

CHAPTER FIVE

SOME THINGS TO KNOW ABOUT YOURSELF

What does it mean to become a Christian? What *really* happened the day you submitted your life to God? Most likely it went something like this:

You heard about Jesus from a friend or family member, or perhaps at a church service. As God's Word did its work, you sensed the convicting activity of the Holy Spirit in your heart (though you didn't know to call it that). You probably became very aware of your own sins. Then, while the sting of conviction was still fresh, someone explained that Jesus died on the Cross for you—an act of infinite love that made it possible for you to be reconciled to God. Drawn by God's merciful initiative, you responded to the gospel by confessing your sinfulness and accepting Christ by faith as your Lord and Savior. Maybe you were given a Bible to commemorate the event, and you went home bursting with new excitement about life...and a thousand unanswered questions.

“ A Christian is not simply a person who gets forgiveness, who gets to go to heaven, who gets the Holy Spirit, who gets a new nature. Mark this—a *Christian is a person who has become someone he was not before*. A Christian, in terms of his deepest identity, is a SAINT, a born child of God, a divine masterpiece, a child of light, a citizen of heaven...Becoming a Christian is not just getting something, no matter how wonderful that something may be. *It is becoming someone.*¹ ”

— David C. Needham

But is this all that happened?

Out with the Old, In with the New

Having your sin forgiven is just one of the blessings you received when God saved you. Don't misunderstand—I would never want to minimize the significance of this act. Every Christian should be overwhelmed to realize that the condemning sin which once hung over us

For Further Study:

Just how bad was the “old creation” that has been replaced? Romans 3:9-18 spells it out in frightening detail.

now hangs nailed permanently to the Cross (Colossians 2:13-15). But as amazing as forgiveness is, it is only the beginning of your inheritance in Christ. Something absolutely fantastic has occurred! The Bible describes it this way:

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a *new creation*; the old has gone, the new has come!
(2 Corinthians 5:17)

The day you became a Christian, you became a completely different person. “A Christian is a radically changed person the moment he or she trusts Christ,” writes Jerry Bridges. “This doesn’t mean we become ‘saints’ in practice overnight. It does mean a new creation—a new principle of life—has been planted within us by the Holy Spirit, and we can never be the same again.”²

Your change from an “old creation” to a “new creation” was dramatic and irreversible. You aren’t simply a spruced-up version of what you were before. Unlike the cars that roll off the assembly lines in Detroit every year, you have more than a new paint job and aerodynamic design to dis-

tinguish you from last year’s model. There’s a totally new engine under the hood! And even that illustration falls pitifully short of describing what has taken place. You have been transformed from one being to another.

I doubt you saw all these changes when you looked at yourself in the bathroom mirror this morning. But God’s Word is true. In the following sections we will explore three things that have changed about you now that you are a new creation in Christ.

1 Compare a monarch butterfly to the caterpillar it once was, and it’s easy to see something has changed. Can you detect any evidence showing how you as a “new creation” are different from who you were before? Jot down your thoughts.

Your Spiritual Condition Has Changed

Before you were born again, God saw you as dead, dark and doomed. You were *dead* in sin, unresponsive to spiritual things and incapable of any spiritual life apart from God’s help (Colossians 2:13; Ephesians 2:1). Your heart was *dark*, unable to understand God or obey his commands (Ephesians 4:17-19). As a result, you were *doomed* to bear the full guilt of your sins and pay the horrific but just penalty for them (Matthew 10:28; Romans 6:23).

Your spiritual condition changed the moment you were

born again. The spiritually alive (Holy Spirit) touched the spiritually dead (you) and brought you to life. God enlightened your dark heart so that you could see and pursue him. He changed it from a heart of stone into a heart of flesh (Ezekiel 36:26). Finally, God canceled your death sentence by nailing it to the Cross (Colossians 2:14). No longer are you sitting on Death Row, awaiting torment in hell. Instead, you have the incredible guarantee that you will be resurrected from the dead and spend eternity with God in heaven.

