

# How have you changed, and where do you still need to grow?

Message for Sunday, April 6, 2014  
by Bruce Fraser

**Scripture:** John 3:14-21

**Children's Message:** from John 15:5

I brought a plant from our home for you to see. I hope you like it. I always marvel at how things grow: they start from a small seed, and they just grow.

What if I tried to help this plant by teaching it how to grow? "Now the most important thing is, the roots go down, and the leaves go up. You don't want to get that mixed up. Do you understand? Just nod your branch up and down a bit. (*I help it to nod.*) Good. I want to be sure you understand this, so I brought a book which has pictures in it. See this picture, how the roots go down in the soil, and the green part goes up? That's what I want you to do."

[To the children] Do you think I'm helping this plant to grow? Not really. It doesn't need me. As long as it gets food and water from the soil, it will grow automatically.

But look: there are some leaves on this plant which don't look very healthy. Look at them closely, and see if you can figure out what the problem is.

*(Several days earlier I cut them, then taped them in place, but so that the cut ends were not next to each other.)*

Someone cut the stems of those leaves. They stopped getting food and water from the soil, so they shrivelled up and died.

Jesus says, "I am the vine; you are the branches. Those who remain in me, and I in them, will produce much fruit."

Stay connected to Jesus, and we will grow to be like him.

**Sermon:** "How have you changed, and where do you still need to grow?"

## 1) God means it when he says "I love you"

A young man wrote this love letter to his girlfriend:

My dearest, my beloved.  
I love you with all my heart. You are always on my mind.  
Nothing can keep me from you.

I would climb the highest mountain to see your smile.  
I would swim the widest ocean to feel your embrace.  
I would fight through the deepest jungle to hear a word from your lips.  
I would walk through an Arctic blizzard just to be with you.

Yours forever,  
Joe Smith.

P.S. I'll come over Saturday night if it doesn't rain.

If you're the girlfriend, would you believe what he says?

The highest example of love we have is God coming into the world in the person of Jesus.

God could have said something like this: "My people, I love you very much, I really do. But you do things to one another that make me angry. I want you to try harder to be good."

That would be like watching someone drowning, while you're standing on the wharf. You call out to the person, "Hey you! You should get up on some dry ground." That's true, but it's no help!

It is true that God loved the world, and wanted to save the people from destroying themselves. So God *did* something about it!

**John 3:16, New International Version:**

"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."

Or the same gospel writer put in another way, a few chapters earlier:

**John 1:14, New International Version:**

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

"Flesh" is the word the New Testament writers use to describe the sinful nature of humanity. This is how the Apostle Paul describes flesh:

**Galatians 5:16-17, New Revised Standard Version:**  
Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to

**the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you want.**

God became human—became flesh—and therefore was able to offer the perfect sacrifice to forgive sins. That’s the kind of God you can put your faith in — a God who says something, and who follows through on it.

## 2) Do you mean it when you say “I follow Jesus”?

What about us? As followers of Jesus, we say that we love God and love our neighbour.

Becoming a Christian is supposed to change a person:

- 2 Corinthians 5:17 “Anyone who is joined to Christ is a new being; the old is gone, the new has come.”
- Galatians 2:20 “It is no longer I who lives, but it is Christ who lives in me.”
- Philippians 4:13 “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.”
- John 15:5 “Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.”

And since John 3:16 talks about love, how about this:

- John 13:34 “As I have loved you, so you must love one another.”

Do you think being a Christian has changed you? Has it changed the people around you who are Christians? It should have. If it hasn’t, something’s wrong. Either God’s promises in the Bible are wrong; or else we are doing something wrong.

Often, when people become Christian, they report feeling wonderful, they feel much closer to God and more loving to the people around them. But feeling different doesn’t mean that actual behaviour has changed.

If you want to be honest with yourself, ask someone else whether you have changed. Don’t ask a relative or your best friend — get someone who can be objective. Best of all: ask someone who’s not a Christian.

Oh! While on the topic of how we come across to people who are not Christians: how many of you go out to a restaurant on Sunday for breakfast or lunch? If I were to

ask the staff at the restaurant what they think of their Sunday customers, what would they say? I was looking at a website created by a church specifically for restaurant workers to write their comments on the Christians who come on Sundays ([www.SundaysAreTheWorst.com](http://www.SundaysAreTheWorst.com)). It’s sad: very, very sad. This report is typical:

**I have to wait tables every Sunday morning, because I am a full time student. My weekdays are devoted to 10 hour days at school and catching up on my copious homework, so the weekends are all I have to make the money I need to pay my rent and support myself while I try to make a better life. I begin dreading working Sunday mornings all week long. It is incredibly rare that I have a table that will tip more than 10%, much less actually be kind on Sunday mornings. There is one family in particular that comes in every Sunday after church who are some of the rudest people I have ever met, and they have never once tipped me.**

Remember: you are representing Jesus and his church. Act – and tip – accordingly.

What if you’ve been a Christian for a long time? It’s hard to remember what you were like that long ago. Or maybe you’ve always been part of the Christ’s life. This need for examining ourselves still applies.

How have you changed in the past five years as a Christian? The process of maturing as a Christian takes a lifetime, and is not complete until after death. “Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face” [1 Corinthians 13:12].

Please understand me here: I don’t mean to compare yourself with others around you. I mean compare yourself with yourself.

Consider the way you handle conflict in your family or at work or with friends. Are you any better at controlling your anger and your revenge and your hurt pride than a few years ago?

Do you still worry and fret about things as much as back then?

