Growing Up: Images of Christ

Colossians 1:15-28

Grace Hills Baptist Church

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 Have you ever been the image of somebody or something? I’m sure we’ve all seen pictures or known people who looked extremely similar to their parents. Tom Hanks and his son, Colin, are amazingly similar in appearance. So, too, does actress Demi Moore and her daughter Rumer. And then there is John Travolta – oh, never mind. When this happens – and it happens to most of us, because we tend to bear some resemblance to our parents or children – we might say that the child is the spitting image of their parent. But we can be more than just the physical image of another person. We can be the image of a trait, or a value, or a characteristic – like when we say that Joe Montana is the image of what a quarterback should be, or that Audrey Hepburn was the portrait of class. You can be the image of honesty, of greed, of compassion, or of anger.

 What do we mean when we say all of this? Saying a person is the image of something or someone is our shorthand way of saying that this person embodies this trait, or calls to mind this other person. It is a way of saying that, if we want an idea what this trait or that person is like, look here. This person is the image of so-and-so, or such-and-such. It helps us wrap our minds around an abstract concept, or gives us a touchstone to understand someone we may have never met. Images are important to us, because they help us understand the world and how we as people live in the world.

 It’s vitally important, then, for us to pay attention to the first words in our passage of Scripture this morning. Paul begins this passage by saying, “He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation.” The “he” Paul is referring to is Jesus Christ, and Paul seems to be quoting an ancient hymn. Like images, music helps us wrap our minds around ideas and understand the world. We attach meaning to familiar lyrics and associate certain tunes with particular habits or actions. Even my 16-month-old son does this; when I start singing “Row, Row, Row Your Boat,” he knows it is time to calm down and go to sleep. It doesn’t always work, but he knows that is what it means! Paul knows the power of music, and so he chooses this early Christian hymn to make his point.

 What is his point? Jesus Christ is our image, our icon of God. When we wonder what God looks like, we look to Jesus. When we wonder what God would do, we look to Jesus. When we wonder how God would live, we look to Jesus. Jesus is the reflection of God himself, the true image of the invisible God. And, as we like the Colossians try to become more mature Christians, growing up in faith, it is important to have a true image in front of us – because there are any number of false images that can keep us from growing into mature followers of Jesus.

 Paul lays out, quickly, a handful of the false images that compete for our attention and our loyalty: thrones, dominions, rulers, powers. Each of these false images of God can accomplish great good, but each can also enslave us or lead us astray. Thrones and rulers, or governments, can serve the good of the people who are subject to them, providing for social welfare and protecting the innocent. However, they can also overreach, become corrupt, and even cause tremendous harm. The temptation for Christians is to look to political power or national leaders as more than what they are, to cozy up to them for prestige, security, or power of our own. We can be tempted to view them as saviors, as perfectly aligned with God – but they aren’t. They are imperfect images of the invisible God.

 So, too, are other dominions and powers that can enslave us. Addictions, temptations, desires to become more than what God intended – all of these powers can bore down into our souls and mar the person God wants us to grow up to be. We become consumed with greed, and we find ourselves working longer and longer hours while neglecting our families and finding ourselves becoming less and less generous, less and less compassionate, less and less joyful. We become obsessed over comfort and security, and never allow ourselves to feel the thrill of faithful reliance on God, the hopeful uncertainty of taking a risk for the kingdom, the steady assurance of God’s Spirit upholding us in every trial or circumstance. We allow worry, fear, and satisfaction to lead us away from the path Christ walked and invites us to walk. We are tempted to follow imperfect images of the invisible God.

 Our true image of God, Paul says, is Jesus Christ. He alone is the one who gives us the best picture of God, he alone reconciles us to God, and he alone is the one who has lordship over us as God’s people. Therefore, as God’s people following the true image-bearer of God, Jesus, we have a job, a task, a purpose – one Paul spells out in the remainder of our passage today. Because of Christ’s reconciling work on our behalf, because we have heard the Gospel proclamation, and because the mysteries of God have been made known to us, our task is crystal clear: to proclaim Jesus Christ, the image of God. Paul puts it this way: “It is he whom we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone in all wisdom, so that we may present everyone mature in Christ.”[[1]](#footnote-1) Our task as those who are growing up in Christ is to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus so that others can also grow up in Christ.

