth installment in this series on transformation, as we see how Jesus brought this same freedom of forgiveness to a notorious sinner of his day.

**Luke 7:36-50:** When one of the Pharisees invited Jesus to have dinner with him, he went to the Pharisee's house and reclined at the table. <sup>37</sup> A woman in that town who lived a sinful life learned that Jesus was eating at the Pharisee's house, so she came there with an alabaster jar of perfume. <sup>38</sup> As she stood behind him at his feet weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears. Then she wiped them with her hair, kissed them and poured perfume on them.

<sup>39</sup> When the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would know who is touching him and what kind of woman she is—that she is a sinner."

<sup>40</sup> Jesus answered him, “Simon, I have something to tell you.”

“Tell me, teacher,” he said.

<sup>41</sup> “Two people owed money to a certain moneylender. One owed him five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. <sup>42</sup> Neither of them had the money to pay him back, so he forgave the debts of both. Now which of them will love him more?”

<sup>43</sup> Simon replied, “I suppose the one who had the bigger debt forgiven.”

“You have judged correctly,” Jesus said.

<sup>44</sup> Then he turned toward the woman and said to Simon, “Do you see this woman? I came into your house. You did not give me any water for my feet, but she wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. <sup>45</sup> You did not give me a kiss, but this woman, from the time I entered, has not stopped kissing my feet. <sup>46</sup> You did not put oil on my head, but she has poured perfume on my feet. <sup>47</sup> Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven—as her great love has shown. But whoever has been forgiven little loves little.”

<sup>48</sup> Then Jesus said to her, “Your sins are forgiven.”

<sup>49</sup> The other guests began to say among themselves, “Who is this who even forgives sins?”

<sup>50</sup> Jesus said to the woman, “Your faith has saved you; go in peace.”

Our story opens in Luke 7:36: “When one of the Pharisees invited Jesus to have dinner with him, he went to the Pharisee’s house and reclined at the table.” A Pharisee invites Jesus to his home for dinner. During that time there were two principle parties within the Jewish ruling council, or Sanhedrin. The Sadducees, who were mostly aristocrats, had bought into Greek culture. For them God was a deistic force who did not intervene in human affairs. They did not believe in the spirit world or the resurrection.

While the Sadducees were secularists, the Pharisees were the separatists of their day. They followed strict guidelines of right and wrong. They taught the Torah to the people and were much more popular than the Sadducees. Their view of Scripture and theology was much closer to that of Jesus.

That’s why the Pharisees are always popping up in the gospel narratives. Some of them even became followers of Jesus. Some were just curious. Others saw him as a threat, and we often find them setting theological traps, trying to discredit Christ.

It’s hard to say which group this Pharisee, named Simon, fell into. Earlier in this chapter Jesus was in Nain, where he raised the widow’s son from the dead. There is no indication

that he had moved on. So, perhaps the Pharisee was checking out this Jesus character in the aftermath of his spectacular miracle. It is quite clear that he was not a particular friend or follower of Christ.

Notice that they recline at the table, which was the typical posture for eating. Head toward the table and feet pointed away, the diners would lie on their sides, often on low couches or a mat.

They had been there only a short time, when in walks an uninvited guest, a woman. Verse 37 says, “A woman in that town who lived a sinful life learned that Jesus was eating at the Pharisee’s house, so she came there, so she came there with an alabaster jar of perfume.”

Now that might seem strange from our point of view, because here in the city we entertain our guests behind double-locked doors. But the houses in Israel were often largely open to the outdoors, due to the warm climate, and if a well-known person were invited to what would be a large meal, less fortunate folks from the community would sometimes gawk or hang around waiting for leftovers.

Still, it was a brazen move to come right in where they were eating. But it was not just the fact that she was an intruder that set the room abuzz. Perhaps by her appearance and probably by her reputation, she was well-known. Nain was a small town in a conservative Hebrew community, and this woman was a prostitute.

The text calls her, literally, “a sinner.” The NIV says that she “had lived a sinful life,” to make it clear that she was not just a sinner in the theological sense that everyone is a sinner. She was a notorious sinner, a woman of ill-repute.

