

# Conformity Unto Christ, and Following His Example

by John Owen

*The sermon emphasizes the importance of conformity unto Christ, which involves internal conformity to his habitual grace and holiness, as well as external conformity to his example in duties of obedience.*

**Scripture:** Leviticus 19:2, Matthew 11:29, Romans 8:29, 2 Corinthians 3:18, Ephesians 4:13, Philippians 2:5, Colossians 3:10, Hebrews 12:3, 1 Peter 2:21-23, 1 John 3:2

**Topics:** "Conformity to Christ", "Imitation of Christ"

## Description

John Owen emphasizes the necessity of conformity to Christ as the ultimate goal of a believer's life, highlighting that true faith and love manifest in a desire to emulate Christ's internal grace and holiness. He explains that believers are called to reflect Christ's image, which is revealed through the Gospel, and that this transformation requires both a spiritual understanding of Christ's virtues and a heartfelt love for them. Owen outlines the dual aspects of this conformity: the internal grace of Christ and the external obedience to His example, stressing that genuine imitation of Christ involves both mortification of sin and growth in grace. He concludes that the life of God in believers is fundamentally about becoming like Christ, which is essential for true Christian living.

## Transcript

III. The third thing proposed to declare the use of the person of Christ in religion, is that conformity which is required of us unto him. This is the great design and projection of all believers. Every one of them hath the idea or image of Christ in his mind, in the eye of faith, as it is represented unto him in the glass of the Gospel: #932;#8052;#957; #948;#8057;#958;#945;#957; #922;#965;#961;#8055;#959;#965; #954;#945;#964;#959;#960;#964;#961;#953;#950;#8057;#956;#949;#957;#959;#953; #954;. #964;. #955;., 2 Cor. iii. 18. We behold his glory "in a glass," which implants the image of it on our minds. And hereby the mind is transformed into the same image, made like unto Christ so represented unto us -- which is the conformity we speak of. Hence every true believer hath his heart under the conduct of an habitual inclination and desire to be like unto Christ. And it were easy to demonstrate, that where this is not, there is neither faith nor love. Faith will cast the soul into the form or frame of the thing believed, Rom. vi. 17. And all sincere love worketh an assimilation. Wherefore the best evidence of a real principle of the life of God in any soul -- of the sincerity of faith, love, and obedience -- is an internal cordial endeavour, operative on all occasions, after

conformity unto Jesus Christ.

There are two parts of the duty proposed. The first respects the internal grace and holiness of the human nature of Christ; the other, his example in duties of obedience. And both of them -- both materially as to the things wherein they consist, and formally as they were his or in him -- belong unto the constitution of a true disciple.

In the first place, Internal conformity unto his habitual grace and holiness is the fundamental design of a Christian life. That which is the best without it is a pretended imitation of his example in outward duties of obedience. I call it pretended, because where the first design is wanting, it is no more but so; nor is it acceptable to Christ nor approved by him. And therefore an attempt unto that end hath often issued in formality, hypocrisy, and superstition. I shall therefore lay down the grounds of this design, the nature of it, and the means of its pursuit.

1. God, in the human nature of Christ, did perfectly renew that blessed image of his on our nature which we lost in Adam, with an addition of many glorious endowments which Adam was not made partaker of. God did not renew it in his nature as though that portion of it whereof he was partaker had ever been destitute or deprived of it, as it is with the same nature in all other persons. For he derived not his nature from Adam in the same way that we do; nor was he ever in Adam as the public representative of our nature, as we were. But our nature in him had the image of God implanted in it, which was lost and separated from the same nature in all other instances of its subsistence. "It pleased the Father that in him should all fulness dwell," -- that he should be "full of grace and truth," and "in all things have the pre-eminence." But of these gracious endowments of the human nature of Christ I have discoursed elsewhere.

2. One end of God in filling the human nature of Christ with all grace, in implanting his glorious image upon it, was, that he might in him propose an example of what he would by the same grace renew us unto, and what we ought in a way of duty to labour after. The fulness of grace was necessary unto the human nature of Christ, from its hypostatical union with the Son of God. For whereas therein the "fulness of the godhead dwelt in him bodily," it became "a holy thing," Luke i. 35. It was also necessary unto him, as unto his own obedience in the flesh, wherein he fulfilled all righteousness, "did no sin, neither was guile found in his mouth," 1 Peter ii. 22. And it was so unto the discharge of the office he undertook; for "such an high priest became us, who is holy, harmless, undefiled, and separate from sinners," Heb. vii. 26. Howbeit, the infinite wisdom of God had this farther design in it also, -- namely, that he might be the pattern and example of the renovation of the image of God in us, and of the glory that doth ensue thereon. He is in the eye of God as the idea of what he intends in us, in the communication of grace and glory; and he ought to be so in ours, as unto all that we aim at in a way of duty.

