

I want to start with a question. If someone asked you what the ultimate goal of the Christian life is, how would you respond?

In a moment I am going to ask you to talk with someone next to you about your answer. This is not a trick question – because there are a number of valid responses you might come up with. So don't worry about failing the test! Having said this, now talk with your neighbor about your response...

One of my favorite responses to this question as to what the goal of the Christian life is comes from the Westminster Catechism. In this document the question is posed, 'What is the chief end of man?' The response is both simple and profound – 'The chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy God forever.' But this response leads to yet more questions. How do we glorify God and enjoy God forever?

My answer to that question is simple – as followers of Jesus we glorify God by becoming, day-by-day, more like Jesus. That is, we enjoy God's pleasure as we are transformed into the image of his Son. This is a vision and a promise Paul and others present us in the New Testament, as we will see later.

The term 'Christian' was first used to describe 1st century followers of Jesus. Literally translated in its original context it simply meant 'little Christs'. It described people who had committed their life to following Jesus to the extent they devoted their life to the ultimate goal of becoming more and more like him. The New Testament is full of words and images that point to the fact that the Christian life begins when we are saved from sin, from which point we begin a journey of transformation that leads to the day when we arrive at our ultimate destination when we will be like the one whom we follow.

Let me digress for a moment. I have just undertaken my annual health check. I visited with Doctor Rob a few weeks ago and our consultation followed a familiar routine. He checked my blood pressure and he listened to my heart and lungs. He examined closely each and every one of my freckles to make sure there was nothing sinister. With my skin this takes some time.

Then came the moment I was dreading. Out came the scales and he weighed me. Now is it just me, or do doctor's scales always add a kilo or two? I have spent many hours working out how to place my scales at home on the tiles in such a way that my weight is as low as possible. In Doctor Rob' surgery there are no tiles and the scales are depressingly accurate.

Then he measured my height. I am staring to wonder whether Doctor Rob is checking for that inevitable day when I start to shrink in height. Finally, there were firm words spoken about BMI indexes and diet and exercise, to which I nodded humbly.

Regular physical health checks are vital. So too are regular spiritual health checks.

The Apostle Paul wrote to the church in Corinth and challenged them and us with these words:

Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you—unless, of course, you fail the test? (2 Corinthians 13:5)

Paul is challenging us to undertake a spiritual health check. Are we passing or failing the test of faith? Are we becoming more like Jesus? How do we know if we are or aren't?

When was the last time you took a spiritual health-check?

In a physical examination we check things like blood pressure, pulse, weight and so on.

In a spiritual self-examination we check whether we are demonstrating the character of Jesus more and more. For me, the character of Jesus that we should be clothing ourselves with is listed in Paul's words to the Galatians:

The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.
(Galatians 5:22)

As Luke reminds us, Jesus was filled with and empowered by the Holy Spirit all through his earthly ministry. As such, his life bore the Fruit of the Spirit that Paul reminds us of. The Fruit of the Spirit describes the character of Jesus – the character we are called to emulate. So, to test whether we are becoming more like Jesus we must ask ourselves:

Am I becoming more loving, more joyful, and more peaceful.....?

And that is what I would like you to do now. I'd like you to take the piece of paper you received when you came in and over the next few moments reflect on whether you are demonstrating more and more Fruit of the Spirit and therefore, becoming more and more like Jesus.

Self Examination Test

There are two ways that test could have been phrased. The first is 'Are you loving?' and so on. The second is 'Are you becoming more loving?' The insertion of that one word, 'becoming', is vital if we are going to accurately assess our spiritual health. Everywhere in the New Testament we read that Christian faith is a journey, that to follow Jesus is to engage in an ongoing process of transformation. Now if it is true Christian faith is a journey, the bible teaches us it is a journey with three basic stages.

In the first stage of our journey with God we are justified. Through our acceptance of God's gift of salvation through Jesus sacrificial death, our sins are forgiven and we are restored to relationship with God. To be justified means we are made right with God.

(Strictly speaking, our journey actually begins even before this as God calls us to faith. God's Holy Spirit is active in our lives before we even recognize it or respond to it.)

The second stage of our journey with God is sanctification. This is one of those big Christian words we trip over. It simply means to be made holy. Through the work of the Holy Spirit, over a period of time God transforms us into the image of Jesus. To be sanctified means we are made holy by God.

The third and last stage and final destination of our journey with God is glorification. The end result of the sanctifying work of God in our lives is this: one day we will be like Jesus. We will be holy. Glorification means one day we will be made complete for God.

Summarizing this process, the Apostle Paul said to the church in Corinth:

The Lord—who is the Spirit—makes us more and more like him as we are changed into his glorious image.
(2 Corinthians 3:18b)

So, how are you going on your journey with God? Are you becoming more like Jesus? Are you being changed into his glorious image?

Let me illustrate two common paths we might travel on this journey.

