

18-part teaching series
by Rev. Robert Griffith

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|--------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| 1 - By their Fruit ... | 10 - Maturity: A Daily Choice |
| 2 - The Mirror Never Lies | 11 - Marks of Maturity - 1 |
| 3 - Our Purpose in Life | 12 - Marks of Maturity - 2 |
| 4 - Stages of Spiritual Growth | 13 - The Power of Testimony |
| 5 - The Fruit of the Spirit | 14 - Effective Grace |
| 6 - This Love, this God | 15 - Living in Two Kingdoms |
| 7 - A Burden for the Lost | 16 - God Told Me ... |
| 8 - Our Mission | 17 - Coins and Railways |
| 9 - Responsibility | 18 - Don't Cling to the Firewood! |

GROWING IN CHRIST – Part 1

'By their Fruit ...'

by Rev. Robert Griffith

I think the best way to introduce this new series is to let the following Scriptures set the scene for us as we embark upon this journey together.

Ephesians 4:11-16

"It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming.

Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work."

Hebrews 5:11–6:4

"We have much to say about this, but it is hard to explain because you are slow to learn. In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's word all over again. You need milk, not solid food! Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil.

Therefore let us leave the elementary teachings about Christ and go on to maturity, not laying again the foundation of repentance from acts that lead to death, and of faith in God, instruction about baptisms, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment. And God permitting, we will do so."

1 Corinthians 3:1-3

"Brothers & sisters, I could not address you as spiritual but as worldly - mere infants in Christ. I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not yet ready for it. Indeed, you are still not ready. You are still worldly. For since there is jealousy and quarrelling among you, are you not worldly? Are you not acting like mere men?"

Colossians 1:28,29

"We proclaim (Christ), admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect (mature) in Christ. To this end I labour, struggling with all his energy, which so powerfully works in me."

2 Peter 1:2-8

"Grace and peace be yours in abundance through the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord. His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires.

For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness, love. For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ."

Galatians 5:22-25

"But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit."

"Speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into Him Who is the Head, that is, Christ."

Do you see where this is headed now? Christian Character; maturity in Christ; practical holiness; who we are in private; whatever you call it, if we are serious about making a difference for God in our community and in this nation then we absolutely must wrestle with the Bible's teaching on Christian character and spiritual maturity. So I have simply called this teaching series, *'Growing in Christ'* and I hope we will all allow the Holy Spirit to shine His spotlight on our personal relationship with God as manifested in our character, beliefs and actions. How we speak and think and act.

Spiritual maturity is not linked to physical maturity. We may get to 80 years of age and have 80 years of experience walking with the Lord or, as is too often the case, we may only have one year's experience 80 times over! Growing in Christ is not guaranteed and nor is it automatic. But growing in Christ is essential if we are to fulfil God's call on our lives and embrace our purpose in being here.

In the sermon on the mount in Matthew 7 Jesus says, *"By their fruit, you shall know them."* Notice it does not say, *"By their gifts you shall know them."* Nor does it say, *"By their numbers you shall know them."* Nor does it say, *"By their understanding of grace you shall know them."* Nor does it say, *"By their denomination you shall know them."* Nor does it say, *"By their willingness to sacrifice some traditional structures and be radical for God shall you know them."* Nor does it say, *"By their ability to clean up the outside of their lives you shall know them,"* Nor does it say, *"By their ability to pray you shall know them."* Nor does it even say, *"By their faith you shall know them."*

It says *"By their FRUIT you shall know them,"* and the simple but confronting truth about fruit is this: the nature and quality of the fruit will always reveal what is inside the tree. Jesus said you cannot get good fruit from a bad tree or bad fruit from a good tree. If the tree is healthy - you will get healthy fruit. Of course we can fool some of the people all of the time; we can fool all of the people some of the time; we can even fool ourselves most of the time - but we cannot fool all of the people all of the time and we will never fool God. God is in the business of revealing hearts and He will be revealing our hearts throughout this teaching series, but only if we let Him.

That's why the degree to which this teaching will impact our lives is going to vary because we are all different and we will all be challenged in different ways or not challenged at all if we close off. The seed of God's Word will be tossed our way through every sermon, but the quality and receptivity of the soil of our hearts and the subsequent fruit which will may emerge from that seed, is all entirely up to us through our response.

At some point in our Christian life most of us have studied the topic of spiritual gifts and it can be a fascinating and life-changing study for many. God certainly uses that understanding in many exciting ways to release His people into the ministry for which they were born. However let me make some hard hitting observations, and as I do, I want to encourage you to ponder what you think is more important to God and to the effectiveness of the Church in reaching the people around us: what we do or who we are?

Notice I said *more* important. What we do is vitally important and God wants us equipped to do many things in the power of His spirit. But when we think about being equipped to do God's will, I wonder how many times we naturally think about *tasks* rather than *character* - what we *do* rather than *who we are*.

We cry out to God for a real relationship with Him and we even complain about the drought in our lives at times when God seems so far away; when we just can't work out what it is we are meant to do in this life; but in that personal area of our lives to which only God and us have access, we are making choices which cut across the purposes of God and even our own prayers and heart's desires. We want so badly to have a real experience of God, to walk in the power of His spirit, to hear His voice and know His will and be used by Him to make a difference, but then we can make lifestyle choices which cut right across those prayers being answered.

Whilst worshipping that electronic screen in our lounge room we notice news from around the world and we see incredible poverty and hardship and oppression. Day and night we are confronted head-on with war, death, crime, disease, loneliness, hunger, starvation, injustice and abuse. We switch off the television and before long find ourselves talking about the challenges of our rich, privileged, materialistic lives – relatively unmoved in our hearts by what we just saw.

Satan has helped us divide our lives into separate compartments which we don't seem to connect very often. More and more in these supposedly enlightened times of living under God's grace we can come to a Sunday service and worship God with a sincere heart and maybe even pray over someone in a ministry time and feel like this is the real stuff, this is the meat, this is what it's all about. Then we make different choices when it comes to how we drive our car, how we talk to our children or spouse when we are tired. We study spiritual gifts and have people pray over us for the 'real' stuff of the Christian life and then make choices at home about what we watch on television or read in books or online which attacks the very foundation of our character and undermines the effectiveness of those very gifts for which we were praying the night before.

We use our tongues to bless the Lord, to worship His holy name, pray for the sick and declare His word but then use the same tongues to gossip, slander and malign others. We may even dress it up as 'sharing prayer points' about each other. Once or twice a week, if we're lucky, we expose our minds, our eyes and our ears to some potentially life-changing, God-honouring teaching which, if truly received and applied would impact our city and nation in ways we only dream about - but then for the other 95% of the week we expose ourselves to all the things of this world, much of which is in direct opposition to that which glorifies God and exhibits the character of Jesus.

We sing songs and read Scriptures about loving one another and meeting the needs of those around us for whom Christ died and yet the choices we make about engaging with the ministry of the Church are more often than not made on the basis of our own felt needs. In our heart of hearts we are selfish, self-serving and self-focussed most of the time – consciously or unconsciously. Deep down, we do most of what we do because it suits us or does not inconvenience us in any major way. The Apostle Paul gave us some of the most profound words ever to leave human lips or come off a pen and one of those statements is found in his first letter to the Corinthians, in chapter 13.

"If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing."

Let me paraphrase those words and give them a much sharper point:

"If I have God-ordained and empowered spiritual gifts operating in my life and yet possess some fundamental character flaws - I am a spiritual child, drinking spiritual milk! If I can hear the voice of God and translate it into powerful prophetic words through preaching or prophetic utterances but continue to hide habitual sin, resentment or bitterness in my heart ...

... then I am a spiritual child, drinking spiritual milk! If I have allowed God to lay the essential foundation of grace in my understanding of Him but have not allowed Him to transform the foundations of my personal life and character - I am a spiritual child, drinking spiritual milk!

If I have an overwhelming spiritual burden for the lost and a passion and frustration for the Church to reach them in evangelism but are still carrying personal baggage in my character - I am a spiritual child, drinking spiritual milk! If I can pray eloquently and exalt the Lord and intercede for His people and yet speak to or about my wife like she is a hired hand or worse - I am a spiritual child, drinking spiritual milk!"

That is the real meaning of this often sanitised, softened 'love chapter.' When it is truly understood, 1 Corinthians 13 is one of the most confronting, face-slapping passages in the New Testament. Throughout this teaching series, those of us who are brave enough will be encouraged to allow God some face-slapping time where He will examine our hearts, our personal priorities and our character – who we are in private. During that process we will be challenged to ask some hard questions:

- > Will we allow the Holy Spirit time to address the issues which form the foundation beneath all foundations - our Christian character - our private life?
- > Will we give God permission to address foundational issues governing what we think; what we say; how we say it; to whom we say it; what we expose our minds and hearts and bodies to; who we listen to and what we listen to; who we allow to be a key influencer in our lives; what we do with our bodies and how we treat them; how we drive; our attitude to each other and to Government authorities and law enforcement people?
- > Will we allow God to do a work in us which directly targets our attitudes, our honesty, our integrity, practical holiness and personal lifestyle choices which all impact our witness more than all of the theology and ministry equipping put together? Are we brave enough to drop our guard and let God in so He can do all that by His transforming Spirit?
- > Are we passionate enough about the lost in our community and leading them to Christ that we will do anything to achieve that - even if it means being laid open before God and each other as He re-arranges some very deep, personal and foundational issues and practices which may have previously enjoyed a safe haven or protection from His searching light?

I hope the answer is 'yes' to all of the above questions because that is what God will do if we open up to this teaching. You see friends, I'm not sure if you know this or not; I'm not sure if you have realised this fact, but every one of you is a preacher. Every one of you is preaching a version of the gospel to everyone you live with, have fellowship with, talk to at work, pass in the street, speak to on the phone. They are all 'hearing' you preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ in the way you live, speak and act; in the choices you make; in what you listen to, watch, spend your money on and spend your time doing. That lifestyle gospel is being preached from the depths of your character and if your character is flawed then the gospel you preach is flawed and the Jesus you present to the world is not the Jesus they need to see or hear or fall in love with or follow as a disciple.