He hath "predestinated us to be conformed unto the image of his Son, that he might be the first-born among many brethren," Rom. viii. 29. In the collation of all grace on Christ, God designed to make him "the first born of many brethren;" that is, not only to give him the power and authority of the firstborn, with the trust of the whole inheritance to be communicated unto them, but also as the example of what he would bring them unto. "For both he that sanctifieth and they that are sanctified are all of one: for which cause he is not ashamed to call them brethren," Heb. ii. 11. It is Christ who sanctifieth believers; yet is it from God, who first sanctified him, that he and they might be of one, and so become brethren, as bearing the image of the same Father. God designed and gave unto Christ grace and glory; and he did it that he

might be the prototype of what he designed unto us, and would bestow upon us. Hence the apostle shows that the effect of this predestination to conformity unto the image of the Son is the communication of all effectual, saving grace, with the glory that ensues thereon, Rom. viii. 30, "Moreover, whom he did predestinate, them he also called; and whom he called, them he also justified; and whom he justified, them he also glorified."

The great design of God in his grace is, that as we have borne the "image of the first Adam" in the depravation of our natures, so we should bear the "image of the second" in their renovation. "As we have borne the image of the earthy," so "we shall bear the image of the heavenly," 1 Cor. xv. 49. And as he is the pattern of all our graces, so he is of glory also. All our glory will consist in our being "made like unto him;" which, what it is, doth not as yet appear, 1 John iii. 2. For "he shall change our vile body, that it may be fashioned like unto his glorious body," Phil. iii. 21. Wherefore the fulness of grace was bestowed on the human nature of Christ, and the image of God gloriously implanted thereon, that it might be the prototype and example of what the church was through him to be made partaker of. That which God intends for us in the internal communication of his grace, and in the use of all the ordinances of the church, is, that we may come unto the "measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ," Eph. iv. 13. There is a fulness of all grace in Christ. Hereunto are we to be brought, according to the measure that is designed unto every one of us. "For unto every one of us is given grace, according to the measure of the gift of Christ," verse 7. He hath, in his sovereign grace, assigned different measures unto those on whom he doth bestow it. And therefore it is called "the stature", because as we grow gradually unto it, as men do unto their just stature; so there is a variety in what we attain unto, as there is in the statures of men, who are yet all perfect in their proportion.

3. This image of God in Christ is represented unto us in the Gospel. Being lost from our nature, it was utterly impossible we should have any just comprehension of it. There could be no steady notion of the image of God, until it was renewed and exemplified in the human nature of Christ. And thereon, without the knowledge of him, the wisest of men have taken those things to render men most like unto God which were adverse unto him. Such were the most of those things which the heathens adored as heroic virtues. But being perfectly exemplified in Christ, it is now plainly represented unto us in the Gospel. Therein with open face we behold, as in a glass, the glory of the Lord, and are changed into the same image, 2 Cor. iii. 18. The veil being taken away from divine revelations by the doctrine of the Gospel and from our hearts "by the Lord the Spirit," we behold the image of God in Christ with open face, which is the principal means of our being transformed into it. The Gospel is the declaration of Christ unto us, and the glory of God in him; as unto many other ends, so in especial, that we might in him behold and contemplate that image of God we are gradually to be renewed into. Hence, we are so therein to learn the truth as it is in Jesus, as to be "renewed in the spirit of our mind," and to "put on the new man, which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness," Eph. iv. 20, 23, 24, -- that is, "renewed after the image of him who created him," Col. iii. 10.

4. It is, therefore, evident that the life of God in us consists in conformity unto Christ; nor is the Holy Spirit, as the principal and efficient cause of it, given unto us for any other end but to unite us unto him, and make us like him. Wherefore, the original Gospel duty, which animates and rectifies all others, is a design for conformity unto Christ in all the gracious principles and qualifications of his holy soul, wherein the image of God in him doth consist. As he is the prototype and exemplar in the eye of God for the communication of all grace unto us, so he ought to be the great example in the eye of our faith in all our obedience unto God, in our compliance with all that he requireth of us.