Your Standing Before God Has Changed

The Bible says you were once God's enemy. Did you know that? You weren't just apathetic or passive toward him. You weren't just a cynic or an agnostic. You were actively opposed to his rule and reign in your life (Romans 8:7). And he was opposed to you. But your standing before God changed completely the day you became a Christian.

**Meditate on
Colossians 1:21-23.**

Isn't it hard to believe God would treat his former enemies with such mercy?

■ Once you were God's enemy; now you're his friend.

■ Once you were at war with him (what a mismatch!)—now you have peace with God through your Lord Jesus Christ (Romans 5:1).

■ You were guilty of great sin; now you are justified by Christ and free from condemnation (Romans 8:1).

■ You used to be cut off from God and without hope in this world; now he will never leave you or forsake you (Hebrews 13:5).

■ Once you were far away from him, but now you "have been brought near through the blood of Christ" (Ephesians 2:13).

■ Once you faced the inescapable wrath of your heavenly Judge; today you know the love and provision of your heavenly Father. He even invites you to approach his throne boldly with your requests so that he can give grace and help in your time of need (Hebrews 4:16). Praise be to God for his wonderful work on our behalf!

Your Identity Has Changed

Prior to regeneration, you thought of yourself primarily in terms of your own traits and accomplishments. Maybe you took pride in your musical talent or athletic ability.

“ Because of Christ’s death in our place, God’s justice is now completely satisfied. God can now, without violating His justice or His moral law, forgive us freely, completely, and absolutely.³ ”

— Jerry Bridges

**Meditate on
Philippians 2:1.** Are you encouraged to know you are united with Christ?

2 Listed below are a few of the riches that make up our inheritance in Christ. Put a ✓ beside any for which you are especially thankful.

- | | |
|--|--|
| ☐ Forgiveness of sin | ☐ Eternal life |
| ☐ Adoption by God | ☐ Gifts of the Spirit |
| ☐ Fullness in Christ | ☐ Justification |
| ☐ The Holy Spirit | ☐ Power to change |
| ☐ Knowledge of truth | ☐ Faith |
| ☐ Peace with God | ☐ Healing |
| ☐ A purpose in life | ☐ Wisdom |
| ☐ Authority over demons | |
| ☐ _____ | |

Perhaps your life revolved around education, career advancement, or financial status. It could be that you were absorbed in your physical appearance or winsome personality. Whatever the case, one thing is clear: Your sense of well-being depended

on *you*. You were the center of your universe.

This explains why so many people today are plagued by neurosis. Once their money dries up or their hair falls out; when they gain a pound or when the fingers fumble over the keyboard; when their Harvard degree no longer impresses the company president, they encounter a major identity crisis. Why? Because they measure their worth on the basis of external or material criteria. And sooner or

later they are bound to come up short.

But now that you are a Christian, you have been united with Christ, and that changes the reference point of your identity. When the Spirit of Jesus entered your heart, you experienced a living merger with him. A metamorphosis has occurred! You have been joined with God himself.

Scripture uses two phrases interchangeably to describe this union. In some places it says we are “in Christ,” or “in him.” In others it says Christ is “in us.” There is at least one verse that combines both of these: “We know that we live *in him* and he *in us*, because he has given us of his Spirit” (1 John 4:13). Either way, the amazing fact is that you have been united with Christ.

Introducing the New You!

Rather than maintaining a self-image based solely on your abilities or accomplishments, it’s time to start seeing yourself as the person you now are in Christ.

A child of God. If this statement weren’t so clearly affirmed in the Bible, it would be very difficult to believe. What father would kill his own (and only) beloved son in order to adopt a pack of renegade orphans? The idea is

For Further Study:

According to Ephesians 1:5 (New International Version), what two things motivated God to adopt you?

preposterous. And yet this is exactly what God did in order to make you part of his family:

For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, “Abba, Father.” The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children. Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings that we may also share in his glory. (Romans 8:15-17)

You don’t deserve to be God’s slave, much less his son or daughter. Nobody does. Yet he adopted you as his own. And as if that weren’t enough, he made you a full heir to his infinite riches. “How great is the love the Father has lavished on us,” wrote the apostle John, “that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!” (1 John 3:1). Now he is your Father, you are his child, and you will relate to him this way for the rest of eternity.