So that's where we are headed and if your primary goal is to just enjoy the company of other Christians and worship God in song only rather than in the way you think, speak and live, then I suggest you tune out now because this is not the teaching series for you. Only those who really want to make a difference; only those who want to live in revival more than sing about it; only those who really care about the millions of people around them who are lost and lonely and spiritually bankrupt; only those for whom God's will is more important than their own personal comfort; only those people should embark upon this journey in the weeks ahead.

My calling and my reason for being here is the same as the Apostle Paul's and so I preach and teach for same reason Paul did – so, “... *that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. ... speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ.*”

If that is your heart's desire, to become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ and to grow up into Him, Who is the Head, that is Christ . . . then strap yourself in, because God has much to teach us in the days ahead. The ride may get bumpy at times, you may even wish you were somewhere else at times, but hold on and receive God's implanted Word deep in your heart and everything will change – and I mean *everything*.

GROWING IN CHRIST – Part 2

'The Mirror Never Lies'

by Rev. Robert Griffith

Last week I began a new teaching series which is potentially one of the most confronting I have ever preached. That is because it deals with deeply personal issues like our Christian character; our maturity and honesty; who we are in private versus who we are when people are watching. If this teaching is going to do what I believe God wants it to do then we will need to give the Holy Spirit permission to shine His searching light into every corner of our hearts, exposing any pockets of darkness in our character, our attitudes our motives and our inconsistent actions.

In that process, the question which will continually confront us is: Who are we really? Who are we deep down inside where those hidden sins, bad attitudes and character flaws have not yet been dealt with by the transforming grace of God? It is wonderful to be set free by a knowledge of God's grace. It is liberating to know that our sins will not separate us from God anymore because of what Jesus has done.

It's just incredible to live under God's amazing grace, but are we allowing that grace to have its full effect on our lives and especially on our character? Until we allow every attitude, thought, word and deed to come under the scrutiny of the Spirit of God, we will remain impotent and powerless as a disciple.

The world desperately needs the Church to become who we are meant to be: the Church of Jesus Christ as revealed in the New Testament; the Church that God so desperately wants to use in His last great harvest of souls. The Church Jesus promised to build is a lean, mean fighting machine full of clean, fit, focused, highly self-disciplined soldiers who have dedicated their lives to rescuing the innocent and conquering the enemy and they spend time every day making sure they are equipped for battle and ready for deployment.

That Church makes a difference. *That* Church kicks the enemy's butt. *That* Church strikes fear in the hearts of anyone and everyone who stands against the purposes of our Commander in Chief - the Lord Jesus Christ. Is that the Church that you see around you in our nation now? Probably not in most cases. So what is missing?

Well I believe the Christian Church in this nation is in need of a great reformation in many areas. People need to understand the grace of God and come out from under the 'do-more-try-harder-so-God-will-love-me' legalistic yoke and into the freedom of God's unconditional, forgiveness and love. People also need to be released from the erroneous view that there are clergy and laity - a few gifted people up front who do most of the ministry and all the others who get to pay for it and watch it from a distance. That concept needs to be exposed for the lie it is so that everyone can be released into the ministry of the Kingdom of God.

Churches need to move away from unbiblical and ineffective styles of leadership and governance and return to the clear Biblical principles of raising up gifted, called, empowered leaders as God determines so that the Church can survive the rapid growth that will occur in revival.

The Church needs to be set free from the bondage of denominationalism and traditions which force people to maintain certain practices and doctrines as though they came from the heart of God when in fact many of them were never from Him and have served more as a barrier to His work than a blessing. I believe there has been some progress in all these areas in recent years and we have much to praise God for - and yet revival still eludes us.

The Church remains largely irrelevant and impotent in the communities around us. We are a long way from being a dominant force and the conscience of our society. That is because, I believe, we are yet to give the Lord full permission to work at the very foundation of our lives as a corporate body. Our character, our personality and the choices we make in private and at home and work and play; our attitudes, actions and lifestyles which define far more clearly who we really are than all the stuff we believe in our minds and sing about and pray about.

For so many of us, our Christian life is defined, in our minds at least, as that which we do on a Sunday and in our other 'Church' activities. Too often, for many of us, we have this mask for when we are with Christians and then we take it off when we drive our car, relate to our family, talk to our workmates, watch TV, surf the internet etc. But who you are when nobody's looking; who you are at your worst moment is your true condition. That is reality. That is what you know in your heart of hearts to be your true condition before God. No matter how hard we try to project a good, clean, holy, spiritually disciplined façade, every now and then we walk past a spiritual mirror and see the truth as God sees it and see ourselves as we really are.

We need to understand something. The gift of discernment could well be more active in the pagan world than in the Church. As confronting as that sounds I believe it is true. People outside the Church see the truth in us more than we see it ourselves. Non-Christians, more often than not, will see what God sees. They will see our inconsistency. They will hear what comes out of our mouth and observe how we drive and what we watch on TV and what we do with our money and how we talk about our spouse and children and workmates and neighbours and they will make judgements about Christianity and God based on our life. We are all on display friends. We are naked before a watching world. Every thought, word and deed is under the microscope. The way we live, the way we drive, the way we speak, the way we do business, that way we shop, the way we comment on world events and politics – it is all on display to the world every day.

Now I can almost hear the protests rising, *"Surely he's not saying that we should allow other people's opinions of us to govern our lives. Surely he's not suggesting that we should allow other people's opinions of us set the agenda for how we live?"* Well relax, because I am not saying that at all. You can breathe easy.

I am not suggesting for a moment that you should allow someone's personal opinion of you to govern what you do with your life and how you live. But don't relax too long here, because what I am saying is that if people's opinions of God and the Church of Jesus Christ are based on what they observe in us and those opinions are negative and critical, then we need to take responsibility for that. Our lives are an open book to the world and the opening page of that book reads as follows:

Come and meet Jesus. Here He is. Come and meet the Lord of glory in my life. Observe me every day. Watch what I do and listen to what I say and observe my attitude on the road when I drive and sit in on my nights in front of the lounge room idol and observe what I choose to fill my mind with - and you will meet Jesus - or not. You will see His transforming power first hand - or not. You will see why I am so different to you and why Christianity is so life-changing and transforming - or not. You will be so arrested and excited as you observe me - you will cry out to God for the reality that is mine - or not. You will want to be where I am and you will want what I have - or not. You will see Jesus in me and in my attitudes, my actions and where I spend my money and time - or not. Come now and observe me closely, look into my heart and my soul and my bookshelf and my playlist and my internet browser history and my mind and find Jesus - or not.

Like it or not, that is the script on the opening page of your book and mine and it is laid out before the world every day and we cannot close it or change it.

We are the only Jesus this world will ever see and they couldn't care less about our spiritual gifts; our power ministry; our knowledge of the grace of God; our anointed worship; our spiritual discernment; our biblical leadership structure and all the other wonderful changes that may have taken place to renew us and revive us and re-focus us. Those things are all important and they have been used by God and will be in the future but they are for us, the Church. What about them - the ones who are yet to bask in God's glory? What about those outside the Church who have no choice but to look at you and me and make a judgement about God based on what they see in our character and our life. Our families and our friends who are not part of the Church will do the same.

They don't care how gifted we are or how prominent we are in ministry; they don't care how long we've been a Christian or how knowledgeable we are; they don't care about our training or equipping; they don't care that we got a word from the Lord for someone last Sunday; they don't care about anything that happens inside the Church; they don't care that we stand here and worship a God of power, if that same God has not changed us so radically that they see it with their own eyes and hear it with their own ears and are gripped by the reality of who we are in Christ.

The ones who desperately need the Gospel are also not impressed by our evangelism programs. They just need to see transformed lives. They need some concrete evidence that God is real and that He can completely change their life. They don't want to hear us talk about How powerful God is and what He did in Church last week when we just act like everyone else when they see us. We groan when we're sick; we whinge just as much as they do about the government; we criticise others behind their back; we act pretty much like everyone else in world. Our attitudes, our character and our transformed life will say so much more than any spiritualised witnessing they may hear from us.

Do you know what you're unbelieving workmates and family and friends are saying to you? Do you know what your own children who are yet to embrace Christ are saying to you? Whether you know it or not, whether they know it or not, effectively they are crying out, *"Show me the real God in your life. Live it. Prove to me that this stuff is real as it transforms you. Don't tell me about God. Don't witness with empty words and prayers. SHOW ME THE LIVING JESUS every day in the way you live. Then, maybe, just maybe I might see the truth in what you say."*

The world is suspicious of a God who can find you a parking spot on a rainy day but cannot stop women and children being raped and murdered in Sudan. The world is suspicious of a God who can wipe you out and re-arrange your heart in a ministry time on Sunday but He hasn't helped you drive any safer on Monday. The world is suspicious of a God who loves them so much that He had His only boy murdered to save them all and yet the people who need His love the most – the lost, lonely, dirty, marginalised and oppressed people in the world around us are still not made to feel welcome in what some of us call 'God's house.' The world is suspicious of people who are in the front line of Christian ministry in the Church but do not show the reality of God's transformation in them.

Basically friends, what I am saying is that the thousands of people out there who desperately need to know Jesus will never know Him until we drop the masks, stop playing games and let the Spirit of God permeate and saturate our whole character. Our walk and our talk need to come into line if we are to make any impact in this world for God.

Thousands of people are out there waiting for you and me to get our act together and let the sanctifying work of the Spirit touch every area of our lives, deep inside us where our true character, morality and heart lies. Those people will not respond to God; the end times harvest will not be a reality for you and me; revival will remain just a word in our prayers and songs until the day comes when we decide to open all the doors to those secret little nooks and crannies of our heart and mind and allow the Holy Spirit to complete the transforming work which God started on the cross, over 2000 years ago.

