

'To Be Conformed to the Image of His Son'

by T. Austin-Sparks

The sermon emphasizes the importance of being conformed to the image of Christ and the role of baptism as a committal to God in this process.

Scripture: Jeremiah 18:4, Matthew 3:13, Romans 8:29

Topics: "Commitment to God", "Transformation"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the transformative work of God as the Potter, who reshapes humanity into vessels for His glory despite the marred state of the clay. He illustrates how the pressures of life, often seen as disintegration, actually unite believers in a deeper fellowship, especially in times of persecution. The sermon highlights the importance of recognizing Jesus as the ultimate Pattern, whose baptism signifies a complete commitment to God, serving as a model for believers to follow. Sparks encourages the congregation to reflect on their own commitment to God and to strive to be conformed to the image of Christ. Ultimately, he calls for a deeper understanding of the Holy Spirit's role in revealing this Pattern to believers.

Transcript

"And when the vessel that he made of the clay was marred in the hand of the potter, he made it again another vessel, as seemed good to the potter to make it" (Jeremiah 18:4).

We are going to consider the next movement into God's Mind as represented by the potter's work but before we come to that I just want to add a brief word to what we have said earlier.

We were speaking about the pressure of the hands of the potter, and saying that one of the effects of that pressure is to bring each particle of the clay very close together, so that they do not remain individual parts, but become parts of one complete whole. Now, while there are many more things that could be said with advantage about that, there is just this one thing that I want to add.

We have spoken of the final triumph of the potter with the clay, and it is a mark of his victory that the parts are pressed closely together. But let me explain what I mean. You are very well aware of what the enemy is trying to do with God's vessel. His great work is to break up that vessel, to scatter and disintegrate it, by persecution and all kinds of methods, but in that divine sovereignty the very work of the enemy is being made the pressure of the hands of the Potter. Our hearts are more united today with the hearts of the poor persecuted people of God in China, in Russia and in other parts of the world than they have ever been

before. We are praying today as we have never prayed for all the scattered and persecuted people of God, and, while outwardly it looks as though the vessel is being broken to pieces, inwardly it is becoming more and more united. All the parts of the vessel are becoming more closely knit together in the spirit, so that the pressure is having just the opposite effect to that which the enemy wants it to have.

We find that there is some special blessing of the Lord upon international gatherings, and one of the chief blessings is the wonderful fellowship that we realize we have. This is not a fellowship that is made by our coming together, but it is already present and is only expressed by our being together. So this is a triumph of the Lord over all the disintegrating efforts of the enemy. I trust that you are going back to all your lonely places the stronger for realizing that you are not alone. That will be one of the Lord's triumphs over a great deal of suffering.

Now let us come to our next step in this matter of the movement into the Mind of God. We have lifted out of Jeremiah that verse which speaks of the vessel being marred and made again. Of course, historically this related to Israel, which was the vessel that God was forming at that time. Israel was the clay in God's hands out of which He was seeking to make a vessel for His glory, but Israel resisted the will of God and He had to crush that clay out of shape and begin again to make another vessel as was good in His sight. We will come back to that later.

The principle is of much wider application. If Jeremiah 18 was confined to Israel alone, then we have no right to be here this morning. Our only justification would be that we are trying to be students of history. However, the principle is of much wider application than Israel - it applies to the whole human race, as much to the Gentiles as to the Jews.

The clay is humanity as a whole. God began to make a vessel of humanity, but it was marred in the hands of the Potter, so He set Himself to make another vessel, and we know that He is now forming His new heavenly vessel of the clay out of all nations.

To return to Israel: When Israel broke down, nationally and historically, God brought in the spiritual and eternal Israel, and now at this time, in this very place, He is at work on this other vessel. God is now forming a spiritual Israel in the place of the earthly and temporal Israel.

The first thing God has done is to reveal the pattern of His vessel. I think it is a very wonderful thing that in this dispensation God has commenced by showing His pattern. The pattern has been set before us - and this is the whole meaning of the Incarnation of God's Son.

And yet, while that is so true, it requires the work of the Holy Spirit to make us see the Pattern. He was in close touch with men, yet they did not see Him. They did not know nor understand who and what was this One who was moving in their midst every day. He was not recognized by the world, and it was with great difficulty that even His disciples had any conception of what He was. It was not until the Holy Spirit came that they began to see who it was that had been with them all that time, and then not only did they begin to see who He was, but what He was. They not only saw the Person, but they began to see the meaning of the Person. They came to see that He was a great Pattern, so the Holy Spirit revealed in their hearts not only the Person but the Pattern.

