

Bible Studies for Life for November 9: Not conformed but transformed

October 27, 2008

Remember the old westerns? The good guy always wore white, and you knew the bad guy by his black hat. There wasn't any in-between. Just good and evil.

It would be great if salvation put the bad guy behind bars and we could ride off into the sunset. But in real life, salvation is the beginning of the story, not the end. It's the start of a battle between good and evil, the Spirit of God against the old sin nature. Once we accept salvation, we become Jesus' deputies, empowered to fight this battle just as he did.

Remember, when we are saved, we don't lose our sin nature. We do, however, gain power through the Holy Spirit to overcome sin. And we are expected to exercise that power to "work out" our salvation with "fear and trembling." We are called to overcome evil with good.

Why does this battle continue to wage? Because God wants as many people as possible to enter relationship with him. That's why we must fight the battle against sin. Yes, we will fail occasionally, but we also will overcome. Little by little, we will become more like Jesus, and that is the testimony that will draw people to God. It also allows the work of God to continue even though Jesus no longer walks among us. And it presents a strong testimony about the difference God can make in our lives.

But we can't continue living by all the old rules—the world's rules—and expect miracles to happen. We must be transformed. With Jesus as our role-model, we must adopt a new standard and a different mindset. We

must assume everything we used to do is suspect and come to God as little children, ready to learn how a child of God should act.

Become a living sacrifice

The first step to transformation is to become a “living sacrifice.” This is a difficult concept. But it’s easier to understand if we compare it to Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross, which, in contrast, could be called a “sacrifice to death.”

God designed salvation to be an exchange, or swap, with Jesus. Because “the wages of sin is death (Romans 6:23), someone had to die for our sins. Jesus, who had no sin, became sin for us, “so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Corinthians 5:21). For this exchange to work, Jesus had to sacrifice his life. Through his death, the sin-payment was made, and we could take up Jesus’ purity, which allows us access to God’s presence. In this exchange, we are given all the privileges of the Son of God. Not only may we stand before God, but when we do, he sees Jesus’ purity instead of our sin. We are truly children of God.

We like to think of this as a free gift. And it is, if you consider we don’t have to do anything to get it. Jesus wanted to make the sacrifice and offered it before we thought to ask for it. But having accepted the swap, we have an obligation to God—an expression of thanks for the unbelievable generosity of his gift.

We have been made as pure as Jesus. We must try to maintain that purity. We now hold the Spirit of God in our hearts. We must try not to drag God’s Spirit through the filth of sin. Rather than giving in to our sin nature as we did before we were saved, through the power of the Holy Spirit we must resist and overcome sin. Essentially, we must become living sacrifices. God doesn’t ask us to die on a cross, but he does ask us to crucify our sin nature. Jesus, when he died on the cross, fought a spiritual battle against

death. We must now fight a spiritual battle against sin.

Sacrifice starts in the mind

Paul calls it a living sacrifice because it isn't easy. Just as Jesus suffered on the cross, we must sacrifice our selfish desires and attitudes. As anyone who has tried to resist selfishness will realize, this is a difficult battle. What we need to remember is that the battle already is won through Jesus. If we put on our armor and stand firm, we can and will win.

First, we must realize our old patterns of thinking and behaving probably are wrong. We must be willing to start over, examining every motive and every impulse, measuring them against God's word. We must spend time with God in prayer and reading the Bible so we can soak up his presence and learn his ways. This will begin the process of transformation.

Next, we must commit to total honesty with ourselves and God. We must have the courage to examine ourselves. If we find a behavior or attitude that is sinful, we must confess it and ask for God's power to overcome.

Sacrifice changes our spirit

In the old westerns, it wasn't only the color of their hat that gave away the good guys and the bad guys. Their attitudes, manner of speaking and even their posture would reveal the truth about what kind of person they were. Like it or not, we also can reveal what's in our hearts by our attitudes and mannerisms.

The fruit of the sin nature are selfishness, anger, bitterness, pride, jealousy and the like. When we obey the sin nature rather than the Holy Spirit, these attitudes guide everything we say and do. On the other hand, when we become living sacrifices, we nail all these attitudes to the cross.

What makes this process so challenging is that we must turn our backs on

those attitudes and walk away, letting them die a gruesome death. Our tendency is to run back and rescue them because we really don't know how to handle life's challenges without sinful attitudes.

Paul says in Galatians 6:15, "what counts is a new creation." We must become a new creation, learning to fight life's battles with love, mercy and humility rather than the world's weapons of pride, anger and selfishness. It requires a change of heart that only can be made by God.

Remember, this is a battle we all must fight. The sin nature owned our hearts until the day of salvation, and it doesn't give up territory without a battle. Fight well and fight consistently. Put on your armor and take your stand. Pray for wisdom and strength, and you will surely "overcome evil with good" (v. 21).

Discussion questions

- *Do you believe you are able to overcome evil with good?*
- *Why is it difficult to overcome evil with good?*
- *How can prayer and Bible study help?*