In this teaching series God is going to invite us to stand before the mirror of His Word and we are going to see ourselves as we really are. This revelation will not come in judgement for there is no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus. This is not about judgement, this is about the 'cause and effect' realities of life and how our attitudes, personal lives and character are used by God to save and draw people near to Him ... or ... they are used by Satan to repel people from God and the Church. God wants to challenge us all again to stop playing Church and stop cranking the handle week by week as we perpetuate Church life and make very little difference in the world.

Will it ever be different? Will we ever see revival across our city and our nation? Will we ever see the explosion of Church growth which the disciples saw in the early Church? Are these just dreams or will we get to be part of that harvest? Good questions .. and the answers are right in front of us, as the Lord brings up that mirror before us and asks us today: HOW THEN SHALL YOU LIVE? What kind of Jesus are we showing our children, grandchildren, our relatives, our friends, our workmates, the people in the street, our neighbours? What kind of Jesus are the emaciated children on the World Vision segment on TV seeing in us and in the millions like us who stare at their faces without compassion – waiting for the next trashy reality show to come on? What kind of Jesus are people seeing in us, in our attitudes, our lifestyle, our moods and the choices we make each day? Are we showing them the one and only life-transforming, grace-filled Saviour - the One Who is the way, the truth and the life? Are they seeing the real Jesus in us? If they are, then they will sit up and take notice and they will evangelise themselves right into the Kingdom of God because they will want what we've got; they will want to be where we are; they will see life and light and hope and maturity and consistency in us and they will respond because they want to be like us.

Friends, the Holy Spirit is going to bring up that mirror in front of each one of us right through this teaching series and this mirror never lies. We can fool ourselves into thinking that we are doing OK and that our lives are consistent with what we say and what we sing and pray; we can even fool others most of the time. But we cannot fool God and sooner or later that mirror will confront us with the truth and God is going to challenge us all to look long and hard into that mirror and allow it to do its job. It may not be a pleasant experience, but I can assure you it will be a liberating experience. God is doing this for a very positive purpose - He isn't just wanting to give us a hard time as He reveals our character flaws and spiritual immaturity. God has a purpose. He wants to refine us and pull up the weeds of the enemy that continue to choke the good seed. He wants to close the doors we have left open through which Satan can still come and destroy our effectiveness and rob us of the fruit God desires to birth in us.

The Lord is going to knock us into shape for the task ahead. It will be like we are entering boot camp and the major offensive into enemy territory is not far away. So this will not be froth an bubble and some of us will not like our time in boot camp at all. It is a hard place to be. But if we submit to the discipline and submit to the firm but loving hand of our Lord and Commander - then we will be transformed during this time. This part of our journey is not negotiable friends. There is no way around this narrow valley. If we want to get to the promised land we have to go this way. The road may be rocky, we may feel like turning back, but our Guide will be there as He has been all along and He will make sure we get through it. When we do, and we look back on this leg of the journey, we will praise God for every rock and every pothole and every struggle because we will have found a freedom and a power and a maturity that we never would have dreamed possible in this life.

Well, now that I've warned you all and told you what's coming, I suggest you spend some alone time with God in the coming days and let the Holy Spirit show you what God is doing in your heart and in your Church and your city. Sometimes the Spirit needs to be given time and permission to break up our fallow ground - smash through the crust on our hearts and prepare the soil for the seed of God's Word. May we receive all that God has for us at this time.

GROWING IN CHRIST – Part 3

'Our Purpose in Life'

by Rev. Robert Griffith

If we truly want to grow and mature in Christ, then we must allow the Spirit of God access to the bedrock of our life, our faith, our character and our personality so that He can strengthen us, remove any flaws and if necessary, totally rebuild everything. In order for us to find growth and maturity and strength above the surface, we need to make sure everything below the surface is in order.

I liken our journey in this teaching series to the restoration of the Queen Victoria Building in Sydney many years ago. Some of you may have even seen what they did to that magnificent building. I recall the day when I walked past in George Street as a truck was coming through a large gate in a security fence and so I got to see right into the construction site.

I was astounded to see that they had excavated beneath this grand old building far enough to put in a multi-storey underground car park. They had actually gone beneath the old foundations to strengthen them and restore them. Then they went down three more floors.

I remember walking through the building several years later admiring the finished product above the ground but then I quickly realised that for every hour they spent on the visible renovation above ground, they spent at least ten hours underneath the ground, making sure that this magnificently 'revived' building everyone could see had a firm enough foundation to allow it to stand for another 100 years.

Friends, that's the kind of process which can unfold in us through this teaching series, if we let God have His way. The safety fence has been erected, the plans have been prepared, some rather confronting warnings have been issued about the task before us and now the excavation and exposure of the foundations of our life can begin. We will go slowly so as to ensure that the whole building doesn't collapse. The task is monumental to us, but a normal day on the job for God.

I want us to begin at the basic level of reading the plans and understanding our very purpose in life. This comes even before the foundation is replaced or strengthened. This is the philosophy beneath the foundation if you like. So what is our purpose in life? The Apostle Peter tells us very clearly in his first letter. Let's read this from the amplified Bible.

1 Peter 2:9 *"You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a dedicated nation, God's own purchased, special people, that you may set forth the wonderful deeds, and display the virtues and perfections of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvellous light."*

Living a life without any real meaning to it - without any goal or purpose - is not only dull and boring, it is miserable! For the Christian, such a life should never be. If we really understand who we are, what our purpose is for us being here - and where we are going - life will become exciting and abundant and full. If the foundation is strong, the building will be strong. If our basic purpose is clear, our life will work.

So who are we? We are: "... a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a dedicated nation, God's own purchased, special people; we are the sons and daughters of God." (1 John 3:2). We are, "children of God and joint heirs with Christ." (Romans 8:16, 17). We are "his bride . . ." (Revelation 19:7).

And what is our purpose? Our purpose in life can be summed up with two words: *becoming* and *doing*. Those same two words form the basis of evaluation for us along the way too. At any point in our lives we should be able to ask *"Who am I becoming?"* and *"What am I doing?"* The answers to those questions will determine if we are on track with what God has prepared for us. Let's see what the Bible says about this.

1. Becoming

Romans 8:28-29 *"And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers."*

Who we are becoming as a person is a 100 times more important than what we are accomplishing. If we have the proper character, we will accomplish God's will for our lives. Heaven is not our goal, it is our destiny. Our goal is to become more like Jesus! The Apostle Paul is a great example of someone who was becoming. He was a man who was not in a spiritual rut. He pressed on towards the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus. His one supreme goal was to know Jesus in a more intimate way and to be identified with Him by his life.

1 Corinthians 9:26-27 *"Therefore I do not run like a man running aimlessly; I do not fight like a man beating the air. No, I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize."*

Paul knew that if he would ever be the person Jesus wanted him to be, he must exercise discipline. He had desire, but discipline was also necessary. The body, with its own desires and cravings, must be brought under control and become subject to the Spirit of God. The word *disciple* comes from the same root word that *discipline* comes from. If we are going to be true disciples of Jesus Christ, we must learn to discipline ourselves. This simply means we must learn to bring our lives under subjection. We need to exercise control over our desires, thoughts, emotions and behaviour. In almost every other vocation - for example: sports, music, or a military career - discipline is the key for success. Our primary vocation or calling is to be a Christian (Christ-like), and this is only possible when we cooperate with the Holy Spirit and discipline ourselves.

2 Corinthians 7:1 *"Since we have these promises, dear friends, let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God."*

Revelation 19:7 *"Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory! For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready."*

The emphasis in the above Scriptures is that the Holy Spirit does not do it all. We must discipline ourselves and make ourselves ready for our Bridegroom. It may not always be convenient to fast and pray, but it is important. There are many things we could do besides reading the Bible, but man cannot live by bread alone. We need to partake of the bread of life (the Word of God). Discipline in our lives does not make God smile on us more or love us more. Our salvation and our relationship with God is not affected by anything we do or don't do. Discipline is not a legalistic duty. Nothing we do or don't do will change God's love for us or our relationship with Him. However, our personal experience of the fullness of that relationship and the power of our salvation, that is, the practical outworking of what God has worked in us, will only be our experience as we participate with the Holy Spirit and allow the life that is in us to rise to the surface and permeate who we are and what we do in the process.

There are so many Christians who right now are crying out for the power and reality and gifts of the Holy Spirit as they seek a deeper walk with God and yet their undisciplined lives, sinful habits and character flaws stand in the way of who they are becoming and so they cry out in vain. The fact is, you can be whatever you want to be in this life! It really is true. What kind of Christian do you want to be? What do you really wish to do with the rest of your life? It is up to you to choose whether you will be just an ordinary Christian, or whether you will be a person that God can use in a very special way. Again, discipline is the key.

Elijah was used by God to bring revival to a whole nation. Was he some super human being? No, not at all. James tell us in his letter that Elijah was a man subject to human passions as we are, and yet he prayed earnestly that it might not rain: and it didn't rain on the earth for three years and six months. Then he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain, and the earth brought forth her fruit. (James 5:17,18). His key to success was not that he was a special kind of person - with special talents or powers. The key to his success, I believe, was a disciplined prayer life.

In Acts 6 we read about the seven men who were appointed as the first Deacons of the apostolic Church. Five of them were Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas. How many of them could you have named? Probably none. They were just good, ordinary men who did their job in a good, ordinary way. But what about the other two deacons, Stephen and Philip? They had the same opportunities. The same doors opened to them that opened to the other five. But both went down in Church history as great men of God. Stephen became the first Christian martyr and Philip became a great evangelist who set the city of Samaria on fire with the flames of the gospel of Jesus Christ. He was also responsible for the gospel being carried into the country of Ethiopia. (see Acts, Chapters 7 and 8). These men, like all the great men and women of the Bible and throughout Church History, were becoming; they were in a constant state of flux; they never stopped growing in Christ; they were disciplining themselves so as to allow the Spirit of God the opportunity to mould them more and more into the image of Jesus.