A purchased possession. Some dear friends of mine have adopted children. It has cost them thousands of dollars, though their love for children made it seem like a small price. Your adoption into the family of God was costly, too. In order for you to be reconciled to your holy Father, someone had to pay for your sins.

That’s why Jesus died. It wasn’t for *his* sins that he hung on the Cross. Rather, he hung there despised by

“ Lord Jesus, you are my righteousness, I am your sin. You took on you what was mine; you set on me what was yours. You became what you were not that I might become what I was not.⁴

— Martin Luther

men and rejected by God because of *your* sins. He took your place. The sinless Lamb of God became sin for you in order that you might be spared God’s judgment. The innocent One received the full blow of God’s holy wrath on himself so you wouldn’t have to experience

it. That’s why the Bible says, “You are not your own; you were bought at a price” (1 Corinthians 6:19-20). By shedding his precious blood, Jesus did more than forgive your sins—he purchased you. He owns you. You are his.

A follower of Jesus Christ. “If anyone would come after me,” Jesus announced to the crowds, “he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me” (Luke 9:23). The requirements haven’t changed in the last two thousand years. Now that you are born again, you are to follow Jesus for the rest of your life.

**Meditate on
2 Corinthians 5:15.**
Since Christ died for
us, shouldn't we be
eager to live for him?

Those who expect to have their sins forgiven and then go on their merry, self-centered way have obviously never studied their Bibles. As 1 John 2:6 says, "Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did." That means whenever there is a conflict between your desires and God's desires, you follow his path. As you might guess, this won't be easy. You will have to deny yourself certain pleasures. You will have to crucify certain desires. You will have to replace old sinful habits with new habits that please God. And yet the joy of following your Lord will more than compensate for any apparent loss.

Ambassadors of Christ's kingdom. One of the most distinguished streets in Washington, D.C. is Massachusetts Avenue. It is lined with embassies representing countries from all over the world. The ambassadors who live here, though residents of the United States, are chiefly concerned for their own countries. They are not interested in our crime problems or educational system or economy, except to the degree these issues influence the nation they serve. They are living in one country but living *for* another.

So are you! When you became a Christian, your citizenship switched from earth to heaven (Philippians 3:20). "We are therefore Christ's ambassadors," says Paul, "as though God were making his appeal through us" (2 Corinthians 5:20). Your allegiance has changed. You aren't living for yourself or this world's values any more—you represent the Lord Jesus Christ and his kingdom. He calls you to be a faithful emissary of your new "country" and its values. As Christ's ambassador you are to live in a way which testifies that Jesus is Ruler and Savior of the world.

Pursuing His Purpose

As you now see, you aren't the same person you were before God saved you. Your condition has changed, your standing with God has changed, and your identity has changed. But there's something else dramatically different about you: your purpose in life has changed as well.

The Lord didn't cross your path momentarily and say, "Excuse me...I know you are living for yourself, but you have a bunch of sin that needs to be forgiven. If you will just say this little prayer, I'll forgive your sins, then you can be on your independent, selfish way." No—salvation isn't some clip-on accessory. When God claimed you for himself, he fundamentally changed your purpose for living. Here are his two broad-brush objectives for your life.

Conformity to Christ. Though echoed throughout the New Testament, God's goal of making you like his Son is expressed especially well in Romans 8:28-29:

And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.