There must have been a collective gasp as she walked into the room. Simon himself had to be on the verge of a holy convulsion. Here he is, a Pharisee, the guardian of family values, hosting an important itinerant preacher. And at the worst possible time, here comes Heidi Fleiss waltzing into his living room as if she belongs there. Who knows? Maybe this wasn’t her first visit.

Why is she here? Why now? And what is she up to? In his wildest imagination he could not have imagined the scene that was about to unfold before him.

Verse 38 describes what happened next: “As she stood behind him at his feet weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears. Then she wiped them with her hair, kissed them and poured perfume on them.”

To approach someone’s feet at one of our dinner tables would require considerable agility, but having heard the explanation of how people reclined at the table, you can visualize her position. Evidently, she didn’t do anything at first but just stand there emotionally distraught. This scene must have lasted for some time, given the fact that her tears were dripping from her face to the extent that they began to wet Jesus feet. There’s no record that anyone said anything, and who would know what to say under such circumstances?

Even the woman herself is apparently silent. But, finally she does something. She begins to wipe her tears from Jesus’ feet with her hair, and so initiates a series of startling and scandalous actions. It was considered immoral for women to wear their hair down in public. Whether her hair was already loose or whether she loosened it for this purpose, her lack of modesty had the guests’ eyes popping. And that, even before she proceeded to use her provocative hair to make contact with Jesus in a rather intimate fashion. If her only goal had been to mop up her tears, she could have done so with the fold of her garment.

Notice that she has gone from standing to at least bending over to perhaps kneeling. She begins to kiss Jesus’ feet. There is some evidence in Jewish historic literature that people might kiss the feet of a very revered teacher, but it’s doubtful whether this custom was known in Jesus’ day, and even more doubtful that this woman was aware of it. It seems more likely that it this an authentic, impromptu expression of devotion.

Even accounting for cultural differences, this just isn’t normal behavior anywhere. The guests are both riveted and scandalized. Not the sort of scene that one would expect at a first century society dinner, especially in the home of a Pharisee. Would they have something to talk about at the well tomorrow!

The woman has brought with her an alabaster jar of perfume. These scented oils were the obsession of women in that day. They often wore flasks around their necks and had a special dispensation to do this even on the Sabbath. This woman, however, carried the flask, which would have had a bulb at the bottom and a long neck that had to be broken to dispense the contents. The fact that it came in an alabaster container indicates that it was quite expensive. Completely oblivious to the cost, she pours it on Jesus’ feet.



In verse 39 we see that the host's mind is going a mile a minute. "When the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, 'If this man were a prophet, he would know who is touching him and what kind of woman she is—that she is a sinner.'"

Not only would he know, but if this guy were really a prophet, then he'd put a stop to it to this unseemly behavior. You wouldn't even have to be a prophet to know that if this lady wasn't a prostitute, she had to be, at the very least, a desperate housewife.

Before he could even verbalize his thoughts, Jesus spoke up in verse 40: "Jesus answered him, 'Simon, I have something to tell you.'"

Apparently, the woman was still anointing Jesus' feet as he addressed Simon. What Simon says is, "Tell me, teacher." What he's thinking is, "Boy, this has gotta be good." But as is so often the case, Jesus addresses the situation indirectly rather than directly. Instead of offering an explanation, he tells a story, and that catches the Pharisee off balance.

As verse 41 informs us, the story has to do with a man who had two debtors. "Two people owed money to a certain moneylender. One owed him five hundred denarii, and the other fifty." So, there's a considerable difference between these two debts. 500 denarii was maybe \$40,000 or more. The second man owed only one tenth that much. But what the two debtors had in common was that neither had the funds to repay the moneylender.

So, dis small-time guy, he could en' up wid like a pinky broke, you know? Bud dis udder guy, well, now, dat's a lotta money. A fella could lose a coupla kneecaps in a deal like dat, if you know what I mean.