If you have not read Billy Graham's Autobiography, *Just a I am*, then I strongly recommend you find a copy and read it soon. One of the most obvious characteristics of this incredible man of God is that from the day He embraced Jesus as Saviour right through to the end of his long life, Billy Graham was a work in progress; he was always becoming; he was always learning, growing and maturing. After leading hundreds of thousands of people to the Lord in over 160 countries around the world this great statesman of the Kingdom of God still disciplined himself every day to study the Word and pray and deal with personal sin and weaknesses in his character. He said that one of his struggles in writing an autobiography was that he was still learning and growing and he knew that as soon as he committed anything to writing about his life there would be another lesson and another chapter where he would become even more like Jesus.

What a testimony! What a powerful example of this foundational truth. If ever there was a man in our lifetime who could hang up his hat and feel like he had arrived and done well - it would be Billy Graham. A man of incredible integrity and maturity; a man of transparent honesty and humility; a man who did more in one life-time to make this world a better place and populate heaven than any other single person for centuries. And yet that man was still becoming, still learning and still growing in Christ until the day he died. So you see friends, becoming is not just an initial phase; it's not an early training program; it's not something we grow out of. This is a day-by-day lifetime process and the reason we are not living in full-on revival across this nation at present, I believe, is because millions of Christians stopped becoming . . . years ago. They supposedly 'grew up' and 'settled down' and the learning and growing, the daily disciplined journey stopped dead in its tracks. Becoming is critically important . . . but so is doing.

2. Doing:

Matthew 28:19 *"Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit ..."*

Mark 16:15 *"He said to them, "Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation."*

Acts 1:8 *"But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."*

The responsibility for reaching this world with the gospel of Jesus Christ does not belong only to preachers and paid staff in Churches. Every child of God is to be a witness for Jesus Christ and to use their gifts to reach the same end - to seek and to save the lost. The spiritual-minded Christian is not content with just existing. Such a person has learned that the only truly happy life is when we get involved with the work of God and are always busy for Jesus. They have learned that true joy comes when we have the right priorities: Jesus first, others second, ourselves last.

Luke 17:33 *"Whoever tries to keep his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life will preserve it."*

There is a lot of meaning in those words of Jesus. When we truly lose sight of ourselves and begin to live for others, we will be partakers of the abundant life.

Luke 6:38 *"Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you."*

What is this Scripture referring to? Give what? Where does it say that this is referring to material things only? When you read the eleven verses before verse 38, you will realise that Jesus was talking about giving love. What we have is what the world needs most. We have Jesus and we have truth. We also possess the love of God, because God is love! We are vessels of His truth and we need to be channels of His love. As the old saying goes: *"God's love was not put in your heart to stay; Love isn't love, until it's given away!"*

Everything we have been given is to be given away. We are not meant to keep it. We are called to be channels, not reservoirs! We are meant to bless others with all that we have. Our time, our gifts, our money, our prayers, our life! If we live our selfish 'walled-in' lives, we will go backwards in our walk with Jesus Christ, the same Jesus Who said in Matthew 20 that He was sent by the Father, *"... not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many;"* the same Jesus Who said in John 20, *"As I have been sent . . . so now I am sending you."* Jesus Christ loved others, lived for others, and finally died for others! And He has called us to do the same.

So is there a purpose for us being in this world? Did God save us for a reason? Yes! God loves us and He wants to share eternity with us, but He also wants us to be busy becoming more like Him, and doing His will - *becoming, and doing!*

Who are you becoming and what are you doing? Are you on a journey or have you arrived somewhere and parked (or stalled) years ago? Are you making choices every day which allow the Holy Spirit to refine you and mould you more and more into the image of Jesus? Or to put it another way, are you dying to your own selfish, fleshly desires every day so that the life of Christ that is in you becomes more and more obvious to those around you? That's what growing in Christ looks like!

Is your personal, intimate relationship with God growing or deteriorating? Those are the only two choices - no relationship is static. You are either making daily choices to grow closer to God and become more united with Him, in Christ, or you are not. If you are not then the enemy will make sure you are drifting further and further away in your experience of that relationship. God will never leave you, but your fallen humanity, your selfish desires and focus can become so dominant that He may as well be a million miles away.

Who are you becoming? What are you doing? The only two answers that are consistent with the New Testament revelation of what a Christian is are this: **I am becoming more like Jesus and I am doing the works of Jesus.** Which means I am becoming more loving, patient, kind, long suffering, compassionate, selfless, caring, serving, humble, focussed on the needs of others and it means that my life's focus is to preach the good news, give sight to the blind and set the captives free. That is the answer God is waiting to hear from each and every one of us. Is that the answer you can give Him today? Who are you becoming right now? What are you doing with your life right now? Answering those questions will help you determine if you are truly growing in Christ or not.

GROWING IN CHRIST – Part 4

'Stages of Spiritual Growth'

by Rev. Robert Griffith

In our last message we were confronted with two key questions which hit at the heart of our purpose in life. Who am I becoming? and What am I doing?

I wonder if you have grappled with those questions at all this past week and whether the Lord has given you some answers. Maybe you have even made some decisions and some different choices as a result. I hope so.

In this sermon I want us to continue our journey together as we look at the process of spiritual growth and the stages through which we are meant to pass as we grow in Christ. Let's look at a couple of Scriptures first.

1 Peter 2:2 *"Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation .."*

Ephesians 4:13-15 (Amplified Bible) *".. that we might arrive at really mature manhood and womanhood - the completeness of personality which is nothing less than the standard height of Christ's own perfection - the measure of the stature of the fullness of the Christ, and the completeness found in Him.*

So then, we may no longer be children . . . Rather, let our lives lovingly express truth in all things - speaking truly, dealing truly, living truly. Enfolded in love, let us grow up in every way and in all things into Him, Who is the Head, even Christ, the Messiah, the Anointed one."

THE BABY STAGE

We are born into the Kingdom of God as babes in Christ. Whether we come to know the Lord when we are 8 or 80 - we still enter our spiritual pilgrimage as a baby. It would not be normal for a baby to be born, and the same day begin to walk and talk.

Babies must go through many stages of development before they are physically and mentally able to do these things. But a baby is expected to grow and develop. For instance, if a four-year-old child is still not walking, there would be cause for great concern.

As it is with the natural world, so is it with the spiritual world. When we come into the Church of Jesus Christ, we all have much to learn. We are not yet ready for the 'meat' of God's Word. We must stick to our 'milk' for a while. Peter tells us that like *"newborn babies, (we) crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it (we) may grow up in our salvation .."* (1 Peter 2:2). Milk is good – at the beginning.

Hebrews 5:12-14 *"In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's word all over again. You need milk, not solid food!*

Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil."

The Bible sees the 'milk of God's word' as the 'first principles' if you like and then lists them in Hebrews 6:1-2.

First Principles (milk):

1. repentance from dead works
2. faith toward God
3. doctrine of baptisms (water and Spirit)
4. laying on of hands
5. resurrection of the dead
6. eternal judgment

The letter of Hebrews refers to these six principles of the doctrine of Christ as the very foundation of our Christian experience and life. That is what a newborn babe needs - a good, solid foundation upon which he can build his life for Jesus! The newborn babe does not need to understand all the mysteries connected with the books of Daniel and Revelation.

He needs to understand and be persuaded of the truths that brought him into his new relationship with Jesus Christ (faith toward God, repentance, baptism in the name of Jesus Christ, and the baptism of the Holy Spirit). He needs to have an understanding that there is life after death and that some day all men and women will stand before God.

Besides these truths, the new Christian needs to be taught important principles that lead to spiritual growth: prayer and fasting, faithfulness to God and His body, worship, giving ... etc.

CHARACTERISTICS OF BABIES:

1. *Natural:* Newborn babies are totally dependent upon our parents for all our needs. We cannot sit, crawl, walk or run. We cannot feed ourselves, or change our nappy. All our needs are met by other people. We often make those needs known by crying, as we have no other way to express them.
2. *Spiritual:* A new convert must be taught how to study and read the Bible. We do not have the ability to feed ourselves. We must be taught how to communicate with God, just as a natural baby must be taught to communicate with people. We must be taught how to walk with God, the same as a natural baby must learn to sit up, stand and eventually walk and run.

The natural baby will often fall, until its muscles are more fully developed. It is the same with the spiritual. Therefore the saints and leaders must have much patience as the new convert gradually develops their spiritual muscles.

Unfortunately, sometimes we bring people to Church, and after they are converted, we expect the Pastor to do all the 'mothering.' If you bring someone to Jesus, do not forsake them after they are in the body of Christ. They will still look to you for further guidance, help, and understanding. If it was love that compelled you to witness to them, then that same love should still manifest itself toward them after they are in the Church.

THE CHILD STAGE:

CHARACTERISTICS OF CHILDREN:

Ephesians 4:14-15 *"Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ."*

Matthew 18:2-4 *"He called a little child and had him stand among them. And he said: "I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven."*

From those verses of Scripture in Ephesians and Matthew we can see that there are negative and positive things connected with the nature of a child. Jesus points out to us that children as a whole are humble, trusting and obedient. They will normally do anything you ask them to, trusting that whatever you say is correct. They are not too proud to humble themselves before God and men. They have not yet learned (at least in most cases) to be stubborn, wilful, and rebellious. In that way we can learn from children. That is the positive side of their nature.

On the negative side, because they do believe everything they hear and trust everybody without question, they are easily led astray. That is why Paul warns us to *"no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves ... blown here and there by every wind of teaching."*

While children can walk, run, feed and dress themselves and do many things, they still occasionally stumble. They still need others to guide them in many things. They are not aware of many dangers that exist in the world, and must be constantly warned. They have no idea what proper food is, and most of them would be happy with nothing but hamburgers and french fries, or perhaps cake and ice cream, if they always had their way.

