

## Stages of Transformation 2 Corinthians 3:18

Last week we began a new series and the goal is to unfold a vision that the elders believe God has given for our church. The process started about 2½ years ago with reading the book Real-Life Discipleship by Jim Putman which helped us to see some well-known biblical principles about the purpose and mission of the church in a new way. We started to ask ourselves: “What would it look like if we applied these principles at East Lincoln?” and we began to see a framework for a unifying goal and process for pursuing that goal take shape.

Last week we asked ourselves: What should our goal be? With all our different strengths, gifts and passions we can end up having different goals in mind and then we struggle with indirection or even division as a church family. But is there a common goal that can unite us all together, even with all our differences? We looked at several passages that make it clear that there is. Ephesians 4:13 says that goal is that we would all attain to “*the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.*” In other words that we would all work together with our different strengths, gifts, and passions to pursue the goal of becoming more like Christ in every way. As a church, we’ve been called to glorify God by making disciples and the way that we do that and the goal that we have in mind is building up people who are following Christ and becoming like him in every way: in our thoughts, character, behavior, and mission.

So that’s our goal. That’s how we make disciples and accomplish our mission. The wording may not be perfect, but I want us to become very familiar with that goal – what we are pursuing individually and corporately as a whole church family is “following Christ and becoming like him in every way: our thoughts, character, behavior, and mission.”

The big question for today is: How do we do that? Or, what does that look like? You can have a room full of college freshman who share the goal of becoming doctors, but if you don’t have a clear plan or process in place, I doubt that anyone is going to make it, and if they do, who knows what kind of doctors they’ll be... Thankfully there is a clear process for aspiring doctors to go through with many different steps and stages along the way. The shared process is just as important

as the shared goal and that's what we're going to talk about today when it comes to pursuing our unifying goal in the Christian life.

One of the verses we looked at last week was 2 Corinthians 3:18 which says, "*And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.*" That verse says that our goal is: "being transformed into the image of the Lord," but it also includes another important phrase that tells us how that happens: "*from one degree of glory to another.*" That's the process and this morning I want to focus on understanding the meaning of that phrase. More than anything, I think when the elders started understanding these things and how they apply to a Christian's life and to the church as a whole, the lights started turning on and we began to see a new and much more effective way of pursuing our goal as a church.

We're going to have some fun here this morning with trying to grasp the significance of this phrase...

Bekah, Charlotte, Kara, Caitlin

We have several ladies who are pregnant right now and I've asked four of them to come forward. I want to have a few words with their children... Now keep in mind, I'm not talking to these moms; I'm talking to their children inside them... I have some concerns and you may have noticed too... "So listen, I wanted to talk with you about some things that have been bugging me. You guys really haven't been pulling your weight. You make your mom do everything. I mean I can see what you've got going on here – you've got built in transportation, so you don't even have to lift a foot. You've got a fancy meals-on-wheels food program in which you don't even lift a finger. You sit there in the warmth of your mom's body, not making any kind of effort to get up and get dressed. I mean, you sit around naked all day for goodness' sake. You don't even breathe for yourselves! I don't even want to know what you're doing about your bathroom and bathing needs. You sit around all day doing absolutely nothing other than the occasional kick or punch in your mom's stomach to get her attention. I mean, come on! Your mom's doing everything. I expect this all to change immediately..." All right, thank you! I'll let these moms go back to their seats.

Miles, David, Ida, Bridget

Next, I have some other volunteers, this time we can actually see them. I've asked some of the babies in our church to come forward with one of their parents. I just want to do a little interview with these so we can get to know them better. "So, let's begin by introducing who you are... Go ahead and tell everyone your name... Wow, rebellious aren't we? Well, how about this, at least tell me how old you are... Really? We're not going to there either? Ok, maybe you're just not in a talkative mood... let's try this... (hand them a pen and paper) Why don't you go ahead and write down your name and age on this piece of paper... go ahead... Wow. You guys are really stubborn. Maybe I need to talk to some parents around here about raising your kids... Well, I guess if you're not going to cooperate you may as well go back to your seats."

