

Conformity – the Life of Love

God did not choose to give His Word to us in the form of a technical manual. Instead, He gave it to us as a book with gripping narratives, moving poetry, terrifying prophecy, and illuminating teaching. All of it combines to give us an understanding of what it is to live as a child of God, to live the Christian life. It is God's glory to give the Word in this way, and our joy to walk through it all, gathering out of it the themes, topics, doctrines and ideas. We are attempting in this series to do a very large flyover of the whole Word of God – to discover the priorities, process, position, posture and practices of the Christian life.

So far we have seen that the great priority is to glorify God through loving Him supremely. We have seen coming to love Him in this way takes place through a process of living in His presence.

As we've considered the process of the Christian life, we've described it as a cycle, made up of five stages: communion, conviction, confession, cleansing, and conformity to Christ. As we live life seeking to know God by adoring Him in worship, and admiring Him in our everyday lives, we come to know Him better. The consequence of knowing a holier God better is that we are more aware of our sin, and feel convicted. This conviction is not a conviction of all our sins, but of one or a few areas that God wants removed if the communion is to grow. A response of faith is to confess these sins as sin, with the intention of forsaking them. What follows is cleansing, where God cleanses our consciences of these sins, and enables us to put off this sin in practice by fleeing from it.

This brings us to the fifth stage of living in His presence, which is conformity to Christ. If we are fleeing from sin, we are necessarily following after something else. If we are putting off the old man, we are instead putting on the new. If we are repenting of selfishness, we are embracing Christlikeness. If our minds are being renewed as we commune with God, the negative side of this is that we confess and forsake what is unlike Christ, while the positive side is that we actively pursue pleasing Christ. In words, deeds, thoughts, actions, attitudes, ambitions, goals, desires, in all kinds of life contexts, we try to please God. As these actions and thoughts and words become more and more consistent, our characters are changing into the image of Christ. That's why this stage is called conformity. It is here that our characters are made more like Christ.

If you are seeking to live in God's presence, communing with Him, and living with the process of conviction, confession and cleansing, inevitably, you will be experiencing this stage more and more – being changed into the image of Christ. This change is nothing short of a metamorphosis. That's the word which Paul uses in Romans 12:2 when he says that we are to be transformed by the renewing of our minds. In 2 Corinthians 3:18, he again speaks of this metamorphosis, when he writes,

But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord

Like we have been saying, this process of knowing God by living in His presence is a life of faith. Just as each of the stages – communion, conviction, confession, cleansing, were done or received by faith, so this stage is also done in faith. Conformity to Christ is essentially obeying God's Word by faith.

But what does it all amount to? Are Christians aiming at trying to master hundreds upon hundreds of very different commands, with no relation to one another? Fortunately not because when we look into the Bible, we find that all these commands, all this putting off and putting on aims at one thing. Or to put it another way, the essence of the commands and therefore the essence of holiness or Christlikeness can be summed up in one word.

1 Timothy 1:5 ⁵ *Now the purpose of the commandment is love from a pure heart, from a good conscience, and from sincere faith,*

Notice the purpose of the commandment, of all commandments ultimately, is love.

2 Peter 1:5-7 *But also for this very reason, giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue, to virtue knowledge, ⁶ to knowledge self-control, to self-control perseverance, to perseverance godliness, ⁷ to godliness brotherly kindness, and to brotherly kindness love.*

What comes at the pinnacle of all the other virtues?

1 Peter 4:8 ⁸ *And above all things have fervent love for one another, for "love will cover a multitude of sins.*

Colossians 3:14 ¹⁴ *But above all these things put on love, which is the bond of perfection. Above all things – love.*

1 Corinthians 13:13 ¹³ *And now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love.*

This is what the whole process of the Christian life aims at – love. Holiness and love are inseparable. Christlikeness and love are inseparable. The holier, more obedient, more sanctified you are, the more loving you will be. So how does this life of love appear in a growing Christian's life? Three areas of love summarise a life that is Christlike.

1) The Christlike person loves God ultimately.

You might remember we said that the point of becoming like Christ is that He is the only One who has ever loved God perfectly – which is the great priority of the Christian life. To become like Christ is to become a person who meets the priorities of the Christian life. The holier you become, the more you love God for who He is, and love Him ultimately. He is not a means to your own ends, nor is He just one instrument to achieve what you want. He increasingly becomes your ultimate dependence, ultimate devotion and ultimate delight. This is how Jesus loved the Father.

However, Jesus said that the second greatest commandment is to love your neighbour as yourself. How is it possible to love anyone or anything else if we are to love God ultimately? If God reserves for Himself ultimate love, how does a Christlike person love his neighbour?

2) A Christlike person loves his neighbour for God's sake.

Leviticus 19:18 'You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the children of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD.

Here you find the second greatest commandment in all Scripture, almost hidden amongst many, many other commandments. And so the first and most obvious thing we see is that loving others is a command from God. And what did Jesus say we are doing when we keep His commandments?