So it is with the spiritual children. Guidance is still needed in the spiritual diet, also. Even much religious material that is available in bookstores can be harmful to the Christian who is not fully rooted and grounded in the truth. Some books may look very interesting and yet be filled with false doctrines and slander against the truth! As it has always been, there are many false religions and false prophets who will lead people astray, if they can. Jesus and the apostles warned us concerning this. (See Matthew 24:11; 1 Timothy 4:1-5; 2 Timothy 4:3-4)

Just as natural children are full of energy, so is it with spiritual children. The energy must be channelled in the right directions. Zeal without knowledge is like a runaway horse! Knowledge is learned, not just by studying the Word of God, but also by walking with Jesus Christ over a period of time, and learning those things which enhance or hinder His Kingdom growing among us.

It is attained, not only by glorious experiences, but also by hardships, persecutions, temptations and trials. All these help a spiritual child to grow up and become a mature Christian. Also, Christians still in the child stage, tend to rely on the blessing more than the One Who blesses, Jesus Christ!. They have not learned that the greatest joy of being a Spirit-filled Christian is the relationship we have with Jesus Christ.

THE YOUTH STAGE:

1 John 2:14 *"... I write to you, fathers, because you have known him who is from the beginning. I write to you, young men, because you are strong, and the word of God lives in you, and you have overcome the evil one."*

This is the stage in which the Christian starts to become an 'adult' in terms of their spiritual strength and faith in God. This is where we learn how to 'take hold of God' by prayer and fasting. We learn how to assert and use our God-given authority over the enemy of our soul, the devil.

There are, however, some dangers to avoid. Young people tend to believe that they know more than their elders and they crave their independence. It is often difficult for them to be subject to authority. Often they don't appreciate anybody correcting them.

Sometimes there is the same tendency with those in the 'spiritual youth stage.' They pray and fast much. They feel they are spiritually strong, but they may still lack maturity. They may feel that because they hear from God and enjoy God's blessings, they do not need to submit themselves to authority or correction. This can be extremely dangerous, because the Bible admonishes us:

Hebrews 13:17 *"Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you."*

THE MATURE CHRISTIAN:

Ephesians 4:11-13 (Amplified Bible) *"His gifts were (varied; He Himself appointed and gave men to us,) some to be apostles (special messengers), some evangelists (preachers of the Gospel, travelling missionaries), some pastors (shepherds of His flock) and teachers. His intention was the perfecting and the full equipping of the saints (His consecrated people), (that they should do) the work of ministering toward building up Christ's body (the church), (that it might develop) until we all attain oneness in the faith and in the comprehension of the full and accurate knowledge of the Son of God; that (we might arrive) at really mature manhood - the completeness of personality which is nothing less than the standard height of the fullness of the Christ, and the completeness found in Him."*

As I said in the previous sermon, heaven is not our goal - it is our destiny. Our goal is to grow up and become mature - to become more like Jesus Christ. This was what Paul was referring to in this passage:

Philippians 3:12-14 *"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."*

In all things, Paul seemed to be a mature Christian. He could write *"for me to live is Christ .."* How many of us could make such a statement. Paul also wrote:

1 Corinthians 2:15-16 *"The spiritual man makes judgments about all things, but he himself is not subject to any man's judgment: For who has known the mind of the Lord that he may instruct him?" But we have the mind of Christ."*

Despite his close walk with God, Paul was not satisfied! Had he lived in our day, he would probably have loved the old hymn:

*To be like Jesus, to be like Jesus,
On earth I long, to be like Him,
All through life's journey, from earth to glory,
I only ask, to be like Him.*

The sad truth is that some people remain in the 'baby stage' year after year. There is no spiritual growth in their walk with God. They are in a spiritual rut. They are going nowhere. This is not the will of God for any of us. Paul said it beautifully in this verse:

2 Corinthians 3:18 *"And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit."*

That is God's will for you my friend. His plan and purpose for you is to grow up into Christ. He wants you to have the dependency and innocence of a baby - but He does not want you to remain a baby. He wants you to have the faith, the humility and trust of a child but He does not want you to stay a child. He wants you to have the enthusiasm and passion of youth and the commitment to life and ministry - but He does not want you remain a youth.

He wants you and I to progress through these stages as we mature in Him and unless we are making deliberate choices to progress through these stages of growth, we will never find spiritual maturity in this life. It is not automatic and it will not be our experience unless we make the right choices. There are spiritual babies in the Church who have been Christians all their lives and have never learned to stand on their own two feet. It is amazing really. We would be beside ourselves with worry in the natural world if our child could not walk and talk and dress themselves after only a few years.

Yet there are thousands of spiritual babies dribbling their way through life in the Church year after year, needing to be spoon fed every week. Even more still have progressed to the child stage and can manage to get around on their own and dress themselves and feed themselves - but they remain addicted to milk and are permanently malnourished, weak and spiritually starved.

It's time to be honest with ourselves and God. If we are not learning more about God every day; if we are not facing new challenges in our spiritual journey every week which force us back onto God to trust Him to get us through another learning experience, then we have stalled in our journey and we are not maturing at all. We are not becoming more like Jesus. We are just living a version of yesterday and not seizing the day and embracing the power and reality of tomorrow.

As parents, if we had a child that stopped developing and growing at an early stage in life then I know we would stop at nothing and take them to any and every specialist to find out what was wrong with them and what could be done to help them grow up as normal people do. And yet we have thousands of spiritual children who are in the same boat in Churches across the nation. Their normal development in the Lord stopped at some point many years ago and they are spiritually retarded and very little is being achieved in that Church because so few people see this truth.

While ever we can find one person who knows less than us or who has experienced less than us - we think we are mature! That would be funny if it was not so serious! Instead of comparing ourselves with other babies, we should look at Jesus as our only valid comparison and role model. We are to become like Him in every way and that is our goal and that should drive us to our knees every day and press us forward in our quest to grow up into Him.

GROWING IN CHRIST – Part 5

'The Fruit of the Spirit'

by Rev. Robert Griffith

Before we can really grow in Christ and become all that God intended us to become, we have to first acknowledge that our entire Christian life is a growing process in the first place. Now that sounds so obvious but I believe it needs to be stressed over and over again. If you look at the way many Christians are living today you would deduce that their conversion was their destination and that they reached their goal when they came to faith in Jesus Christ.

Until we come to the point of accepting that our conversion was only just the beginning of a long journey and that we must progress through the stages of maturity in our spiritual life just as we must in our physical life; until we acknowledge the need to grow and change and develop every day, 'Growing in Christ' will be nothing more than the title of a teaching series. It will certainly not be our experience.

Once we acknowledge our need for growth; once we commit to travelling this road to maturity, then we must ask, as we did a couple of weeks ago, 'What is our purpose in life?' Until we know why we are here; until we know what this 'maturity' is that we seek, then our pursuit of it will be futile. I believe we established our goal already in this series - can you remember?

What is our purpose in life? What is this maturity which we long for every day? It centres around two words: *becoming* and *doing* - becoming more like Jesus and doing the works of Jesus. That is why we are here; that is what we were left on this planet for; that is our primary reason for being. God's will for each and every one of us is the same: we are to be conformed into the image of His Son, Jesus and as that transformation takes place we therefore act more like Jesus and do the things Jesus did when He was here.

His mission was to seek and save the lost. He was sent to preach good news to the poor, open blind eyes and deaf ears and bring life to the lame - to heal the sick and broken-hearted and free the oppressed. We are surrounded by those who are blind, deaf and crippled physically, emotionally, relationally and spiritually. Just as Jesus came to set those captives free and take back everything the devil has stolen, so too is our calling and our purpose today and every day.

Therefore, as we are transformed more and more into the image of Jesus, it will affect our character and then our actions. It will affect who we are as well as what we do. Both go together, but I want to stress again that *who* we are always comes first. Who we are deep inside is always more important than what we do. In fact it is supposed to be the source for what we do. If our works and actions are to bear any real fruit at all they have to come from the depths of who we are.

So with that in mind, let us continue our journey of growth in Christ.

Galatians 5:22-23

"But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law."

Notice that these things are called the fruit (singular) of the Spirit, not fruits (plural). This is so very important to understand. These things come as a single package because they come from one source – Jesus Christ, imparted to us by the Holy Spirit.

This fruit is not something we can develop within our own selves. This is a supernatural work of God in our lives. This is not something we put on when we are in Church and take off when we get home. It is godly character that becomes part of the real us, as we learn to walk and live in the Spirit. We may try to "put on" these things by manufacturing masks that give the appearance of spiritual fruit, yet they only work for a while in hiding the real fruit in our hearts. Apart from Jesus Christ we cannot bear this fruit. Jesus made that very clear a long time ago:

John 15:4-5,8

"Remain in me, and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing . . . This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples."

When we are born into His kingdom, we become "trees of righteousness, the planting of the Lord" (Isaiah 61:3). Jesus said, "Every plant which my heavenly Father has not planted shall be rooted up." (Matthew 15:13). Fruit always comes from the heart of the plant. If the life of an apple is in the tree - it will bear apples. Simple. It's guaranteed. It's automatic. So too with us - unless we have the life of Christ in us by the indwelling of His Holy Spirit - we will never bear His fruit. A true Christian is known by their fruit:

Matthew 7:16-20

"By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? Likewise every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them."

Matthew 21:18-19

"Early in the morning, as he was on his way back to the city, he was hungry. Seeing a fig tree by the road, he went up to it but found nothing on it except leaves. Then he said to it, 'May you never bear fruit again!' Immediately the tree withered.'"

Jesus hungers to see the fruit of the Spirit manifest in our lives. We are as cursed as that fig tree if we are not bearing the fruit of the Holy Spirit! Then He told this parable:

Luke 13:6-9

"A man had a fig tree, planted in his vineyard, and he went to look for fruit on it, but did not find any. So he said to the man who took care of the vineyard, 'For three years now I've been coming to look for fruit on this fig tree and haven't found any. Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil?' 'Sir,' the man replied, 'leave it alone for one more year, and I'll dig around it and fertilize it. If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down.'"