Fortunately, the moneylender in this case is anything but a Mafioso with a cheesy Rocky Balboa accent. He forgives both debts, the big one and the small one, according to verse 42: "Neither of them had the money to pay him back, so he forgave the debts of both." So, the question Jesus poses to Simon is this, "Which one is going to be more grateful? Which one is going to be more devoted to his forgiver?"

Verse 43: "Simon replied, 'I suppose the one who had the bigger debt forgiven.'" Notice that he begins his response with "I suppose." I don't know of any place else in Scripture where the speaker qualifies their response in such a manner. Not that he doesn't know the

obvious answer. But he's hedging, or perhaps he senses that he's stepping into a trap.

Jesus confirms Simon's answer and then proceeds to spring the trap. "Now," says Jesus in verse 44, "let's do a little comparison between my hypothetical situation and what we're experiencing here. You see how this woman is treating me—with lavish affection—wetting my feet with her tears and wiping them with her hair, of all things! But you, when I came in you didn't even offer me water for me to wash me feet myself, which is considered a common courtesy. And a kiss would have been a friendly greeting, but you were, at best, standoffish.

Compare that with this woman who is kissing my feet, an outlandish display of affection which has undoubtedly made you squeamish. And not just once; she's been at this ever since I came in. You didn't even offer me cheap olive oil for my head, as hosts often do, but she has given me something far more valuable and applied it to my feet from a position of humility.

By answering in this way, Jesus explodes two of Simon's unspoken accusation. First, Simon had concluded that if Jesus were a prophet he would know what kind of woman he was dealing with. But, of course, Jesus did know. If he could read Simon's mind, then certainly he could see the plain truth of this woman's situation.

Simon also assumed that if Jesus did know who she was, he wouldn't let her carry on like that. But Jesus has nevertheless accepted her affection as appropriate, and, furthermore, he's used it as a foil to show the contrast between the response of the self-righteous and that of someone who is humbled by grace.

We might, however, wonder if Simon didn't have a point when it comes to the appropriateness of the woman's actions. It's a pretty plain breach of decorum, and perhaps we share some of the Pharisee's unease. But decorum was not #1 on Jesus' list of priorities.

According to Jesus' example of the two debtors, her actions might have been inappropriate had she been forgiven little. But her sin debt was monumental. From an objective standpoint, she had engaged in shameless immorality in a way that dragged others into her sinfulness and undermined societal standards. But, perhaps even more importantly, her debt of sin was monumental from a subjective point of view. Because she recognized the extent of her unworthiness, she also marveled at God's forgiveness.

And if her sin was indeed great, then, Jesus maintained, her forgiveness *required* a lavish display of love.

I have read this passage many times, and it's not one of those stories that requires much imagination to understand it. Jesus explains it quite well. And, yet, I must confess that until I studied it this week I never really got the point. My impression had always been that she comes crying under the burden of conviction. That she is a penitent weeping at Jesus feet and seeking salvation.

But that's not the conclusion Jesus draws. We don't know how she had met Jesus. Maybe she had seen him raise the widow's son. Maybe she had listened to him teach. And she might still be emotionally overwhelmed by the conviction of her sin. But that's not the main reason she was there.

However and wherever and whenever she had had an encounter with Jesus, she had placed her faith in him and had been forgiven. That's why she came with her outlandish, lavish display of affection. Otherwise, we must conclude that Jesus entirely misunderstands and misapplies the point. His explanation for her behavior is not that whoever needs forgiveness most must humiliate themselves most thoroughly. His explanation is that she can't control her love, because she is so cognizant of the magnitude of the forgiveness she has already experienced!

In verse 48 he pronounces her sins forgiven. Given the context, however, we understand that he was announcing that her sins had already been forgiven. And, yet, there must have been something special about hearing that absolution from the lips of Jesus.

This confirmation on the part of Jesus was made based on the evidence of her response. But it was not just for the sake of the woman. This was not the only time in his ministry that he made a public point of announcing someone's forgiveness for the benefit of his listeners and to demonstrate his own divine prerogative to forgive sins.