Suppose you could plot your journey with God on a graph. I am a recovering accountant, so I love graphs. On one axis is time. On the other axis is some measure of spiritual maturity – the Fruit of the Spirit we tested earlier. The common experience of a Christian believer should be like this. They begin their journey with God as a sinner saved by God's amazing grace. As time proceeds, as the Holy Spirit transforms the heart of that believer – more and more Spiritual Fruit is demonstrated. They are becoming more and more like Jesus. There are dips and bumps in the graph. Life is messy and so are we. We will grow faster at some times more than others – but over time the trend is up and to the right. This is the path God longs our journey to take – the path of spiritual victory. But there are other paths.

Another person starts off well. The first few years of Christian faith are exciting. God is real. The bible is alive. Fellowship is deep. Then life gets in the way. Family and work demands crowd out our relationship with God to the margins. God's voice becomes harder to hear and our growth starts to plateau and then slowly decline as we start going backwards spiritually. We have settled into a life of comfortable spiritual complacency. It may not be complacency, it may be more like frustration – frustration with the God who was once as real and close and now feels like a stranger to us. They have hit a dead end.

Or you may have tried and tried and tried to be a good Christian. You have given it your best shot again and again – but bad habits are hard to break and progress is slow or non-existent. Instead of spiritual victory, life is marked by spiritual defeat. Paul graphically illustrated this malaise.

It happens so regularly that it's predictable. The moment I decide to do good, sin is there to trip me up. I truly delight in God's commands, but it's pretty obvious that not all of me joins in that delight. Parts of me covertly rebel, and just when I least expect it, they take charge.

I've tried everything and nothing helps. I'm at the end of my rope. Is there no one who can do anything for me? Isn't that the real question? (Romans 7:21-24 The Message)

Ever feel like you are at the end of your spiritual rope?

The simple fact is the spiritually frustrated, complacent and defeated never really mature. They spend extended times as spiritual babies – failing to grow towards adult maturity. Churches can sometimes be messy places because they're filled with lots of spiritual babies. Don't get me wrong – babies are wonderful. But they are also messy, demanding, loud and completely time-consuming. Babies don't care who they vomit over or who changes their nappy – as long as it's changed.

So as you consider your spiritual health check, where are you on this graph?

Are you living a life of spiritual victory? Yes there are some bumps in the road, but you see clear evidence that the Holy Spirit is making you more like Jesus.

Or are you spiritually frustrated or complacent? Does it feel like you have hit a dead-end with God – that you're stuck?

I'm guessing that the reality is that if I asked, many of you would indicate that you are stuck – that you've hit a dead end with God. I am under no illusions that for many of us this is the unfortunate reality. Too many Christians live lives of quiet spiritual frustration and desperation. Mostly we want to grow, but we have forgotten how – if we ever knew.

If this is us, and let's face it most of us have been here, how do we become unstuck?

Is there a magic formula we could use, or a special prayer we could recite?

With that good old protestant work ethic, do we just grit our teeth and try and work harder?

The answer is much simpler and far more hopeful. To illustrate I want to you to take a moment to be conscious of something we are all doing right at this moment. And no, it isn't sleeping! We are all breathing; at least I hope we are.

Follow me now as we breathe in - breathe out. Breathe in – breathe out. Breathe in – breathe out.

I feel like I'm back in pre-natal classes!

That very simple action of breathing in and out is essential to life. It's one of God's many miracles. With every breath we draw air into our lungs, which in turn oxygenates our blood, which in turn circulates our body bringing life and health to every extremity.

In the same way drawing breath is essential to physical life, breathing in the Holy Spirit is vital to spiritual life.

We cannot grow and mature as Christians without the Holy Spirit. Only the Holy Spirit can sanctify us – make us holy – make us more and more like Jesus.

One theologian puts it like this: we must be made good in order to do good - not do good in order to become good. The Holy Spirit makes us good in the way that only God can.

And here is the amazing thing. Just as we breathe in air to our physical bodies, so it is possible to draw the Holy Spirit into our spiritual life. As we do, the Holy Spirit brings life to every part of us, in the process making us more and more like Jesus on our journey towards glorification.

If spiritual transformation is as simple as 'breathing in the Holy Spirit', how then do we do this?

On your handout is a triangle with the heading Holy Spirit Transformation. I have adopted this from the work of James Bryant Smith. On the three points of the triangle are practices that enable us to breathe in the Holy Spirit. Why don't you write them down as we name them?

The first point of the triangle is **Gospel Immersion**. As people created in the image of God we are wired for story. We are nurtured as young children on fairy tales and bedtime stories. We read stories in books; we watch them on our TV's and in our cinemas. We are storied people. And the stories we read, watch and listen to affect us deeply. They shape how we see and respond to the world. Our character is formed in part by the stories we believe to be true. They form us at a deep level.

But many of the stories we read and watch are not true. They reflect a distorted version of truth that is at the heart of our broken world.