God himself, or the divine nature in its holy perfections, is the ultimate object and idea of our transformation in the renewing of our minds. And, therefore, under the Old Testament, before the incarnation of the Son, he proposed his own holiness immediately as the pattern of the church: "Be ye holy, for the Lord your God is holy," Lev. xi. 44; xix. 2; xx. 26. But the law made nothing perfect. For to complete this great injunction, there was yet wanting an express example of the holiness required; which is not given us but in him who is "the first-born, the image of the invisible God."

There was a notion, even among the philosophers, that the principal endeavour of a wise man was to be like unto God. But in the improvement of it, the best of them fell into foolish and proud imaginations. Howbeit, the notion itself was the principal beam of our primigenial light, the best relic of our natural perfections; and those who are not some way under the power of a design to be like unto God are every way like unto the devil. But those persons who had nothing but the absolute essential properties of the divine nature to contemplate on in the light of reason, failed all of them, both in the notion itself of conformity unto God, and especially in the practical improvement of it. Whatever men may fancy to the contrary, it is the design of the apostle, in sundry places of his writings, to prove that they did so, especially Rom. i.; 1 Cor. i.. Wherefore, it was an infinite condescension of divine wisdom and grace, gloriously to implant that image of him which we are to endeavour conformity unto in the human nature of Christ, and then so fully to represent and propose it unto us in the revelation of the Gospel.

The infinite perfections of God, considered absolutely in themselves, are accompanied with such an incomprehensible glory as it is hard to conceive how they are the object of our imitation. But the representation that is made of them in Christ, as the image of the invisible God, is so suited to the renewed faculties of our souls, so congenial unto the new creature or the gracious principle of spiritual life in us, that the mind can dwell on the contemplation of them, and be thereby transformed into the same image.

Herein lies much of the life and power of Christian religion, as it resides in the souls of men. This is the prevailing design of the minds of them that truly believe the Gospel; they would in all things be like unto Jesus Christ. And I shall briefly show -- (1.) What is required hereunto; and, (2.) What is to be done in a way of duty for the attaining that end.

(1.) A spiritual light, to discern the beauty, glory, and amiableness of grace in Christ, is required hereunto. We can have no real design of conformity unto him, unless we have their eyes who "beheld his glory, the glory of the only-begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth," John i. 14. Nor is it enough that we seem to discern the glory of his person, unless we see a beauty and excellency in every grace that is in him. "Learn of me," saith he; "for I am meek and lowly in heart," Matt. xi. 29. If we are not able to discern an excellency in meekness and lowliness of heart, (as they are things generally despised,) how shall we sincerely endeavour after conformity unto Christ in them? The like may be said of all his other gracious qualifications. His zeal, his patience, his self-denial, his readiness for the cross, his love unto his enemies, his benignity to all mankind, his faith and fervency in prayer, his love to God, his compassion towards the souls of men, his unweariedness in doing good, his purity, his universal holiness; -- unless we have a spiritual light to discern the glory and amiableness of them all, as they were in him, we speak in vain of any design for conformity unto him. And this we have not, unless God shine into our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of his glory in the face of Jesus Christ. It is, I say, a foolish thing to talk of the imitation of Christ, whilst really, through the darkness of our minds, we discern not that there is an excellency in the things wherein we ought to be like unto him.

(2.) Love unto them so discovered in a beam of heavenly light, is required unto the same end. No soul can have a design of conformity unto Christ but his who so likes and loves the graces that were in him, as to esteem a participation of them in their power to be the greatest advantage, to be the most invaluable privilege, that can in this world be attained. It is the savour of his good ointments for which the virgins love him, cleave unto him, and endeavour to be like him. In that whereof we now discourse -- namely, of conformity unto him -- he is the representative of the image of God unto us. And, if we do not love and prize above all things those gracious qualifications and dispositions of mind wherein it doth consist, whatever we may pretend of the imitation of Christ in any outward acts or duties of obedience, we have no design of conformity unto him. He who sees and admires the glory of Christ as filled with these graces -- as he "was fairer than the children of men," because "grace was poured into his lips" -- unto whom nothing is so desirable as to have the same mind, the same heart, the same spirit that was in Christ Jesus -- is prepared to press after conformity unto him. And unto such a soul the representation of all these excellencies in the person of Christ is the great incentive, motive, and guide, in and unto all internal obedience unto God.