 Now, we can know that – but a true sign of maturity in Christ is to actually live it out, and that’s harder than we realize. Why? Because we can be too easily distracted in the church. Professor David Ng (eeng) spoke of this in his book, *Youth in the Community of Disciples*. There, he identified four distractions or temptations for the church that keeps us from our central task of proclaiming Christ. None of them are bad things – but they keep us from our primary thing, the true mark of growing up as Christians.

First, Professor Ng says, we are tempted to be a place of entertainment. We know, deep down, what he’s talking about: we fall prey to the temptation ourselves that church needs to grab our attention, stimulate our minds, wow us with technique and meet our personal expectations of music style and the like. We also fall prey to that temptation as a congregation: we put pressure on ourselves to be better and better, ensuring that the people who come to our church leave satisfied. The people in the pew become “spectators while worship leaders and Bible teachers ‘put on a show,’ using whatever gimmicks and novelties they can pull out of their bag of tricks so that everyone has fun.”[[2]](#footnote-2) There’s nothing wrong with enjoying the music or hearing a stimulating message in a fresh, engaging way, and there certainly isn’t anything wrong with having fun – but that’s not the primary purpose of the church. Our purpose is to proclaim Christ.

A second temptation the church faces is the belief that the church is here for maintenance. It can be easy to fall into the trap of thinking that the church is where we bide our time between our baptism and Christ’s return. We come to faith, declaring Jesus as Lord, at the age of 8 or 18 or 80, and then we try to get through life with as little fuss and effort as possible and still be seen as a good Christian person waiting for heaven. The key for the church that pursues maintenance is to keep the members comfortable without challenges – a holding pattern, if you will. But if there’s one thing Jesus never did, it was sit in a holding pattern, at least not for more than a day or two – and even then, as when he waited before going to see Lazarus, he did it for a purpose: to proclaim the power of God. Maintaining the status quo isn’t a bad thing – but it isn’t our purpose as followers of Jesus. Our purpose is to proclaim Christ.

A third temptation is to be a place that focuses on fellowship. Oh, how great a temptation this is, especially for Grace Hills! We love one another dearly here. We enjoy our time together. We loathe anything that threatens the unity of our fellowship, and we pride ourselves on being a place where everyone belongs, or at least trying to be a place where everyone belongs. Professor Ng points out that fellowship isn’t a bad thing – but it’s not our central purpose. “Fellowship-focused churches,” he says, “act as little more than social organizations that exist for their own members, rather than for the worship of God as the body of Christ.”[[3]](#footnote-3) A church whose primary focus is fellowship isn’t a church; it’s a country club. Jesus didn’t come to start a country club, and our main purpose isn’t to be fellowship. Our purpose is to proclaim Christ.

One final temptation we face when we think about our purpose as Christians is that the church is a place primarily of protection. We live in a world where it can feel like danger is everywhere. We have seen most graphically in the past few weeks that our physical safety can be endangered just by being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Furthermore, the safe, secure world we thought we lived in – where life made sense and our values were upheld by the vast majority of people – can seem to be shifting for us. Things we thought were true in society have changed – not always for the worst, but change nonetheless – and we can grow fearful. And our reaction to all of this can be to build our walls higher, huddle together a little more closely, and man the ramparts against the besieging forces of secularism, violence, and a changing world. We can start keeping our children exclusively within a Christian bubble – enrolling them in Christian schools and listening to Christian music and going to Christian movies and interacting only with other Christians – and we can start living in that Christian bubble ourselves. We can see our purpose as a church as providing protection to all who gather together as members and participants in the congregation. But that’s not our purpose, at least not our main purpose. Our purpose is to go out and share the Gospel, engage the world around us with a different message. Our purpose is to proclaim Christ.

When we live out our purpose – our true purpose, our main purpose – of engaging the world and proclaiming Christ, we are doing what Paul wrote about in his letter to the Colossians: we are growing up in Christ. Becoming an adult in America means becoming a responsible, contributing member of society. We *do* certain things, or at least *should* do certain things. We pay our taxes. We register for the draft. We contribute to society by getting a job and participating in the civic life of our community. We, in short, act like grown-ups – and that means doing the things grown-ups do. The most important thing grown-up Christians do, the most important purpose we have as followers of Christ, is to act like Jesus, our model, the image we have of God – and proclaim Christ to all who will hear. Are we proclaiming Jesus Christ to a listening world? Are we pointing to the perfect image of the invisible God? Are we growing up in Christ? Let us pray.

1. Colossians 1:28 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. FotW 258, 260 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. FotW 260 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)