Like any good father, God won't let you spend your entire life in spiritual diapers. Instead, he will orchestrate situations that stretch your character, that force you to grow. If anger or impatience has characterized your life,

“ Truly, at the day of judgment we shall not be examined [by] what we have read, but what we have done; not how well we have spoken, but how virtuously we have lived.⁵

”

— Thomas à Kempis

he will expose it and help you replace it with forbearance and self-control. He will shine his spotlight on your pride and self-centeredness, then lead to follow the humble example of his Son. Where your life has been bound up by greed and material accumulation, the

Lord will change the priorities of your heart so that you crave his kingdom and his righteousness.

Ephesians 5:1 exhorts us, “Be imitators of God....” The command implies a lot more than superficial or cosmetic imitation. You're not merely to mimic or act like God; you are to become like him.

You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to *put on the new self, created to be like God* in true righteousness and holiness. (Ephesians 4:22-24)

For Further Study: Are you intimidated by the thought of spending your entire life becoming more like Christ? Let Paul's words in Philippians 3:12-14 stir up your faith.

There's a name for this process of being conformed to the image of Christ. It's called *sanctification*, and it's guaranteed to keep you busy for the rest of your life. However, you will find several books recommended at the end of this chapter that can greatly accelerate the process.

Glorifying God. Before you were converted, you were the supreme object of your own affections and energies. You lived to fulfill your own agenda. But now all that has changed. As a Christian, your mission in life is to live for the glory of God. Everything you do should be evaluated

3 Briefly describe one area of your life (only one!) that still needs to be conformed to the image of Christ.

in the light of this priority. Your speech, morals, attitudes, finances, hobbies, relationships, TV viewing, work habits, tax returns, and every other area of life should be devoted to pleasing and honoring the God who redeemed you. As God's Spirit transforms you from within, you should find yourself in agreement with the psalmist who said, "Not to us, O Lord, not to us but to your name be the glory, because of your love and faithfulness" (Psalm 115:1).

"If I'm So New, What's This Old Stuff?"

You've probably figured this one out on your own by now, but let me mention it anyway: Even new creations in Christ are tempted to sin. In fact, your battle against sin has really just begun. "My life didn't become complicated until I became a Christian," says theologian R.C. Sproul.⁶ How many of us can identify with his words!

At the risk of being long-winded, let me share a story that confirms Dr. Sproul's remark.

The night I became a new creation, I had a sense of indescribable gratitude to the Lord. I also felt waves of appreciation for the man whose preaching had illumined the path of salvation for me. I viewed him as a spiritual father, a role model to follow in the things of God. He was someone I could emulate. To him I was probably a nameless speck among a sea of 2,000 other faces. But to me, C.J. Mahaney was a spiritual giant, the first Christian I had ever wanted to be like.

My sense of indebtedness to C.J. was genuine and deep. My own arrogance, as it turned out, was deeper still.

I made that unpleasant discovery a few weeks after my conversion, the day I joined a group of my new Christian friends to play basketball at a local gym. Basketball had been my life since junior high school, and I had been attending college on a basketball scholarship. But for the first time ever, I was playing ball as a Christian. And all around me were new friends who were equally in love with God and eager to serve him.

I wound up on the same team with a man named Gary, and it is here the plot begins to thicken. You see, Gary was a very nice person. Gary was a pastor. Gary cared about

Meditate on Jeremiah 17:9. When you think your motives are pure and your actions are godly, watch out.

**Meditate on
Philippians 2:3-4.** Is
this something you
would do naturally
apart from the Spirit's
help?

the feelings of others and wanted everyone to participate, whether they stunk or not. All that stuff was fine, mind you, but just not on my team. My objective was to win, and save the friendship bit for afterwards.

We would have won the first game easily had it not been for Gary. He kept passing the ball to others even though they had no clue what to do with it. Meanwhile, I was coming to a slow boil. I was trying to act like a Christian, but inside I felt ready to explode.

With the game hanging in the balance, Gary decided to give Ed (not his real name) a chance to score. Ed was the guy who had matching shorts, matching t-shirt, matching socks, and matching sneakers. But Ed wouldn't have known the difference between a basketball and a bowling ball. Within ten seconds, the other team had stripped the ball away from Ed and scored the winning lay-up.