Are you any better at controlling your greed or lust: whether it is for sex, for money, or for food?

Being a Christian does make a difference! And it’s exciting when we see it happen. And it’s great to be part of it!

### 3) HOW do I grow as a Christian?

This message so far is a good example of pie-in-the-sky piety. I tell you to go out and be like Christ, then leave you to sink or swim.

The big question is how does one do this? Again, I trust that you understand me: please don't ever think that I'm saying that I've got it all figured out, that my life is exemplary!

But the point is important: how do we live up to this calling we have as followers of Jesus Christ? Here are two brief thoughts.

#### a) **A healthy tree has its roots in the earth; we must be rooted in Christ**

Jesus tells us this himself, in a passage I quoted earlier:

John 15:5

**“Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.”**

First and foremost, this is not something we do by ourselves. There's a lot of self-improvement teaching in our world, and most of it is good for giving people motivation, confidence and ambition.

But we need to acknowledge our limits. We are not supermen or superwomen. We are humans. It is only as we draw on the supernatural powers which are available to us through Christ that we can hope to become like him.

#### b) **Practice**

An Olympic athlete wins a medal only after years of patient, persevering practice. Imagine a figure skater trying to get the triple axle jump just right. She has trouble staying up long enough to make all the turns. So she does weight-lifting on her leg muscles to make them stronger. At every practice, she tries that particular move thirty times. She watches videos of herself, slowing it down to frame by frame so she can see exactly where she might be making mistakes. She makes a determined effort to focus on that one problem, and finally succeeds in overcoming the barrier.

Suppose you have a problem with your temper. When something doesn't go right, you turn into a porcupine. Anyone who comes near you gets stung with your needles. This has happened hundreds of times, and you — and everyone close to you! — are well aware of this problem. You make a determined effort to focus yourself on that one problem. The next time disaster strikes, you are ready with a plan. You count to ten, go for a walk, or whatever you have decided will be your strategy. Probably it won't work the first time. But the key is that

you decided to work on this. And with Christ's help, you will.

I could go on with more ideas, but that's enough for now. In the bulletin is a paper I ask you to take home and go over during the next week. It's a guide to help us look at ourselves. Why not be daring, and go over it with someone else who knows you well? When we come back next week, it will be Palm Sunday, and we will share the Lord's Supper together. This can be a way to prepare yourself for that time.

#### **Next Steps:**

- Use the questions on the paper to examine yourself.
- In those places where you need help, ask for God to work with you.
- Make a plan for how you will do that.

## Prepare Yourself for Communion

We will have communion next Sunday. Some people don't receive communion because they believe they are not worthy of it. This comes from a misunderstanding of communion. Jesus gave us this meal to help us draw closer to him; it's not reserved for those who are already so close they are perfect.

When the religious leaders demanded to know why Jesus welcomed tax collectors and other sinners, and even ate meals with them, he answered, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners" [Mark 2:17].

All of us need to grow more like Jesus. Communion is a means to help us do that. So this week, take some time to prepare to meet with the Lord. Confess any sin you've been involved in, ask forgiveness, and renew your commitment to follow Jesus. The following list might be helpful.

## Personal Confession

John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement, regularly prayed through a list of heart-searching questions to see if there was any part of his life where he was denying God. Here is a similar list.

- ◆ Am I consciously or unconsciously creating the impression that I am a better person than I really am? Am I a hypocrite?
- ◆ Am I honest in all my acts and words, or do I exaggerate?
- ◆ Do I pass on to another what was told to me in confidence?
- ◆ Can I be trusted?
- ◆ Am I a slave to clothes, friends, work, food, drink, or habits?
- ◆ Am I self-conscious, self-pitying, or self-justifying?
- ◆ Did the Bible live to me today?
- ◆ Do I give time for the Bible to speak to me every day?
- ◆ Am I enjoying prayer?
- ◆ When did I last speak to somebody else with the purpose of trying to lead that person to faith in Christ?
- ◆ Are my contacts with other people bring glory to the Master?

- ◆ Do I pray about the money I spend?
- ◆ Do I go to bed and get up in time?
- ◆ Do I disobey God in anything?
- ◆ Do I insist on doing something about which my conscience is uneasy?
- ◆ Is any part of my life jealous, impure, critical, irritable, distrustful?
- ◆ How do I spend my spare time?
- ◆ Am I proud?
- ◆ Is there anybody whom I fear, dislike, avoid, criticize, neglect, or hold a grudge against? If so, what am I doing about it?
- ◆ Do I grumble or complain constantly?
- ◆ Is Christ real to me?
- ◆ Did I pass up an opportunity to help someone? Do I pretend that I'm too busy to stop? Do I really love others?
- ◆ Do I share with the needy some of my abundance?
- ◆ When I'm doing a job, am I hard-working? If I'm an employer, do I pay my employees a living wage?
- ◆ Do I yearn to do God's will?

**NOTE:** If, after praying over these questions, you feel that you score pretty low, it does not mean that you are disqualified from being filled with God's Spirit. Rather, the Holy Spirit may use such questions to show us our need, and then bring us to the point of repentance.

Reading the Bible every day is a vital part of growing in faith. After reading, pray about the passage, that God will show you how to live it.

Every morning, begin the day with prayer. If you don't know how to pray, try something like this:

"Good morning, Lord. Thanks for another day. Lord, help me to know you will for my life today. May I have a deep hunger and thirst to follow you all day long. I thank you that you are with me to guide me by the Holy Spirit. I pray in Jesus' name. Amen."