But the Holy Spirit went further. It would be a terrible thing for us if our eyes were opened to see all the meaning of Jesus Christ. If the Holy Spirit revealed Christ to us we might fall down in utter despair. We would say, like Peter: "Depart from me; for I am a sinful man, O Lord." However, the Holy Spirit began to

make the Pattern real in the disciples. To use the so well-known words of the Apostle Paul, He began to 'conform them to the image of Christ' (Romans 8:29).

Those two things are essential to our coming into the Mind of God.

Now let us come immediately to the Pattern. You may never have wondered why we have the four Gospels at the beginning of the New Testament, for they were not the first of the New Testament writings. Some of the Gospels were written well after the Apostles had written their letters. But you see, the Holy Spirit had this matter in hand, so He placed the Person before the corporate expression. So we will look at the Person who is the Pattern.

First of all, the Man Himself is presented. Where do the Gospels begin with the presentation of the Man? Perhaps you have noticed that the Gospel by Mark, which was the first of the Gospels to be written, begins with Jesus at thirty years of age. Matthew and Luke may tell us a lot about the earthly birth and childhood of Jesus, but the first one to present this Person begins with Him as a full-grown man. And the first thing that is shown to us about Him as the Pattern is Jesus coming to the Jordan to be baptized by John.

That represented a very great crisis in His life. At that point He stepped across the line which lay between His private life and His public life, between Jesus the carpenter of Nazareth and Jesus the great Servant of the Lord. At that point He stepped out before heaven - the 'heavens were opened'; before hell - because Satan would begin at once to react; and before all men. And, as it were, before the whole universe, He took His position with God. He made His utter committal to God. On the one side there lay all that this world could offer, all the kingdoms of this world that Satan could give Him, all the realization of human ambition, all the experience of the satisfaction of the natural man. On the other side of His baptism there lay suffering, persecution, loneliness and death. The Jordan was a grave, and in going down into those waters of baptism He died to all that which lay on the one side and accepted all that lay on the other.

This is the comprehensive and inclusive meaning of baptism. It is the repudiation and death to one whole realm of things, and the acceptance of all that is involved in the other realm.

So Jesus came to Jordan. John would forbid Him, and sought to discourage Him by saying: 'No, this is not for You. It may be for the crowd, but it is not for You. It may be important for a lot of people, but it is not important for You.' Jesus simply said: 'Let it be so, John.' He would allow no argument to turn Him away from this committal. The best arguments of His best friends would not turn Him aside. He said: 'This is what I have come for, and I am going through with it.'

Is it necessary for me to stay and apply that? This is the Pattern revealed, and it is what goes to make up a vessel. Many, many Christians do not get very far in the Christian life because this thing is not as absolute as it was with Jesus. What does baptism mean to you? Is it just something in the Bible that you are told to do? Is it some part of the ritual of the church? What really does it mean to you? Does it mean this - an absolute committal to God for all the future and all that it involves? That is the pattern, and we shall never come to the full expression of the Mind until this first thing is settled.

The first thing in presenting the Man is His Baptism, and, as I have said, that has to be a testimony before heaven, before hell and before men. I do not think heaven is very interested just in formalities. The angels are not looking eagerly at anyone who is just going through a bit of ritual. If Satan is interested in anything like that, it is only because he wants to laugh. He says: 'Poor creatures! I will prove presently how false it

all is.' And I do not think people who really think have much interest in a merely formal kind of ceremony. But when it is after the character of the committal of Jesus Christ, the whole universe is really interested. If anyone like the Lord Jesus is determined to go through this thing and the enemy cannot stop it beforehand, he will, as in the case of the Lord Jesus Himself, come soon afterwards.

This is just the first thing concerning the Pattern, but let me say at once that it is not just a matter of being baptized or not being baptized. No baptism ever makes us wholly the Lord's. You might be baptized every year and it make no difference. It is a way that the Lord has given us of showing where our hearts are, and a matter of where our lives really are: whether we are wholly committed to God.

May the Lord find every one of us to be like Himself in this matter, and in being wholly committed to God may we be "conformed to the image of his Son".

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