Gary went over to console Ed. "Good try," he said. I sat down on the gym floor and leaned against the wall, steaming mad. During the break I made two resolutions. The first was to keep the ball from Gary so he couldn't pass it to Ed. The second was to win this game decisively. I wanted everyone in that gym to realize I had nothing to do with our first loss. And I intended to show the other team what "in your face" really meant. No prisoners. No mercy. Just simple domination. And more than likely, blood.

As I stood at the foul line ready to begin the next game, I got my first glimpse of the man who would be guarding me. It was C.J....the man who had shown me the way to salvation. The man who had inspired me to give all for Jesus. The man for whom I had felt such profound gratitude and affection.

But all I felt at that moment was a desire to crush the opposing team.

To make a long story short, I played a one-man game. I brought the ball in-bounds every time. I never passed it, even when the other guys were wide open. None of them had the ruthless drive an athlete needs in order to win in this cruel world, so I spared them the trouble. One thing was sure: we were not going to lose.

C.J. guarded me as well as he could, but I had the experience and the height advantage. Before his team even touched the ball, I had scored nine straight baskets. Eventually I missed and the other team got a couple of points. But then I got the ball back again, and in minutes the score was 13-2. At that point my conscience began bothering me a little—a very little—so I passed the ball to a couple of my teammates. (Not Gary and not Ed.) They

“ Christians tend to sin out of habit. It is our habit to look out for ourselves instead of others, to retaliate when injured in some way, and to indulge the appetites of our bodies. It is our habit to live for ourselves and not for God. When we become Christians, we do not drop all this overnight. In fact, we will spend the rest of our lives putting off these habits and putting on habits of holiness.⁷

— Jerry Bridges

shot, I rebounded, and put the ball in the hoop. We had won the game, 15-4, before most of us even worked up a decent sweat.

I felt great. This was more like it. I had really shown these guys who was hot stuff.

But something devastating happened on the way to the water fountain. C.J. came up with a smile on his face and stuck out his hand.

“Great game!” he said. “That was impressive.”

I could have died. The sudden contrast between his Christlike character and my own pride and selfishness made me physically ill. It would have been easier had someone taken a broomstick and whacked it deep into my gut. I didn’t know what to say.

I left the gym after that game more broken than I had ever been in my life. With increasing pain I realized how I had put my interests and ego ahead of others. What could have driven me to show off at the expense of someone I cared for so deeply? I went home and sobbed.

Later, when I couldn’t contain myself any longer, I called C.J.’s home. His wife answered and said he was at a speaking engagement and wouldn’t be home until late. *Great*, I thought, *I’m dying inside and he’s off serving God*. I told her it was a matter of life and death that I speak with him that night. That’s honestly how I felt.

For the next four hours I flip-flopped between being disappointed with myself (which was actually just pride) and heartfelt brokenness. Finally, at 11:30 p.m., the phone rang. It was C.J.

“You don’t know me,” I began, “but I’m the fellow you guarded at Kennedy High School this afternoon.”

“Oh, yeah—great game!”

(Here I was, an emotional amoeba, and he was still trying to compliment me. Stop it already!)

I tried not to fall apart as I confessed how selfish I had been, how ashamed I was for putting the game ahead of fellowship and concern for others, and most importantly, how

For Further Study:

How does God feel toward those who are broken-hearted over their sin? (See Psalm 51:17)

4 With which character do you identify most?

- ☐ Steve: The self-centered, “win at all costs” hoopster
- ☐ Gary: The selfless pastor with a heart to serve
- ☐ C.J.: The forgiving mentor who overlooked an offense
- ☐ Ed: The player who dressed better than he dribbled

For Further Study:

Read 2 Corinthians 7:8-10. What kind of sorrow can make you glad?

ugly my pride and arrogance must have been to God. I asked him to forgive me for embarrassing him instead of honoring him in front of all his friends. He was gracious about it and quickly extended forgiveness. But I learned a lesson that day I will never forget.