Lastly, That wherein we are to labour for this conformity may be reduced unto two heads.

[1.] An opposition unto all sin, in the root, principle, and most secret springs of it, or original cleavings unto our nature. He "did no sin, neither was there any guile found in his mouth." He "was holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners." He was the "Lamb of God, without spot or blemish;" like unto us, yet without sin. Not the least tincture of sin did ever make an approach unto his holy nature. He was absolutely free from every drop of that fomes which hath invaded us in our depraved condition. Wherefore, to be freed from all sin, is the first general part of an endeavour for conformity unto Christ. And although we cannot perfectly attain hereunto in this life, as we have "not already attained, nor are already perfect," yet he who groaneth not in himself after it -- who doth not loathe every thing that is of the remainder of sin in him and himself for it -- who doth not labour after its absolute and universal extirpation -- hath no sincere design of conformity unto Christ, nor can so have. He who endeavours to be like him, must "purify himself, even as he is pure." Thoughts of the purity of Christ, in his absolute freedom from the least tincture of sin, will not suffer a believer to be negligent, at any time, for the endeavouring the utter ruin of that which makes him unlike unto him. And it is a blessed advantage unto faith, in the work of mortification of sin, that we have such a pattern continually before us.

[2.] The due improvement of, and continual growth, in every grace, is the other general part of this duty. In the exercise of his own all-fulness of grace, both in moral duties of obedience and the especial duties of his office, did the glory of Christ on the earth consist. Wherefore, to abound in the exercise of every grace -- to grow in the root and thrive in the fruit of them -- is to be conformed unto the image of the Son of God.

Secondly, The following the example of Christ in all duties towards God and men, in his whole conversation on the earth, is the second part of the instance now given concerning the use of the person of Christ in religion. The field is large which here lies before us, and filled with numberless blessed instances. I cannot here enter into it; and the mistakes that have been in a pretence unto it, require that it should be handled distinctly and at large by itself; which, if God will, may be done in due time. One or two general instances wherein he was most eminently our example, shall close this discourse.

1. His meekness, lowliness of mind, condescension unto all sorts of persons -- his love and kindness unto mankind -- his readiness to do good unto all, with patience and forbearance -- are continually set before us in his example. I place them all under one head, as proceeding all from the same spring of divine

goodness, and having effects of the same nature. With respect unto them, it is required that "the same mind be in us that was in Christ Jesus," Phil. ii. 5; and that we "walk in love, as he also loved us," Eph. v. 2.

In these things was he the great representative of the divine goodness unto us. In the acting of these graces on all occasions did he declare and manifest the nature of God, from whom he came. And this was one end of his exhibition in the flesh. Sin had filled the world with a representation of the devil and his nature, in mutual hatred, strife, variance, envy, wrath, pride, fierceness, and rage, against one another; all which are of the old murderer. The instances of a cured, of a contrary frame, were obscure and weak in the best of the saints of old. But in our Lord Jesus the light of the glory of God herein first shone upon the world. In the exercise of these graces, which he most abounded in, because the sins, weaknesses and infirmities of men gave continual occasion thereunto, did he represent the divine nature as love -- as infinitely good, benign, merciful, and patient -- delighting in the exercise of these its holy properties. 176 In them was the Lord Christ our example in an especial manner. And they do in vain pretend to be his disciples, to be followers of him, who endeavour not to order the whole course of their lives in conformity unto him in these things.

One Christian who is meek, humble, kind, patient, and useful unto all; that condescends to the ignorance, weaknesses and infirmities of others; that passeth by provocations, injuries, contempt, with patience and with silence, unless where the glory and truth of God call for a just vindication; that pitieth all sorts of men in their failings and miscarriages, who is free from jealousies and evil surmises; that loveth what is good in all men, and all men even wherein they are not good, nor do good, -- doth more express the virtues and excellencies of Christ than thousands can do with the most magnificent works of piety or charity, where this frame is wanting in them. For men to pretend to follow the example of Christ, and in the meantime to be proud, wrathful envious, bitterly zealous, calling for fire from heaven to destroy men, or fetching it themselves from hell, is to cry, "Hail unto him," and to crucify him afresh unto their power.