It was, as verse 50 makes clear, her faith that had saved her. And, now, Jesus can tell her to go in peace. Peace was precisely what she had not known. Her sinful ways had destroyed her peace with God and with her own self and even with society. But when God removes the guilt, he removes the barrier that stands between you and him, and he removes your own tendency to see yourself as something less than he created you to be. Only when you have the assurance of forgiveness can you go in peace.

This passage brings several important applications to mind. It reminds me of the universal need for forgiveness and why so many do not find it. Some, like Simon, think themselves too good to need forgiveness. And, others, like this woman throughout most of her life, felt herself too bad to even hope for it. Today, as back then, there are many people today living without God's forgiveness, not because he doesn't want to forgive them but because they are not prepared to accept it.

But a different transformational lesson has been pursuing my heart this week. I just can't escape this correlation between my appreciation of what God has done for me and the way I display my love for him. Like many of you, I have known the Lord since childhood. I've never lived a debauched life. My conversion experience is not the stuff that novels or tabloid stories are made of. And yet, reading this passage, I can't avoid the conclusion that God enjoys it when we love him lavishly, and that often I do not. I just love him routinely.

Loving lavishly does not come naturally for me. I'm not the most emotionally expressive person in the world. This is me when I'm feeling normal. This is me when I'm really excited [same expression, thumbs up]. In addition to being naturally even-tempered, I'm from the Midwest, where personal dramas and emotional histrionics can be capital offenses.

And, yet, the example of this woman pierces me. Jesus is not saying that some of us are just naturally like the woman and some are just naturally like Simon, and that either way is cool or that there's nothing you can do about it. The clear implication is that he's really pleased by those who love him lavishly, because they "get" grace. They get it. They appreciate God. They revel in his presence. It's not the same old, same old. His mercies are new every morning.

The fact is that in order to love much and to love lavishly, you do not have to be a converted mass murderer or a sleazy character. Both objectively and subjectively those of us who cannot easily step into this woman's shoes have every reason to do so.

Regardless of our starting place relative to one another, God's forgiveness does not just give us a boost to a more acceptable level of morality, it carries us across an infinitely wide chasm that separates us from the holiness of God. So, some of us may be Simon in our own minds, but, in reality, all of us are this woman before God.

If you have truly known Christ for most of your life, then you should have also developed a certain theological depth that drives home the wonder of God's forgiveness. You should be capable of evaluating your own goodness based on a comparison with God's holiness, not with those around you. You should know the depth of depravity in your own heart. And you should be able to imagine what your life could have been, had God not intervened early on.

If you are capable of such reflection, then you can love much and love lavishly. For it is not so much the objective sinfulness from which you have been redeemed that makes you a great lover of God, it is your subjective sense that you have truly been saved from something awful that sets you free to love like the woman of Luke 7.

It's not just the fact of forgiveness but our appreciation of it that sets us free. Free to revel in God's goodness, more concerned with abandon than restraint, driven by desire rather than decorum. That's the freedom of forgiveness. Not just freedom from the consequences of sin, but freedom to love the Lord your God lavishly.

Sometimes people ask me, "Who is your favorite Bible character?" It's kind of a hard question to answer, but if you asked me this week, I'd have to say that I can't tell you her name, because it isn't even mentioned. But this unnamed woman pursues Jesus even at the most seemingly inopportune times, because her love is overflowing. She has been transformed by the freedom of forgiveness. And I desperately want what she had. I hope you do too.

# When Two Fools Collide

Delivered at Washington Community Fellowship

Jan. 28, 2007

[Kenny Rogers and Dottie West singing –<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dFcAx3OnBJI>]

You want things your way  
And I want them mine,  
And now we don't know  
Just where to draw the line.  
How long can love survive  
If we keep choosing sides,  
And who picks up the pieces  
Every time two fools collide?

You lay the blame on me  
And I, the blame on you,  
But why do we keep finding faults  
In everything we do?  
And how long can we keep right and wrongs  
So cut and dry,  
And who picks up the pieces  
Every time two fools collide?

