

You Can't Not Be What You Don't Want to Be

If Mrs. Michaels, my seventh grade English teacher, saw that title sentence, she would cringe, and probably disavow any knowledge of me. However bad it sounds grammatically, it expresses a profound truth pertaining to personal development, be it emotional, intellectual or spiritual growth.

How many of us have known someone (or been someone) who went through life saying, "I am not going to be like _____" (fill in the blank), only to end up just like the one we sought not to be? Maybe it was an overly critical acquaintance, or a manipulative employer, or an abusive parent. Why do we so often emulate the very person we least desire to be?

In the same way, is it not difficult to break free of some pattern in our lives, even though we despise it and loathe ourselves for it.

There is a good reason this happens. We tend to go the direction in which our eyes are fixed. If I drive down the road looking out the side window, I will tend to steer the car the direction in which I am looking. In the same way, if I am fixated on some negative personality trait in myself or someone else, I will tend to steer my life in the same direction, because that is what is before my eyes.

The only way to avoid this trap is to intentionally focus on what I desire to be. The apostle Paul expresses it this way:

*Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: **Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead**, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus. (Phil. 3:12-14)*

What better role model could I seek than Christ. He is perfect in all ways. If, as Paul suggests, I forget the hurts and disappointments of the past, and instead, focus on Christ's character and personality, I will tend to move in that direction (forward). In two similar passages, the author of Hebrews says,

*Therefore, holy brothers, who share in the heavenly calling, **fix your thoughts on Jesus**, the apostle and high priest whom we confess. (Hebr. 3:1)*

and

*Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us **throw off** everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. **Let us fix our eyes on Jesus**,*

the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. (Hebr. 12:1-2)

In these passages, we are given a strategy for personal growth.

1. **Throw off everything that hinders;** forget what is behind. The first step involves forgiveness. If I can forgive those who have hurt me and forgive myself, I will no longer focus on the wrong, and I am free to focus on something better.

2. **Fix our eyes on Christ** as the goal of our personal development. This is true repentance, where I intentionally change directions towards Christ. By keeping my focus on Him, I continue to move in His direction. It is much easier to run a race when I can at least visualize the finish line. Then, even if I trip and fall, I know what direction to run when I get back up.

3. **Run with perseverance.** I need to be in it for the long run. Life is rarely a sprint; I need to have the resolve to run a marathon. That's hard, but Christ himself will grant me the strength and patience (fruit of the Spirit) to press on by the indwelling presence of His Holy Spirit.

4. **Stick to the course** – run the race laid out for us. God indeed has a plan for each of our lives, and the closer I stay to that plan, the more successfully I will run. He made me, and knows me, so He knows the path that will get me where I need to be, given my individual strengths and weaknesses. When I stray from that path, I forfeit the grace He has lavished upon me to finish the race.

5. **Remember - there is a prize!** There is a huge payoff for finishing the race. Just as Christ, Himself, focused on “the joy set before Him,” I need to remember the joy set before me. If I understand the reward I am promised, I will have the perseverance and the motivation to stay on the correct path, despite the obstacles thrown in my way. And when I fall, I will have the strength to get up and continue the race.

So, even though I “can’t not be what I don’t want to be,” I can become what I want to be through Christ, because,

I can do everything through him who gives me strength. (Phil. 4:13)