Ayla, Oliver, Ona

Let's give them a hand! Now I have some older kids I've asked to come up here. Let's see if they're going to be more cooperative...

- Could you please tell me your name?... Good! This is going better...
- How old are you?... Fantastic, these kids are much more behaved...
- Where are you working right now?
- Did you make enough money to pay the bills this month?
- What kind of car do you drive?
- Where are you living right now? (With your parents?!!!)
- How much have you saved up for retirement?

Well, I'm really concerned about you guys. I just don't see how you're going to make it in the world. You can go ahead and go back to your parents.

A big hand for everyone involved!...

I thought that would be a fun way to point out something we all know when it comes to natural human growth and development, but something we often forget about when it comes to a person's spiritual growth and development. We all know humans go through several different stages of development. They go from being unborn, to infants, to children, to teens or young adults, and then to mature adults or parents. With each of these stages we've learned to have fitting expectations for where a person is at. Before a person is born, we really can't expect them to do anything. They can't walk, or eat, or get dressed; they can't even breathe on their own.

Even when a baby is born, we can't expect them to do much. They can breathe and make noise, but they can't talk or understand language. They can't answer questions. They can't write things down on a piece of paper. They're just an infant and are learning and experiencing a whole new way of life outside their mother's womb. Eventually they become a child and are able to walk and talk and eat and play, but they still aren't ready to go to work and pay the bills. They can't drive or get their own apartments or save up for retirement. They're just a child learning all kinds of things about the life they're in. Even teenagers and young adults haven't reached full maturity yet. They can do all kinds of things, but they haven't learned the things that can only come from experience and age and sometimes the school of hard knocks. A human being isn't fully mature until they reach full adulthood and have grown up in every way – physically, mentally, emotionally, socially, and so on...

So we see these different stages that are a normal part of human growth and development. People start out as babies. And they have to grow up through stages. And we expect them to grow. As much as we don't expect a child to act like an adult, we also don't expect an adult to act like a child. We have appropriate expectations based on the stage they're at.

This concept of growing through stages is the same idea Paul conveys in 2 Cor. 3:18 when it comes to our spiritual lives. We know what the goal is – we are being “transformed into the image of Christ.” That's what full maturity is in the Christian life. But the way this happens is “from one degree of glory to another.” So in the same way a human being goes through several different stages of growth and development, a disciple of Christ does as well. We are not transformed into the image of Christ overnight. It takes a long time – a lifelong process of growth through several different stages – from one degree of glory to another.

When I was a junior in high school, I took an advanced art class and the big project for the year was doing a clay sculpture of my own head. I had to look in the mirror and sculpt my own head out of a lump of clay. It was a project that took much more than just a day. In fact, it took almost a whole year. It started with a big lump of clay. I molded that lump into roughly the shape of a head, neck, and shoulders. I then formed the prominent features which included ears, nose, and chin. And then began the tedious process of carving the individual parts with as much detail and precision as I could. Week after week went by and I made

progress through the stages of the project. It started to look more and more like me, until in the end I had a clay sculpture of my head. (picture)

I transformed the clay into my image from one degree of glory to another. What started out as raw clay was eventually formed to look like my head. But it took a long time and progressed through many stages. That's the idea that Paul conveys in 2 Cor. 3:18, only the image we are being formed into is the image of Jesus Christ. That transformation takes a long time and involves several different stages of growth. At the beginning, we don't resemble Jesus at all. We don't think like him, we don't have the same desires, we don't act like him; and we don't have the same mission in life as him. We have to be transformed from one degree of his glory to another in a lifelong process that God brings about by the Holy Spirit in our lives and that we actively cooperate with.

The Bible refers to these stages of growth in many different places and they correspond with the stages of natural human growth and development. There's a passage in 1 John where John writes about three of these stages. He's writing to a whole church family, but he refers to different groups within that family.