We can save our love,  
We still have the time,  
Oh, I know there must be a way,  
But we still haven't tried,  
To keep our hearts from breaking  
Every time two fools collide.

Life is a series of relationships. Relationships, when they are good, they are very, very good, but when they are bad they are horrid. The misery of broken relationships is far more intense than the happiness of united hearts, because we expect relationships to make us happy. And when they don't, not only are we forced to deal with those interpersonal issues –we're left disappointed and disillusioned about relationships in general. As the old Dottie West and Kenny Rogers song asks, "Who'll pick up the pieces every time two fools collide?"

It is an undisputable fact that relationships do go awry. And that should not surprise us. Sin didn't just rupture our relationship with God, it drove a wedge between us and others as well. Immediately after Adam and Eve sinned together, they began the blame game. And in the next chapter one of their sons kills the other. As a result of that sinful legacy, we have the capacity be loving or to deal selfishly and callously with those around us.

If we can oversimplify this interpersonal dynamic for the sake of illustration, let's characterize our interactions as simply positive or negative. That means that there are three basic types of engagement possible, and I direct your attention to the diagrams below, where these possibilities are depicted. When we deal with others lovingly and they love us in return, life is wonderful. It puts a skip in our step and a song in our hearts.

$$+ \text{ and } + = \text{😊} !$$

But, in a sinful world, we do not live on this plane every day. Sometimes one person is trying to love and the other is being selfish or cruel, or perhaps each contributes a mixture of positive and negative relational energy. The possible permutations are endless. So, then, depending on the circumstances, the positive force might pull the other back into a healthy orbit. Or perhaps the negative force will drag the relationship into a downward spiral. The chances for a foolish fender-bender is significant.

$$+ \text{ and } - = \uparrow \downarrow$$

The third illustration shows what happens when two sinful, dysfunctional people unleash their negativity on each other. That's right, two fools collide—head-on. This is the disastrous synergy of two sets of sinfulness. And that collision can erupt into a demolition derby. Who will win? Typically, nobody .

$$- \text{ and } - = \text{💥}$$

Now I know that none of you good, Christian people have ever had any relational crashes, but you just might have a “friend” who could use some advice in this area. So, as we bring this series on transformation to a close, I thought we'd spend some time talking this morning about how to transform relationships—what to do when two fools collide.

Sometimes people come to me, looking for help with their relationships. Until they speak I don't know whether the problem is with their spouse, with their lack of spouse, with

their children, with their co-workers, with someone else in the church, or with some other kind of relationship. But, before they say a word, I do have a pretty good idea what they're going to say about that relationship.

The vast majority of the time whatever is wrong is mostly the fault of the other individual, and my counselee wants me to help them figure out how to change that person. So, now we have a problem. The individual sitting in front of me desires change. But their assumptions about how that change occurs in the Kingdom of God are absolutely inimical to spiritual transformation.

The possibility does exist for them to invoke the power of God in that relationship, but not by remotely projecting influence over the absent protagonist. God wants work into that relationship by transforming the person who recognizes the problem. And when they find that out, their enthusiasm for counseling drops off dramatically. And sometimes they look at me with that "I'll bet you flunked psychology, and it's a good thing I'm not paying for this advice look."

They want the magic formula for manipulating someone else into seeing things and doing things their way. But even God didn't have much luck with that approach. Remember the law? It set clear boundaries and gave people a series of rewards and punishments to encourage them to follow the program. But it didn't work. It could not overcome human sinfulness nor draw people into the relationship God wanted them to have with him.

So, God tried a different tack. He became one of us and identified with our sin and took it upon himself and acted sacrificially to draw us rather than to manipulate us to himself. And, guess what? He has far more followers now than he ever did then.

The example of the way that Christ came to reconcile us to God ought to give us a clue as to how God wants to heal our horizontal relationships as well. And he's also given us quite a lot of Scriptural direction. So, to help us talk about a transformed response to relational collisions, I've folded this instruction together and dubbed it the *humserfessenergy* principle. I know, it sounds like something from a German automobile ad. And it might not be the most clever mnemonic device ever.