In this parable, Jesus is the man who owned the fig tree. The 'dresser of the vineyard' is the pastor. The fig tree is a person who has come into the Church, but after three years – is still not fruitful. The 'dresser' (pastor) made intercession for the unfruitful person, because the owner wanted to know why it was allowed to take up the ground, since it did not bear fruit. Truly God does not want us to just take up space in the Church. The pastor, evangelists, teachers and leaders preach and teach the Word of God faithfully, and the pastor and leaders pray for the new Christian, but after a while, he/she is expected to take personal responsibility and become a fruitful Christian.

Luke 8:5-8

"A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path; it was trampled on, and the birds of the air ate it up. Some fell on rock, and when it came up, the plants withered because they had no moisture. Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up with it and choked the plants. Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up and yielded a crop, a hundred times more than was sown." When he said this, he called out, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear."

Jesus gave us the interpretation of the parable in verses 11-15. He informed us that the seed is the Word of God. The sower is someone who shares the Word. The varied conditions of the soil represent the varied conditions of the hearts of those who hear the word:

- a) The first kind of soil are the paths between the rows where people walk. This ground is hard. When the Word of God is shared with people whose hearts are hard, it is not received, and the truth shared with them is quickly taken away by the devil.
- b) The second type of soil (rocky ground) represents people who hear the Word, and receive it with joy, but they never get rooted and grounded in the truth. They also lack moisture (they never receive and submit to the Holy Spirit) and so they soon dry up.
- c) The third type of soil (thorny) represents people who receive the Word of God and embrace it fully. They go forth and begin to live the Christian life. But they are never very fruitful because they become distracted and choked with the cares, riches and pleasures of this life.
- d) The fourth type of soil is the receptive heart that receives the Word gladly and becomes a fruit-bearing disciple: The seed in good soil represents those with a noble and good heart, who hear the word, retain it and by persevering, produce the fruit God intended. (Luke 8:15).

HOW TO BE A FRUITBEARER

> *Allow the Holy Spirit to fill you and saturate all that you think, say and do.*

The fruit we are talking about here is the fruit of the Spirit. The Holy Spirit will not force Himself upon you. He must be invited, welcomed and freely submitted to - or we will not see His ministry in our lives. We will not see the character of Jesus emerging in us and therefore we will not bear any fruit for Him. It is our daily choice to either allow the Spirit to rule in our hearts or to quench Him and rule ourselves. This is what 'taking up our cross' really means. This is what 'denying ourselves' really means. This is what 'discipleship' really means. This is Christian maturity.

> *Read and meditate upon the Word of God.*

Psalm 1:2, 3

"But his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night. He is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither. Whatever he does prospers."

We have to hear from God. In John 5:19 we read where Jesus said, *"I only do what I see the Father doing."* So part of the reason we submit to the Holy Spirit is so that we are in tune with the Father at every point. Jesus only spoke the words given to Him by the Spirit and Jesus allowed the Spirit to show Him the Father's heart at every point in His life and ministry among us.

This was a moment by moment adventure. Not a quick prayer at 6am then rush off down and do whatever you think sounds OK. No - Jesus was in tune with the Spirit every step of the way. We have been given such a wonderful gift in the Scriptures. So much of God's heart and God's purpose has been written down for us to read and meditate upon. These words of man contain the very Word of God and we have no excuse for not hearing His voice. This is certainly not the only way God will guide us, but it must always be our first port of call in discerning His will and it should be our last port of call in checking all other sources of His voice to us.

> *Put your trust in the Lord.*

Jeremiah 17:7-8

"But blessed is the man or woman who trusts in the LORD, whose confidence is in him. They will be like a tree planted by the water that sends out its roots by the stream. It does not fear when heat comes; its leaves are always green. It has no worries in a year of drought and never fails to bear fruit."

One of the most honest confessions we can make is to admit that we simply don't trust God enough. That so many (if not all) of our struggles, challenges and failures in life stem from an unbelieving heart. We need to trust God to be Who He said He is and do what He said He would do. We should not allow doubt or fear or man's wisdom and experience to get in the way of pure child-like trust.

Yet again, it comes down to our character deep within. It comes down to our inner nourishment. If our roots are firmly planted in the soil of God's heart; if we are drawing from the living water supplied 24 hours a day by His Holy Spirit, then we will be able to withstand the strongest wind, the hottest day and the coldest night. A tree has no life other than what it draws from the soil and water below. So too with us. Unless we make the choice to plant ourselves beside the stream of God's life-giving water, we will not stand.

> *Let the Lord work on you.*

2 Peter 1:5-8

"For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness, love. For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ."

It is a daily choice, my friends - just as it was with Jesus. As you crawl out of bed in the morning and look at that face in the mirror, ask yourself a question: Who will they see today: Jesus or me? Will I allow my flesh and its desires to dominate my choices today or will I submit to the Spirit of Jesus within me and allow Him to guide my tongue, my feet, my hands, my choices, my prayers and my heart? It sounds so simple - and it is that simple. The only reason it becomes hard is because our heart is desperately wicked and our desire to feed our flesh and our fallen humanity is very strong.

Most mornings we don't even want to look in that mirror, must less ask such a confronting question. But until we do - until we make that choice every day, then the fruit of the flesh will remain and the fruit of the Spirit will not be seen in us. We will not move at all in our journey towards spiritual maturity. In fact, worse than that, like the fig tree - we will wither and die spiritually. Our spiritual effectiveness will be reduced to zero.

If seeking the fruit of the Spirit in our lives is not on the top of our priority list then forget about the gifts. Read 1 Corinthians 13 and you will see that having the gifts of the Spirit without the fruit of the Spirit achieves very little. But you might be thinking how can it be possible to have one without the other? Easy - the gifts are tools for ministry; the gifts of the Spirit are given to the Church so that we can effectively do the works of Jesus. Whereas the fruit of the Spirit flows from our very character. **The fruit of the Spirit defines who we are becoming. The gifts of the Spirit are tools for the ministry which flows from that.**

It's not a matter of going through the list of words in Galatians 5 and ticking them off one by one: 'Let's see . . . love, joy, peace, patience . . . etc.' No. As I said at the beginning, the fruit here is singular. This list is simply a description of the personality of Jesus Himself, indwelling us through the Holy Spirit. It is a package deal – it's all or nothing. You either have them all or you don't. Our task is far simpler than we think. We don't have to struggle and strain trying to fulfil this high calling and this list of character traits.

Galatians 5 does not exhort us to be more loving and joyful and peaceful and kind and forbearing - not at all! The exhortation is to do one thing and one thing only: submit to the Spirit of God and allow Him to bring all the fruit (singular) into our lives - and He will, in increasing measure, as soon as we get this key point into our head. **We cannot produce anything but the fruit of the flesh.** That is all that's inside us. We are wretched, fallen, lost and evil. We cannot bear anything but bad fruit. So the more we struggle in the flesh, the more we do and the harder we try in our own strength, the less likely we are to see the fruit of the Spirit in our lives.

Submission is the key - letting our flesh and all its well-intentioned efforts die with Jesus on that cross – that's the key here. That is how we grow up into Christ. It comes from brokenness, contrition, submission, confession and repentance. It comes from acknowledging every single day that unless the Spirit of God is allowed to release the life and character and loveliness of Jesus in me today, then I may as well stay in bed, for I will achieve nothing of any value for God's Kingdom.

Brothers and sisters hear the Word of God here: no matter how much it offends your fallen mind and wounds your rebellious heart: **This is not about us - it is all about Jesus.** The only reason you still live and breathe is so that you can radiate the life of Christ into the darkness of this world. Yes, you are free - it is for freedom that you were set free by the grace of God - that is true. God is going to love you no more and no less regardless of what you do with your life. But don't you want to know what He planned for you before the creation of the world? Don't you want to know what He longs for you do? Don't you want to know what He had His only boy murdered to empower you to do?

God went to incredible lengths so that you could 'be Jesus' in a needy world. That's why God left you here. If your enjoyment, pleasure and freedom was the only purpose of your salvation, then He would have taken you home to heaven when He saved you. He left you here because the mission of Christ is not complete. He left you here so you could be Jesus to those around you. He left you here to be transformed into the image of Jesus and do the works of Jesus.

How then shall we live? Sadly, probably the same as we did last week. But if we decide to take any of this stuff seriously; if we really allow what God is saying to get into our heart, then we will not be same person this time next week. That, I can promise.

GROWING IN CHRIST – Part 6

'This Love, this God'

by Rev. Robert Griffith

The Apostle Paul was a teacher, pastor and passionate leader and as such his overwhelming desire was to see God's people grow in Christ. Here's just one of his passionate pleas in his letter to his old Church at Ephesus.

Ephesians 3:17-19 " (I pray)... that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge - that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God."

One of the most powerful forces on earth to bring us to into a Christ-like character is having a proper concept of God - how we truly see God; what we think God is really like! Our ability to love God as He desires us to love Him hinges on us having a proper concept of God.

Those who have never experienced much human love often have a distorted view of God. The Bible tells us that we were created in the image of God, but unfortunately, some of us, in our imaginations, have been busy trying to create a God in our image, with all our limitations!

It's tragic but true that as many children have grown up, they have heard statements like, "If you do that, God won't love you." or "God's gonna get you!" With a picture in their minds of a God who is ready at every opportunity to dish out His wrath upon humanity, is it any wonder that as those children they grow they reject God? Their parents, or sadly even the Church, have introduced them to a God they cannot love!

Some people like this do come to Jesus out of fear, but that kind of relationship seldom lasts! John Powell, in his book *Why Am I Afraid to Love*, says the following:

"Fear is a fragile bond of union, a brittle basis of faith. The person who serves out of fear, without the realization of love, will try to bargain with God. He will do little things for God, make little offerings, say little prayers, etc., to embezzle a place in the heaven of his God. Life and faith will be a chess game, hardly an affair of love."