John 14:15 ¹⁵ *"If you love Me, keep My commandments.*

The outflow of love is obedience, so when we are told to love someone or something, and we do so in obedience to God, it is ultimately an act of love for God. I do not firstly love my neighbour because of my neighbour. I love my neighbour firstly because I love my God, and my God told me to love Him. My love for my neighbour is not based in my neighbour; it is based in the will of my God.

I do not love my neighbour the way I love God. I love God for Himself. I love my neighbour as a means of loving God. I love my neighbour not because my neighbour is my source of ultimate

dependence, ultimate devotion, ultimate delight, but because it pleases God that I do so. That doesn't mean I am not truly loving the person. I am. In fact, my love is purer, and probably stronger than ever before. It is simply that my love does not terminate on my neighbour.

Now that is an incredibly freeing thought. If I must find something in my neighbour to love before I can love him, I might never get there. But if I love him because I want to please my God, I am able to love the person, in spite of who he may be.

Let's consider something else about Leviticus 19:18:

You shall love your neighbour as yourself. This command is not exhorting us to love ourselves. It assumes that we love ourselves. Paul says in Ephesians 5, no man ever yet hated his own flesh. We are built with a kind of natural affection for our own wellbeing, health, comforts, and joy. This command says – see to your neighbour's well-being the way you do to your own. Regard your neighbour with the kind of love you give yourself. This means treating them as you would be treated. Almost every moral command (do not lie, do not sin with your mouth, do not commit sexual sins, do not steal, do not deceive, do not harm, do not kill, do not envy) comes back to this: would you want someone to treat you that way? How would you prefer that they treat you? If you think about it, you will be able to see why the commands are essentially commands to love. Sin very much loves oneself more than God or your neighbour.

This implies something; it implies he is as you are. For you to treat him as you treat yourself, it must mean you are of the same kind. You are made of the same stuff.

And what stuff is that exactly? If I must love my neighbour because he is as I am, what is he? He is made in the image of God. And this is why you love him: because He, like you, is made in God's image.

Genesis 9:6 "Whoever sheds man's blood, By man his blood shall be shed; For in the image of God He made man.

Do you notice the 'for' word. That means a reason is being given. When you murder someone, you are murdering someone made in God's image. It is precisely because of that act, of spiting the image of God that you are to forfeit your life. Likewise James says this in chapter 3:

James 3:8-9 But no man can tame the tongue. It is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison. ⁹ With it we bless our God and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the similitude of God.

In other words, what you do to people, and what you say to them or about them, you are in some ways doing or saying to the image of God. Human beings are made in God's image, whether they are believers or not. That image is marred, to be sure, but it is there nonetheless.

Put it positively. You can love people, not only because God tells you to and you want to please Him, but because in some dim way, all people reflect God.

There's a third way we can love our neighbour for God's sake.

Matthew 25:34-40 *Then the King will say to those on His right hand, , 'Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: ³⁵ 'for I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in; ³⁶ 'I was naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me.' ³⁷ "Then the righteous will answer Him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see You hungry and feed You, or thirsty and give You drink? ³⁸ 'When did we see You a stranger and take You in, or naked and clothe You? ³⁹ 'Or when did we see You*

sick, or in prison, and come to You?' ⁴⁰ "And the King will answer and say to them, 'Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me.'

Notice what is very clear here: acts of love and kindness done to Christ's brethren were considered to be acts of love and kindness to done to Him. Negatively, acts of neglect and indifference done to His people were done to Him. Or like He said to Saul on the road to Damascus, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?"

We love others, because God loves them. What you do to them is, in a real sense, done to God.

1 John 4:20-21 ²⁰ *If someone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen? ²¹ And this commandment we have from Him: that he who loves God must love his brother also.*

Who is my neighbour? A man once asked Jesus this, and the reply he got was the parable of the Good Samaritan. This teaches that your neighbour is the person furthest from you and everyone in between. That means your neighbour is your enemy. Your neighbour is your opposite. Your neighbour is your fellow-citizen, and the stranger on the bus. Your neighbour is your friend, your family member and your brother or sister in Christ.

Certainly, there are different degrees, and even kinds of love that we show to these different kinds of neighbours. But the point is, a Christlike person loves God ultimately, and loves his neighbour for God's sake. He loves his neighbour because God has commanded it, because his neighbour reflects God, and because his neighbour is loved by God.

There is a third way that this life of love is manifested.

3) A Christlike person seeks to love what God loves and hate what He hates.

Loving God supremely means I love whom and what I love because He loves it. This goes beyond people and extends to values and ideas and truth. It goes beyond people to nature and to the gifts of God. It goes beyond God's creation of humans to all of God's creation.

James 1:17 ¹⁷ *Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow of turning.*

In all of life we are to love things and ideas and values because God loves them. God loves righteousness. God love justice. God loves truth. God loves mercy. God loves beauty. God loves order. God loves cheerful giving. God loves meekness. Do you know it is always sinful to hate what God loves? You are to love what God loves.

If He doesn't love it, then I don't love it. In fact, I hate it. The flip side of the coin is that to love what God loves is to hate what God hates.