But if you take a look at the term on your handout, you'll see how it breaks down into its constituent parts. We're talking about a combination of humility, service, confession, listener, and mercy—like I said, *humserfessenergy*. And, yet, in order to truly transform



relationships, these elements must work together as a package, a package for which there was no name—until now.

*Humserfessenercy* is reflected in Colossians 3:12 and other texts: “Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. <sup>13</sup> Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.”

We'll explain that principle in greater detail as we go along. But, first, let's contrast what we *ought* to do with what we *usually* do. And I'm calling what we usually do *selfrightmentulation*. Perhaps you're not familiar with this neologism, either. But I have every confidence that you'll know exactly what I'm talking about when you see what it means—selfishness, rights, judgment, and manipulation.

Let me give you an example of how *selfrightmentulation* works from a little incident that happened at our house this week. On Monday we had just sat down to dinner, when the phone rang. It was for Cindi. She spent a good while chatting and then returned. I had eaten most of my dinner. Hers must have been lukewarm.

Fast forward to Tuesday night. We're about to do pizza and salad in the living room, while watching the pre-game warmup for the State of the Union speech. Cindi was still holding the hot pizza and the knife, when the phone rang. I cut the pizza and waited for her to finish up. But she wasn't finishing up. Finally, the call ended. But before she could take two steps toward the living room it rang again. Another engaging conversation.

Some people like cold pizza. I am not one of them. So, for the second day in a row, I was almost finished when she joined me for dinner. I looked at her and said, “I don't care what you do, but if we've already sat down to eat when the phone rings, I'm just going to go ahead and eat.” She acknowledged what I'd said in a way that made me think she got the point, but I didn't leave well enough alone. “You know, it's actually kind of rude,” I added.

At that point two things could happen. Cindi could agree with my accusation and capitulate to my indirect ultimatum, or she could take umbrage at either my indictment or my manner or both. Fortunately, she chose to be gracious. Otherwise, we could be looking at a major two-fool collision.

The next day I was working on this sermon. And as I plotted out the constituent elements of *selfrightmentulation*, I realized that I had employed each and every one of them, pretty much in order, only a few hours earlier. First, I focused on myself and how that situation affected me. Then, I got upset because my right to attention was being violated. Then I engaged in judgment of Cindi's behavior. And, finally, I set what was supposed to sound like a personal boundary but was actually a not-so-subtle attempt at manipulation.

Now, when I created the term *selfrightmentulation*, I was not actually thinking of applying it to myself, let alone becoming its poster child. So, the next day I had to go back to Cindi and apologize for so unkindly botching that whole incident in textbook fashion. Now, I think everything is okay. We'll find out the next time the phone rings during dinner.

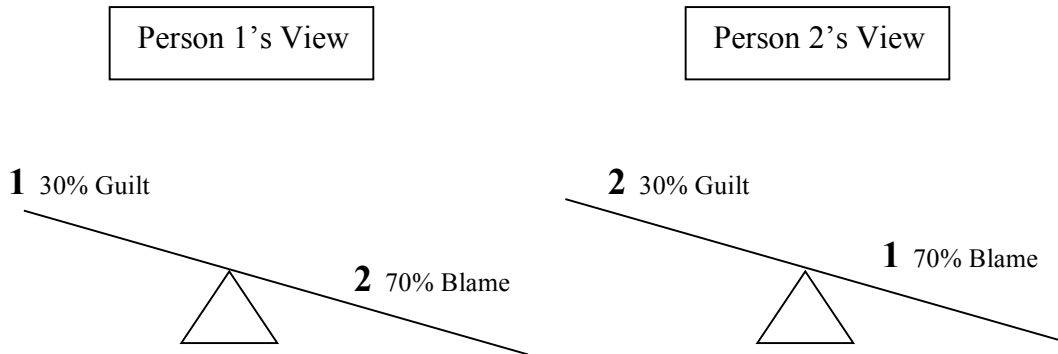
Perhaps my very personal illustration of *selfrightmentulation* seems eerily familiar. Which might be because this term describes not only the wrong way to react to interpersonal challenges but perhaps the most common way as well. But, thank God, there is a better way. It is, I'll grant, far less intuitive to the sinful mind. But it is the way God has prescribed.