2. Self-denial, readiness for the cross, with patience in sufferings, are the second sort of things which he calls all his disciples to follow his example in. It is the fundamental law of his Gospel, that if any one will be his disciple, "he must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow him." These things in him, as they are all of them summarily represented, Phil. ii. 5-8, by reason of the glory of his person and the nature of his sufferings, are quite of another kind than that we are called unto. But his grace in them all is our only pattern in what is required of us. "Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that we should follow his steps: who, when he was reviled, reviled not again; when he suffered, he threatened not," 1 Pet. ii. 21-23. Hence are we called to look unto "Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith; who, for the joy that was set before him, endured the cross, and despised the shame." For we are to "consider him, who endured such contradiction of sinners against himself," that we faint not, Heb. xii. 3. Blessed be God for this example -- for the glory of the condescension, patience, faith, and endurance, of Jesus Christ, in the extremity of all sorts of sufferings. This hath been the pole-star of the church in all its storms; the guide, the comfort, supportment and encouragement of all those holy souls, who, in their several generations, have in various degrees undergone persecution for righteousness' sake; and yet continueth so to be unto them who are in the same condition.

And I must say, as I have done on some other occasions in the handling of this subject, that a discourse on this one instance of the use of Christ in religion -- from the consideration of the person who suffered, and set us this example; of the principle from whence, and the end for which, he did it; of the variety of evils of all sorts he had to conflict withal; of his invincible patience under them all, and

immovableness of love and compassion unto mankind, even his persecutors; the dolorous afflictive circumstances of his sufferings from God and men; the blessed efficacious workings of his faith and trust in God unto the uttermost; with the glorious issue of the whole, and the influence of all these considerations unto the consolation and supportment of the church -- would take up more room and time than what is allotted unto the whole of that whereof it is here the least part. I shall leave the whole under the shade of that blessed promise, "If so be that we suffer with him, we may be also glorified together; for I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us," Rom. viii. 17, 18.

IV. The last thing proposed concerning the person of Christ, was the use of it unto believers, in the whole of their relation unto God and duty towards him. And the things belonging thereunto may be reduced unto these general heads:--

1. Their sanctification, which consisteth in these four things: (1.) The mortification of sin, (2.) The gradual renovation of our natures, (3.) Assistances in actual obedience, (4.) The same in temptations and trials.

2. Their justification, with its concomitants and consequent; as -- (1.) Adoption, (2.) Peace, (3.) Consolation and joy in life and death, (4.) Spiritual gifts, unto the edification of themselves and others, (5.) A blessed resurrection, (6.) Eternal glory.

There are other things which also belong hereunto: -- as their guidance in the course of their conversation in this world, direction unto usefulness in all states and conditions, patient waiting for the accomplishment of God's promises to the church, the communication of federal blessings unto their families, and the exercise of loving-kindness towards mankind in general, with sundry other concernments of the life of faith of the like importance; but they may be all reduced unto the general heads proposed.

What should have been spoken with reference unto these things belongs unto these three heads:--

1st, A declaration that all these things are wrought in and communicated unto believers, according to their various natures, by an emanation of grace and power from the person of Jesus Christ, as the head of the church -- as he who is exalted and made a Prince and a Saviour, to give repentance and the forgiveness of sins.

2dly, A declaration of the way and manner how believers do live upon Christ in the exercise of faith, whereby, according to the promise and appointment of God, they derive from him the whole grace and mercy whereof in this world they are made partakers, and are established in the expectation of what they shall receive hereafter by his power. And that two things do hence ensue: (1st,) The necessity of universal evangelical obedience, seeing it is only in and by the duties of it that faith is, or can be, kept in a due exercise unto the ends mentioned. (2dly,) That believers do hereby increase continually with the increase of God, and grow up into him who is the head, until they become the fulness of him who fills all in all.

3dly, A conviction that a real interest in, and participation of, these things cannot be obtained any other way but by the actual exercise of faith on the person of Jesus Christ.

These things were necessary to be handled at large with reference unto the end proposed. But, for sundry reasons, the whole of this labour is here declined. For some of the particulars mentioned I have already insisted on in other discourses heretofore published, and that with respect unto the end here designed. And this argument cannot be handled as it doth deserve, unto full satisfaction, without an entire discourse

concerning the life of faith; which my present design will not admit of.

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