In contrast, the bible is the story of God's love affair with His creation. From beginning to end we encounter the gospel – the good news – that tells us that God loves this broken and sin-stained world. The bible is truth in that it reveals the God of truth and the truth of our relationship with Him. For example, when I read in John's gospel the story of Jesus' encounter with the so-called adulterous woman I find myself identifying with both her and her accusers. Like the religious folk using the woman as a prop to trip Jesus up, I am prone to the same religious pride and blindness that leads to death. This is truth that hurts, but which ultimately heals. And like the woman, I am a recipient of God's amazing grace.

As I immerse myself in the story of God's grace, I breathe in the Holy Spirit to the deepest parts of my mind. In this way the Holy Spirit transforms me by the renewing of my mind. I am made good in order to do good.

The second point of the triangle is **Spiritual Practices**. Jesus lived a life full of the Holy Spirit. He also lived a life marked by a regular rhythm of frantic ministry punctuated by extended periods of solitude and prayer. Jesus needed to spend time in prayer to the Father and being refreshed by the Holy Spirit. There is a long-list of tried and true spiritual practices that can help us breathe in the Holy Spirit – like prayer, solitude, fasting, service, worship, confession... Which practices are in the rhythm of your life?

The third point of the triangle is **Community**. God is a community of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We are created to live in community with God and each other. At Pentecost the Holy Spirit fell on a community of believers. Their life was marked by a depth of connection and commitment to one another where the bible says 'they had all things in common.' They encouraged and challenged one another; inspired and corrected one another. In the process the Holy Spirit continued to transform them into the image of Jesus.

Some of God's best work in me has happened in the context of community. I became a Christian about six months before I began dating Sue. We have grown up together spiritually. The bible tells us that where two or three are gathered in Jesus' name that Jesus is present with them through the Holy Spirit. Perhaps the greatest gift Sue has given me is the gift of Christian community. In all ways, but especially spiritually, Sue brings out the best in me and she challenges my worst.

Sue is a woman of deep prayer. She prays for me and for our kids and for people in our church all the time. I have no doubt her prayer fans into flame the work of the Holy Spirit in me. For example, every time I preach, Sue prays for me before and as I speak. She brings out my best. But she also challenges my worst. She knows me better than anyone. With a glance she can prick the bubble of religious pride that often threatens me. With a word of correction she reminds me of my first and most important human commitment to my family.

Christian community brings out our best and challenges our worst. Some of you might be thinking, well that's alright for you – you are blessed with a Christian partner – I'm single or I'm a widow or I'm divorced. Christian community is something we can all enjoy, no matter our marital status. I was reflecting this week that pretty much the whole time I have been a Christian I have been a part of a small group. In small groups the Holy Spirit has challenged and changed me.

Let me be blunt. Some of us are living the complacent illusion that if we come to church semi-regularly we are fulfilling our religious obligations and are 'good Christian people'. But as someone once said, going to church doesn't make a Christian any more than going to McDonalds makes you a hamburger. A Christian is someone who is day by day, bit by bit, being transformed into the image of Jesus. Such transformation is a 24/7 process not a one-hour on Sunday spiritual zap.

Through immersing ourselves in the gospel story, regularly practicing spiritual disciplines and committing ourselves to community we start to establish a breathing-like rhythm as we draw in the rich, deep life transforming power of the Holy Spirit.

Do you really want to change? Do you really want to move beyond spiritual complacency, frustration and defeat?

If you are not reading your bible – pick it up, dust it off and start reading.

If you are not engaged in spiritual practices – try some. Find out what works for you.

If you are not in small group – do all you can to get in one.

And finally and most importantly, if you want to change – ask God for the ongoing gift of the Holy Spirit. Simply ask. God our Father longs to give us good gifts – most especially the gift of the Holy Spirit. Ask and you will receive the God's power to change. Remember God's amazing promise:

And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit, who lives in you. (Romans 8:11)

To finish today I have one more thing I want you to do. On your handout is a couple of statements. The first says:

Looking back over my life, one change in me that I am thankful to the Holy Spirit for is:

The second says:

Looking forward, one change I long for the Holy Spirit to bring about in my life is:

As Craig sings for us quietly I want you to spend some time with God responding to those questions. Write down the things that come to mind. When you are finished we will pray.

Breathe

My life is full of unfinished projects. Ten years ago I wrote the outline of a book I have not even started to write. My shelves are full of books half read. Sue has a list of jobs around our home that I have half-finished. I have half-baked ideas and half formed thoughts. The bad news of my life is that often I do not finish what I start.

The good news, the great news of the Christian life is this. God finishes what he starts!

The Apostle Paul said this to the church at Phillipi:

He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus. (Philippians 1:5)

When God starts something, he finishes it. When God saved you from the penalty of sin – when he justified you – he immediately began the process of saving you from the power of sin as his Holy Spirit began to transform you – to sanctify you - from the inside out. And one glorious day – when we see Jesus face to face – we will be saved from the very presence of sin.

God finishes what he starts!