This approach that heals hurts and transforms relationships is what we have dubbed *humserfessenergy*. Let's take it piece by piece. When a relationship breaks down, we must approach the other person with a humility that draws people in, by showing interest in their point of view and asking questions rather than issuing ultimatums. And it precludes a high-handed smugness that only hardens the two parties into their respective attitudes. Had I simply asked Cindi how she thought we should handle dinnertime phone calls, she probably would have agreed with me, and, end of story.

When conflicts arise, the answer is not to oppose the opposition but to respond with humble *service* that shows an interest in the other party. Matthew 5:40: "If anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well. If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles." Luke 6:27-28 adds: "But I tell you who hear me: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you."

Nothing deflates antagonism faster than your antagonist acting on your behalf, trying to satisfy your needs. This non-retaliatory response is both surprising and transformational.

Confession is an extremely important aspect of humserfessenercy. Now, you may not always have something to confess. But in most conflicts both parties bear a measure of responsibility. What typically happens, however, is that we have differing perspectives about where that blame lies, as illustrated below.



As the song says, “You put the blame on me, and I the blame on you.” And we feel responsibility or guilt only for the part of the problem that we don’t blame the other person for. In most conflicts there’s no referee to sort it all out, so we remain prisoners of our own self-protective subjectivity.

In our hypothetical illustration, person 1 feels responsible for only 30% of the problem, while blaming 70% on person 2. Interestingly enough, person 2 sees the balance of blame exactly in the same proportion, except that it is person 1 who is the main culprit. I’m sure that none of you have ever been here before.

Some of us think that the only way out of this situation is to adjudicate the true balance. Maybe you do that by seeing who yells louder, by who caves first, by who is the more able advocate, or by who best manages to revise the history that led to the disagreement. Let me say this as delicately as I know how. This dumber than *Jackass, the Movie*. It’s like *Jackass, the Play at Home Version*.

Here’s a little secret. The real question is not who bears what percentage of the blame. Or who started it. The real question is who will step up and break the impasse.

Notice the illustration of the lever. When you take responsibility for your actions and for the hurt you have caused to the other person, you’re not taking responsibility for a certain percentage of the problem. You’re asking their forgiveness for what you did, period.

That cannot be a conditional confession, as in “If I did X, Y, or Z.” It must be your sincere remorse for having done X, Y, or Z and for having hurt them in whatever ways they feel hurt. It’s not, “I’ll own up to this if you’ll own up to that.” No. It can’t be, “I’m sorry but.” It must be an unconditional confession.

What is the most likely thing that the other individual is going to say in return? Of course. The three hardest words to say are, “I was wrong.” Two of the easiest are, “Me too.”

Even if that’s not the immediate response, it’ll probably happen soon. Why? Because the teeter-totter comes crashing down on their side. Even if they thought their responsibility was only 30%. Because once they grant you forgiveness they can’t balance their guilt with your blame. It’s just amazing how the most recalcitrant opposition turns to mush.

A soft answer really does turn away wrath. And there is no softer answer than that prescribed by James, the brother of our Lord: “Confess your sins to each other.” So simple, yet so hard.

Have you ever seen an accident after which the two parties get out and just scream at each other? That’s just about what happens when two fools collide as well. Everyone is talking—or yelling—but no one is... listening.

Tucked into the transforming principle of humserfessenergy is a tribute to the word *listener*. Why do we think we can mend whatever is broken in a relationship by expressing our opinion, when it was probably our opinion that created the problem in the first place? That’s like trying to put out a gasoline fire by dousing it with gasoline.

I’ve yet to see a rift develop between two people because they listened to each other too much. But a lot of healing can come through listening. James, the wise biblical writer I quoted a moment ago, had this to say in James 1:19: “Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry.” And you know what? There just might be a connection between the three activities—being quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry.