Creature from the Black Lagoon

I have shared this lengthy illustration to underscore a critical point. Beneath the surface of our regenerated lives lies a foul cesspool of selfish motives and evil desires.

Theologians call this *indwelling sin*. We may not see it,

“Here dwells our enemy; this is the fort, the citadel of this tyrant, where it maintains a rebellion against God all our days. Sometimes it hath more strength, and consequently more success; sometimes less...but it is always in rebellion whilst we live.”⁸

— John Owen

others may not see it, but God sees it. And it's ugly.

Even though you have undergone a miraculous metamorphosis through the work of the Holy Spirit, indwelling sin remains. You will fight it for the rest of your life. Sinclair Ferguson has stated that “the power of indwelling sin is no less real in the believer than it is in

the unbeliever.”⁹ Whether you've been a Christian 24 hours or 24 years, the potential for serious sin lurks in your heart.

The apostle Paul understood this cesspool of indwelling sin. Not only did he help point it out to others, but he saw it in himself. This man who authored much of the New Testament, planted many churches, experienced countless hardships for the sake of Christ, and boldly proclaimed the gospel wherever he traveled continued to battle indwelling sin. Years after his conversion, and well into his ministry, he lamented over the wretchedness of his soul. Listen closely as he shares his inward struggle:

I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good. As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me. I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing. Now, if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it.

“ Freedom from the dominion of sin is not...the same thing as freedom from its presence and influence...As an indwelling ‘law,’ or principle in our lives, it is in permanent readiness to act.¹⁰ ”

— Sinclair Ferguson

So I find this law at work: When I want to do good, evil is right there with me. For in my inner being I delight in God’s law; but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my

mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members. *What a wretched man I am!* Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God, through Jesus Christ our Lord. (Romans 7:15-25)

What does all this mean? Simply that Paul had two opposing forces at work in him, battling for supremacy. Like him, you too will often experience a tug-of-war between the desire to do good and the desire to do evil. Sin lies hidden in your own heart, ready to jump out and ambush you when you least expect it. Grasp this and you will be helped immeasurably in your quest to grow as a Christian. But if you ignore this truth about indwelling sin, you will remain forever frustrated and confused about the battle that rages in your heart.

At the moment he saved you, God delivered you from the wrath your sins deserved. He has united you with Christ and placed his Holy Spirit in you. He has made you a new creation. He has adopted you into his family and given you a new identity. He has purchased you for himself and made you his ambassador. He has given you a new heart. But until you die and go to heaven, you won’t have a perfect one. Your bondage to sin has been broken, and yet the potential for sin, the pull of sin, and even the power of sin remain.

But it won’t remain unchallenged. Like the valiant men and women who have served God in centuries past, you must arm yourself for battle against this indwelling foe. And in the strength of the Spirit, you must fight. ■

3p

Meditate on Genesis 4:6-7. You’ll have to stay on your toes if you hope to master sin.

GROUP DISCUSSION

1. What would you do if you suddenly inherited a million dollars (tax free)?
2. Some people feel an immediate difference after being born again, and some don't. What was your experience?
3. What were the three "D's" of your spiritual condition before conversion? (see page 54)
4. Why must a Christian understand how bleak his or her spiritual condition was prior to regeneration?
5. What are some major things that have helped shape your identity?
6. Judging by your daily schedule, who owns your time and energy—you or God? Explain.
7. Describe one way in which you imitated God this week.
8. How long will it take the average Christian to outgrow sin? (This one is a little tricky.)
9. Do you have any remaining questions about this chapter?

**RECOMMENDED
READING**

How Can I Change? by C.J. Mahaney and Robin Boisvert (Gaithersburg, MD: People of Destiny International, 1993)

Transforming Grace by Jerry Bridges (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1991)

Men Made New by John R.W. Stott (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1984)