How true his words are. I have seen it so many times and I have seen people set free from that fear too. The distorted and limited vision many people have of God is not at all the God revealed to us in the Bible and manifested to us through the life, ministry, and death of Jesus Christ! The Bible reveals to us the very nature of God:

1. God is holy (Leviticus 19:2)
2. God is light (1 John 1:5)
3. God is love (1 John 4:8,16)

These are not just attributes or character traits of God. This is the very substance and essence of God. He does not *have* holiness, God *is* holy. God does not *radiate* light, God *is* the source of light. God does not *have* love, God *is* love! Paul tells us that if we are to be filled with all the fullness of God, we need to be able to comprehend or understand the greatness (the breadth, length, depth, and height) of God's love. Then after making such a statement, he concludes that "... the love of Christ ... surpasses knowledge." It is broader than the east is from the west. It is higher than the heavens, and deeper than the ocean. It knows no boundaries or limitations!

Literally thousands of books have been written in an attempt to help us understand this beautiful love, but when they are all compiled together, they still do little justice to this inexhaustible theme. That's what was on his mind in 1917 when Frederick Lehman wrote these words in his popular hymn, *The Love of God*:

*The love of God, is greater far,
than tongue or pen can ever tell,
It goes beyond, the highest star,
and reaches to the lowest hell.*

*Oh love of God, how rich and pure!
How measureless and strong!
It shall forevermore endure,
the saints' and angels' song.*

*Could we with ink, the ocean fill,
and were the skies of parchment made.
Were every stalk, on earth a quill,
and every man a scribe by trade.*

*To write the love, of God above,
would drain the ocean dry,
Nor could the scroll, contain the whole,
though stretched from sky to sky.*

And so continues the insurmountable task of trying to even describe, let alone understand, the greatness of this love, this God. Perhaps it is impossible for us to fully comprehend and define His love, but it is important for us to somehow deep inside of us know God's love and receive God's love. If we have an insight into and knowledge of the vast beauty of His person, it will greatly enhance our relationship with Him, and help us to love Him as He deserves to be loved!

The characteristics of God's love

So let's look briefly at the characteristics of God's love. As we do so, we are again made aware that a vast gulf exists between our frail human love and that which manifests in and radiates from God. More than any other Old Testament writer, the Psalmist David seemed to have a good understanding of God's love. He did not use the word 'love' very much, but he chose rather to write about the characteristics of that love. One of David's favourite themes was the faithfulness of God:

Psalm 36:5 *"Your love, O LORD, reaches to the heavens, your faithfulness to the skies."*

Psalm 119:90 *"Your faithfulness continues through all generations ..."*

The word *truth* as used in most Old Testament scriptures, comes from the Hebrew word *emeth*, and it means: stability, trustworthiness, truth, certainty, faithfulness. In this unstable world when it seems difficult to know whom we can trust, how wonderful to know that God is faithful!

Psalm 57:10 *"For your mercy is great unto the heavens, and your truth (stability, trustworthiness, faithfulness, etc.) unto the clouds"*

Psalm 117:2 *"..the truth (stability, trustworthiness, faithfulness, etc.) of the LORD endures for ever."*

Another favourite subject for David's songs was the lovingkindness of God:

Psalm 36:7 *"How priceless is your unfailing love!"*

Psalm 63:3 *"Because your love is better than life, my lips will glorify you."*

Notice how eloquent David gets when he writes about the beautiful qualities that are a part of God's love: *"unto the clouds," "unto the heavens," "endures forever," "better than life."* But nowhere does David get more expressive than when he writes concerning the mercies of the LORD. Most churches have a hymn or chorus that seems to be the crowd favourite. It is sung all the time. Well, David's favourite theme was *"the mercies of the LORD."* Probably his favourite psalm was Psalm 136, a responsive psalm. The leader would sing a line, *"O give thanks unto the God of gods,"* and the people would answer, *"For his mercy endures forever."* Then the leader would sing, *"O give thanks unto the LORD of lords,"* and the people would sing again, *"For his mercy endures forever."* Twenty-six times the people repeated these words during the singing of that psalm. The chorus of this psalm was David's favourite, which he used in other psalms and on many occasions: *"O give thanks unto the LORD: for he is good, For his mercy endures forever."*

Psalms 106 and 107 start with the same chorus, while Psalm 118 starts and finishes with it. Lest anyone complain upon hearing these words repeated over and over, David seems almost to warn us in this verse:

Psalm 89:1 *"I will sing of the mercies of the LORD forever."*

When the ark was brought up to Jerusalem from the house of Obbedom, and how the singers were singing David's favourite song. The Scriptures are careful to note that this had been ordered by David:

1 Chronicles 16:41 *"And with them (the Levites) Heman and Jeduthun, and the rest that were chosen, who were expressed (designated) by name, to give thanks to the LORD, because his mercy endures forever."*

At the dedication of Solomon's temple many years later, what song do you suppose the people were singing when the house of the LORD was filled with the glory of God? David's favourite song again (2 Chronicles 5:13). Five generations later, its popularity had not diminished. The singers that were appointed to go out before Jehoshaphat's army could not just sing any song. It must be David favourite song again. (2 Chronicles 20:21).

Why was David so caught up with *"the mercies of the LORD"*? Indeed, why do we appreciate this aspect of God's love so much? Is it not because we realize our own weakness and frailty? We have all failed God many times and in many ways - yet He still extends His mercy towards us. As He does so, we are made aware again that God's love is so much greater than any that has ever been offered to us by others. It is unlimited and unconditional!

We all know that we are imperfect. We want to do better and most of us are striving to improve ourselves. Nevertheless, it is the joy of knowing that God loves us just the way we are that enables us to rise from our failures, brush off the dust of defeat and continue to walk with God. More and more, as we experience God's love and begin to comprehend its characteristics and dimensions, our love relationship with Him will grow. Only then will we be able to say with the Apostle Paul:

Romans 8:38-39 *"For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord."*

So how is this love demonstrated? Let's have a look.

1 John 3:16 *"This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us."*

Not everyone who is quick to say, "I love you," really possess what they profess. That is why John the beloved exhorts us:

1 John 3:18 *"Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth."*

When God was ready to demonstrate His love for mankind, he did not just speak pretty words, which came floating down from heaven out of the clouds. He took action. God was manifest in the flesh. Since God is love, the very nature of God was revealed to mankind in a hundred thousand ways during the ministry of Jesus Christ on earth. Every healing was an act of love. Every person set free from demonic spirits was a testimony of the compassion of our loving Lord. The turning of water into wine; the multiplying of the fishes and bread; the calming of stormy seas – they were all miracles that not only exhibited the power of God, but also displayed to us the love of God. Throughout the life and ministry of Jesus Christ, this love was made known. Yet it was by His death that the greatest expression of God's love was given - love that would draw people from the grips of Satan to the crucified Christ:

John 12:31-33 *"Now is the time for judgment on this world; now the prince of this world will be driven out. But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself." He said this to show the kind of death he was going to die."*

Now a very common use of this verse today is that if we praise Jesus, our praise and worship will draw people to Him. In this way the *"lifting up"* refers to praise and worship. Whilst this is a valid interpretation that is consistent with other Scriptures on worship, we must be careful not to use these verses out of context and take anything away from the power of the cross. As is plainly understood by verse 33, Jesus was referring to the demonstration of God's love at Calvary as the power that would draw men and women to Himself.

It is interesting to note that although the Apostles expected the second coming of Jesus Christ to take place at any time, this was never the major theme of their preaching to sinners. The second coming of Jesus Christ is the hope of the Church and the apostles freely used this theme in an effort to challenge the Church to walk closer to Jesus Christ. (See 2 Peter 3:1-14, and 1 John 3:2-3.)

The theme the apostles always presented to a lost world was "the crucified Christ." I have heard thousands of sermons in my time but I have never seen any message touch the hearts of men and women more powerfully than the message of the cross! What took place on that old rugged cross at Calvary was designed by God to bring us to Himself. That beautiful demonstration of His love toward us, if truly understood, should cause us to love Him in return.

1 John 4:19 *"We love, because he first loved us."*

Paul summed up his own evangelistic preaching when he wrote to the church at Corinth:

1 Corinthians 1:17-18, 23-24 *"For Christ did not send me to baptise, but to preach the gospel - not with words of human wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power. For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God .. but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God."*

The cross stands at the centre of our faith - because the cross is the pinnacle of the revelation of God's love. No single event in all of history has demonstrated God's love for His children more than the cross. It is God's love, as shown in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, which leads us to repentance and faith and it is God's love which must lie at the foundation of our Christian experience if we ever hope to press on to maturity as we grow up into Christ.

I was reflecting on this whole theme of God's love one day many years ago and the Lord gave me these words for a song. The key Bible verse which lies at the heart of this song is Romans 2:4 which reminds us that it is God's love that leads us to repentance. Let me close by sharing these words with you which God gave me many years ago.

Your Grace has Captured my Heart

*Your kindness led me to repentance, Your grace has captured my heart
Your overwhelming forgiveness Has given my life a new start
My freedom's secured with the life of Your Son
My ransom is paid and my victory won
My pardon is signed with the blood of the Lamb
So now in Your grace I can stand.
I cannot repay You for what You have done
My rebellion and sin are exchanged for Your Son
I can't understand the reason why
You loved me enough to die*

*I grew up hearing sermons that told me I was bad
The list was very long of things that made God mad
His judgement and His wrath were all I ever heard
Until the day His Spirit helped me hear God's Word
Jesus took the punishment instead of me
He bore the wrath of God so now I am free
Sin, death and judgement are no longer mine
I'm reconciled to God until the end of time*

*The message of His grace has simply not been heard
Millions still in bondage need to hear His Word
The Church has held this secret for two thousand years
Yet so many still are trapped in shame and fear
They know of sin and judgement and the hell they face
But now they need to know of His amazing grace
Their hardened hearts will soften as His mercy flows
But if the Church remains asleep - they'll never know!*

*His kindness will lead to repentance, His love will capture their hearts
His overwhelming forgiveness will give them all a new start
Their freedom's secured with the life of His Son
Their ransom is paid and their victory won
Their pardon is signed with the blood of the Lamb
So now in His grace they can stand.
They cannot repay Him for what He has done
Their rebellion and sin are exchanged for His Son
They'll never know, until we all go
And tell everyone the good news:
Jesus died for them too.*

GROWING IN CHRIST – Part 7

'A Burden for the Lost'

by Rev. Robert Griffith

In every healthy Church there will be an upward, inward and outward focus. That means we will have a ministry to God in worship and prayer; a ministry to the Church through teaching, equipping and nurturing and then a ministry to others beyond the Church boundaries through outreach and service.