People who have received an understanding hearing are unlikely to be angry. Heated talk typically increases the pressure by filling the conflict with hot air. But as soon as we stop and listen, the escalation of tension stops.

I'm not talking about listening solely in order to prepare a rebuttal. I'm not talking about listening just because you're waiting your turn. I'm talking about listening with a view to understanding.

Because, when you truly listen two things happen. First, the other person becomes more amenable to dialog. And, second, it helps you to know how to fix the problem from his or her point of view, which is where healing and reconciliation must begin.

Mercy is the final aspect of our transforming principle of *humserfessenergy*. Mercy is when you refrain from exacting justice. But when conflict arises we gravitate toward justice, because we're sure that if justice had its way, then the other person would quit being a jerk and all would be well.

Luke 6:36 tells us that we should imitate God's mercy by being merciful to others. This is not an optional aspect of Christian spirituality, though we treat it as if it were. In the passage we read earlier from Colossians 3, it tells us to forgive just as God has forgiven us. And God has freely and graciously forgiven us. But when someone has wronged us, we're not so inclined to let them off the hook.

The truth is that others should not have to ask you for forgiveness. I don't mean, of course, that they shouldn't ask; the relationship may not progress until they do. What I mean is that before they ask you should have already forgiven them. When you can ask forgiveness for your own role in the problem and unilaterally forgive others, then you are free. There is no more issue to be resolved, only a relationship to be restored.

While there is unquestionably biblical sanction for the *humserfessenergy* principle, you might wonder whether it leaves out some rather important pieces of the puzzle, like the responsibility to confront people about their wrong behavior or the need to set boundaries in abusive relationships. These are important nuances to this principle, but they do nothing to set it aside.

Correction, especially for repeat offenders, is important. But if you look at the biblical passages that talk about it, you'll see that it is not the principle responsibility of someone who is party to the dispute. The priority there is the restoration of the relationship. If someone has something against you, you are not in a good position to correct them.

Boundaries can be important safeguards in abusive relationships. There is a time to run or

at least hide. There are relationships that you might not be in a strong enough or a safe enough position to address. Even Jesus and Paul got out of Dodge on a few occasions. But this should always be with a prayerful view to coming back to the relationship with a *humserfessenerciful* attitude as soon as possible.

Beware, too, the misapplication of boundaries. As I illustrated from my own experience this week, when we are acting out of our own sinful subjectivity, boundaries can become little more than a manipulative bludgeon.

I don't really care if I manage to put *humserfessenergy* in your vocabulary this morning. I'll admit, it's kind of a goofy-sounding word. I'm much more concerned to put it in your repertoire of transformational tools. Hopefully, we've shown that it's right. But that doesn't mean that you yet have the confidence that it will work. And if you don't you'll probably have a tough time saying "no" to *selfrightmentulation*.

*Humserfessenergy* is not some psychological sleight-of-hand, though there is considerable psychological power when you respond to mistreatment in a transformational way. There are no sure-fire solutions in relationships, there are only responses that honor God and those that do not. There is *humserfessenergy* and there is *selfrightmentulation*.

When *humserfessenergy* works, it's not because it's the best way to leverage your personal power or to influence the behavior of others. When *humserfessenergy* works, it's because obeying God invites his power into situations that are beyond your control or your capacity to rehabilitate. And I've seen God transform relationships, when his people were bold enough to follow his advice—repairing relationships among families, in churches, in the workplace, and between spouses who had been on the opposite sides of the battle line for years.

I bet that some of you are staring at the wreckage of a two-fool collision in your life right now. In the light of what you've heard today, what will you do? And how will you respond to the inevitable relational crashes in your future?

Christians are not exempt from these challenges, but as followers of Jesus, we are called to live by a higher, a *humserfessenerciful* standard. And when we live by that higher standard we also invoke a higher power.

When two fools collide, who picks up the pieces? That looks like a job for our transformational God. Will you invite him into your relationships today?

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