Read 1 John 2:12-14

*<sup>12</sup> I am writing to you, little children, because your sins are forgiven for his name's sake. <sup>13</sup> I am writing to you, fathers, because you know him who is from the beginning. I am writing to you, young men, because you have overcome the evil one. I write to you, children, because you know the Father. <sup>14</sup> I write to you, fathers, because you know him who is from the beginning. I write to you, young men, because you are strong, and the word of God abides in you, and you have overcome the evil one.*

Here you have little children, young men/adults, and fathers/parents. This has nothing to do with their age or stage of life, it has to do with where they're at in their spiritual maturity. Some of them, though they may be fully grown, are spiritual children in the Lord. Others are spiritual young adults, and others are spiritual parents. And the way he describes them at each stage indicates that John had a different understanding of where they were at spiritually and different expectations for them depending on where they're at. He expected little children to act like children, young adults to act like young adults, and parents to act like parents.

You see the same idea and expectations among other writers in the New Testament. There are several passages where the author is frustrated with his readers because they are not at all where they should be in their spiritual growth and development. In writing to the Christians in Corinth, Paul tells them this in 1 Corinthians 3:1-2: *“But I, brothers, could not address you as spiritual people, but as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. <sup>2</sup> I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for it. And even now you are not yet ready.”* Later on, toward the end of the letter in 1 Corinthians 14:20, he says this: *“Brothers, do not be children in your thinking. Be infants in evil, but in your thinking be mature.”* He’s expecting them to grow in spiritual maturity. It’s ok to be like infants in the faith when you’re a brand-new Christian, but not after you’ve been a Christian for a number of years. We get frustrated when adults act like children in our society and it’s just as frustrating when long-time Christians act like spiritual infants or children in the church.

The author of Hebrews vents this frustration to the people he was writing to in Hebrews 5:12-14: *“For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic principles of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food, <sup>13</sup> for everyone who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, since he is a child. <sup>14</sup> But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil.”*

God is at work in your life, transforming you into the image of his Son, and the way he does that is from one degree of glory to another. If God’s Spirit is in you, the expectation for every Christian is that you will grow through different stages of spiritual maturity so that you become more and more like Christ in your thoughts, character, behavior, and mission. So before someone becomes a Christian, they are spiritually unborn. They aren’t anything like Christ and we shouldn’t expect them to be. But when they are born again by the Spirit of God, a new life begins. They start out as a spiritual infant – a brand new believer who’s learning and experiencing a whole new way of life. With care and nurture they grow to be a spiritual child who begins to practice the basics of the Christian life. They learn and grow in many different areas until they become a spiritual young adult who is committed and wants to be used by God. Eventually they progress to

the point where they are actively investing in the lives of newer believers – a spiritual parent who is involved in reproducing disciples of Christ.

Unborn, infant, child, young adult, and parent. Those are the stages and that's the process. And through this process, a Christian is growing and moving forward, following Christ and becoming like him in every way – in their thoughts, character, behavior, and mission. One step at a time through one stage at a time as God is transforming them into the image of Christ from one degree of glory to another.

Every stage is important, and every stage is necessary. No one can skip these stages or get stuck in them if they are going to become spiritually mature. And it's vitally important that we understand this, so that we have right expectations for ourselves and other people when it comes to our spiritual maturity and appropriate steps for moving forward. We don't treat babies like adults or adults like babies and we need to apply that same principle to our spiritual maturity as well.

The question is: what stage are you at? You have to know where you're at if you're going to know how you can move forward. So next week, what we're going to do is begin to look at each of these stages in greater detail to help you determine where you're at and where you need to grow. We'll take the next two sermons to do that, and again, like I said last week, it's our desire as elders that everyone in the church be able to grasp these concepts and see the vision as it unfolds from week to week. So if you miss a Sunday we want you to go back and listen to that sermon. If you were gone last week, go back and listen to that sermon online or get a CD from the sound booth. And if you're going to be gone next weekend, do the same thing the following week. We're excited to see this vision together and there is much to come in the weeks ahead.