Psalm 97:10 *You who love the LORD, hate evil! He preserves the souls of His saints; He delivers them out of the hand of the wicked.*

Hate is the natural and opposite side of loving something. If you love dogs, you will hate cruelty to dogs. If you love peace and quiet, you will hate loud parties next door that go on for hours. If you love babies you will hate abortion. If you love your child, you will hate the cancer that shows up in the blood test. What we love determines what we hate. Jesus loved the worship of His Father. Therefore He hated people using the Temple to make money and exploit the worshippers of His Father.

Jesus loved the truth of the Word. Therefore He hated the additions and perversions that the Pharisees had made of it.

If God loves righteousness, then what does He hate? Sin, a person who loves God is growing in their hatred for what God hates. God hates idolatry. God hates pride. God hates murder. God hates malice and bitterness. God hates fornication. God hates adultery. God hates perversions. God hates the profaning and blasphemy of His name. God hates the desecration of His worship, and His day. God hates the abuse of His Word by false teachers. God hates the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes and pride of life – that is God hates this world system. God hates unbelief. God hates lying. God hates covetousness. God hates envy. God hates drunkenness. God hates sorcery. God hates contentions. God hates slander and people that sow discord. God hates the perversion of justice, bribery and corruption. God hates gossip and evil speech. God hates theft. God hates a false balance.

Do you know it is always sinful to love what God hates?

This is holiness – a life of loving God ultimately, loving your neighbour for God's sake, and loving all things that God loves in the ways and degrees that God loves them. The person who loves God supremely, and man secondly, and creation properly is a holy man. He has fulfilled the Law. He has become Christlike.

What happens when you love the gifts of God for themselves? They have become idols to you. What happens when your absolute trust or devotion or delight is in those gifts? They have become gods. But let those gifts send you up to God in delight, in dependence, in devotion, and they become means of loving Him.

1 Timothy 4:4 For every creature of God is good, and nothing is to be refused if it is received with thanksgiving;

Of course, on this side of heaven, it will be a process, not an event. The way this happens is when we are cooperating with the Holy Spirit's work of conviction, confessing, being cleansed, and yielding to His power to enable our obedience. As our obedience becomes more consistent, it cements into a pattern. When it does this, our characters are being transformed. What really counts is when this obedience, this kind of love for God, neighbour and all creation happens under pressure. This is the grace of endurance. When we are able to love under pressure, we are truly like Christ, and knowing Him like never before. Observe how Christ could love under pressure – Luke 23:34. This is possibly the reason the Lord allows persecution in our lives – it is the ultimate test of holiness – to love our enemies, which is loving under pressure (I Pet 2:19-23).

Now observe how this fifth stage of the cycle completes it and continues it. If you have been in communion with God, it leads to conviction, which leads to confession, which leads to cleansing, which leads to conformity. So here, at stage 5, you have been made more like Christ, even if it be by ever so little, you are incrementally more like Him, more like the one who loved God ultimately, loved his neighbour for God's sake, and creation as God loves it.

What will that do for your communion? Well, the one who is holy enjoys deeper intimacy with God.

Hebrews 12:14 ¹⁴ *Pursue peace with all people, and holiness, without which no one will see the Lord:*

Matthew 5:8 ⁸ *Blessed are the pure in heart, For they shall see God.*

In the same vein, the one living in love is in step with God and will enjoy His presence even more.

1 John 4:12 No one has seen God at any time. If we love one another, God abides in us, and His love has been perfected in us.

In Paul's prayer of Ephesians, we read this:

Ephesians 3:17-19 *that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, being rooted and grounded in love, ¹⁸ may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the width and length and depth and height -- ¹⁹ to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge; that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.*

The one who is rooted and grounded in love, is in the place to better comprehend the four-dimensional love of Christ. We are holier and more loving, and therefore more able to enjoy communion.

*As Jesus put it: **John 15:9-10** ⁹ "As the Father loved Me, I also have loved you; abide in My love. ¹⁰ "If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love, just as I have kept My Father's commandments and abide in His love.*

Why is there deeper intimacy? Because you are reflecting the beauty of Christ better and better. Though God loves you infinitely in Christ, as you practically become more like Him, His pleasure in you is manifested in a deeper way. You sense the pleasure of full assurance of His love, as sin is increasingly forsaken and His ways increasingly embraced.

Put simply, the more you love like He does, the closer your communion will be. You will resemble Him more, and you will see Him more, leading to a new and deeper cycle of communion, conviction, confession, cleansing, and conformity.

Another way of seeing this cycle is to call it the Spirit-filled life. The Holy Spirit is the one active in mediating communion, causing conviction, enabling confession, applying and enabling cleansing, and encouraging and enabling conformity to Christ. On His part, He provides all the grace. On our part, we must walk by faith. In fact, we must fight for faith, since it is always under attack from the Evil One. Faith is what sanctifying grace works through, so the life lived in God's presence is always the life of faith, enabled by grace.

This completes our discussion of the life of faith – the life lived in God's presence. But we've assumed a lot. We've assumed that we have the right to live in God's presence. And biblically, we cannot just assume that. What we must do is retrace our steps to understand what makes it possible for this process to take place at all, or to continue in spite of our sin. What gives us the right to live in God's presence and come to know Him? What is this whole thing of grace in which we stand? This is what we begin considering next week, as we study the third part of our series: the Position of the Christian life.