I believe most of the efforts within most Church ministries today are focussed on the first two and that leaves us with a much weaker 'outward' focus of our Church - the giving away of God's love to those who are yet to personally encounter Jesus. We need to consider this aspect of ministry more seriously if we want to continue growing in Christ. This outward ministry must flow from our upward and inward ministry.

I firmly believe that without a solid grounding in God's love and deep encounter with God in worship; without a well-fed and cared-for Church community, any serious consideration of embracing those beyond the Church community is premature. But to never move out is a denial of our whole purpose which is to embrace the mission of Christ and bring the gospel to the world.

If we truly want to be mature in Christ, which is our goal and the subject of this teaching series, then we must have the upward, inward and outward aspects of our ministry all working in harmony with each other. So let's begin to explore this outward dimension a little more as we see what the Bible has to say to us today about our burden for the lost.

Matthew 9:36-38 *"When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few."*

Mark 16:15 *He said to them, "Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation."*

Acts 1:8 *"But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."*

Matthew 24:14 *"And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come."*

The Church of Jesus Christ has been given the serious responsibility of reaching this world with the gospel - the only truth which can set them free.. It must be preached in every nation and to every person. This responsibility is not for just a few. It is given to the whole Church of Jesus Christ and God has already given us all we need to be effective witnesses: His power, His presence, His love and our personal testimony.

In Christ we are the light of the world. Wherever we go, we must let that light shine through our Christian conduct and testimony. We are the salt of this earth. Salt is a preserving substance. The only thing that is keeping this world from the judgment of God is the presence of His church on this earth. But if we lose our identification (if the salt has lost its savour), we are useless. Embracing Christ's mission does not happen by command or demand. This will only happen as our hearts are gripped with compassion for the lost.

What is compassion? One dictionary says that to have compassion is: *'To have tender emotions, to yearn, to feel sympathy, to feel pity.'* We cannot reach this world when we are not even willing to reach our neighbour. We are called to love our neighbour as ourselves (Luke 10:27). This we find very hard to do! We can love our brothers and sisters in the Church, because they also may feel kindly towards us - but to love our neighbour is a very different thing! When Jesus reminded a lawyer of this requirement of the royal law of love, the man sought to justify himself by asking the question, *"And who is my neighbour?"* (Luke 10:29). Jesus gave him the long answer as He told him this parable:

Luke 10:30-35 *"A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he fell into the hands of robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he travelled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, took him to an inn and took care of him. The next day he took out two silver coins and gave them to the innkeeper. 'Look after him,' he said, 'and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.'"*

We can learn many valuable truths from this well-known parable:

1. The "certain man" is representative of the sinner. His road is downwards.
2. The thieves represent the power of sin, or demonic spirits that try to destroy the sinner and leave him wounded and dying.
3. Two religious leaders were coming from Jerusalem, a priest and a Levite. They had been engaged in religious service in the temple and were on their way home when they came across the wounded man. The priest did not even bother to check the condition of the man. The Levite did walk over and look at his condition, but then went on his journey. Neither man was moved with compassion. Their religion had no real impact upon their lives. They had already finished their religious duties, and they had no time to be bothered with helping a stranger. They had no concept of this man being their neighbour or their responsibility.
4. The man who was wounded was a Jew. The priest and the Levite were Jews. The Jews hated and often mistreated Samaritans. Nevertheless, it was a Samaritan who came along and felt compassion towards the wounded man and ministered to his needs.

We can learn some important lessons and more fully embrace the mission of Christ by taking note of just what this Samaritan did:

(a) *He went to him. He did not wait for the man to come to him.*

We must put the "go" in the gospel by going to the sinner. The Church is not the field, the world is the field. *"Go therefore into all the world ..."* is the call we have received from the Lord. We are actually already in the world every day. Unless we are a hermit hiding in our house, we encounter the world every day. So what should be said is that 'in our going' we need to intentionally connect with those around us.

It is so easy for us to hide in our fortresses, hoping that some new people will just come through the door. We must not stand aloof from the lost. We must not judge and criticize them. We must not act as if we are better than they are. We need to humble ourselves and get down on their level because the ground is level before the cross of Christ and we all stand there together.

(b) *The Samaritan truly saw the man's need, and was moved with compassion towards him:*

We meet so many people each day who do not know Jesus Christ. Many of them have been wounded by sin and all who do not know Jesus are missing the whole purpose of their life. We must pray that we will have a heart full of love and compassion for them. If we do not have a burden for the lost, the chances are great that we will never lead anybody to Jesus Christ!

(c) *He bound up his wounds.*

"... he has sent me to bind up the broken-hearted" (Isaiah 61:1). This is what the gospel of Jesus Christ will do for the sinner. Sin leaves its victim helpless and bleeding, but the saving gospel of Jesus Christ gives healing and forgiveness.

(d) *He poured on oil and wine.*

Both oil and wine are symbols of the Holy Spirit. He did not wait until he brought the man to the inn before he poured on the oil and wine. You can minister in the power of the Holy Spirit to people wherever they are!

(e) *He brought him to the inn.*

He put the man on his own beast. This meant that there was a real sacrifice involved, because he would have to walk along beside the animal. Perhaps he had to travel for several miles before they came to the inn. This showed how much he cared. He would not stop caring for the man until his needs were all met. The inn is a symbol of the Church. It is important that we bring those we win to Christ to the Church where they can find spiritual rest and receive spiritual food.

(f) *He turned him over to the innkeeper, but did not forget about him after that.*

The innkeeper is the Pastor or Church leader or mentor. Those you win to Jesus need someone to care for them and feed them. However, do not just drop those that you have won to Jesus. Continue to minister the love of God towards them, and help disciple them.

So what was the main difference between the priest, the Levite and the good Samaritan? The first two men had absolutely no feeling towards the wounded man, while the third took the time to really see what the man's need was and then did what he could to meet that need. He was filled with compassion towards him. It is an absolute necessity to have a burden for the lost; to have true compassion for souls we are going to lead to Christ.

Psalm 126:6 *"He that goes forth and weeps, bearing precious seed (the word of God), shall doubtless come again with rejoicing, bringing his sheaves with him."*

Jesus is our best example here. Jesus did not just call us to be soul-winners, He gave us a living example. The greatest example of soul-winning in the Bible is when Jesus Christ witnessed to the woman of Samaria. It was no accident that Jesus went to Samaria. It was not the normal route for Jews travelling north to other parts. Jews normally avoided this area because they were highly prejudiced against the Samaritans. Yet we read concerning Jesus, *"He now had to go through Samaria."* (John 4:4). He could have gone around it, but the great Soul-winner had a burden for a certain sinner in that region.

When Jesus reached the city of Sychar, a city of Samaria, he was very weary, and sat down by the well. This was one of the wells that Jacob had dug many hundreds of years earlier, and the Samaritans were proud of its historical significance. As Jesus sat there, a woman came to draw water. It was about noon when the woman arrived. (The Jewish sixth hour is twelve o'clock.)

Most women had long finished drawing the day's supply of water in order to avoid the hot sun, but this woman probably purposely waited until she would be alone. Such was her lifestyle that she was ashamed to meet other women. She was startled to find a Jew sitting by the well when she arrived. She was used to being snubbed by her own kind, so would certainly expect to be snubbed by a Jew. But Jesus spoke to her and asked for a drink.

How shocked she was, so that she had to inquire, *"How is it that you, being a Jew, are asking me for a drink, for I am a woman of Samaria? for the Jews have no dealings with the Samaritans?"* Jesus immediately turned the conversation from the natural to the spiritual. Jesus answered her, *"If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water."* (John 4:10)

I doubt that Jesus stopped everyone who came to the well and witnessed to them. He sat there until this particular woman came whom He discerned had a real need for something in her life. Jesus later cried out to a multitude of people, *"If any man thirst, let him come unto me, and drink."* (John 7:37). That message was only for those who were spiritually thirsty. He evidently considered this woman to be among those who were thirsty for the things of the Spirit.

We can learn a lesson from this. If we share our faith with everyone that we meet, we may have little results for the time spent. It is best to pray that God will lead us to those who are thirsty. The soil of their heart is prepared for the seed of God's Word. Jesus knew that this woman formerly had five husbands and the man she was living with at the present was not her husband. She was seeking true love, but from the wrong sources. Now 'Love' was sitting on the well beside her, sharing with her the truth that would change her life forever.

When we share our faith with people, we need to show a care and concern for them. We need to find out what their personal needs are and show them that Jesus Christ is the answer to all their needs. If they have family problems, let them know that Jesus is the answer! If they have physical problems, tell them that Jesus wants to be their Healer! If they are having problems overcoming some evil habit, tell them that Jesus Christ wants to be their Saviour and Deliverer!

When we study the entire witness of Jesus to this woman, we will see that the woman kept trying to change the conversation, but Jesus kept coming back to her personal need. The woman was so excited about her encounter with Jesus that she forgot why she had come to the well. She left her water pot, and went running into the city and told the men of the city: *"Come, see a man, which told me all things that ever I did: is not this the Christ?"* (John 4:29). Her testimony caused the whole city to come to Christ. (verse 30).

Meanwhile, the disciples were more interested in other things, than sharing their faith. They had gone into the city to buy food, while Jesus rested at the well. When they returned, they saw him witnessing to the woman, but said nothing (verses 8, 27). After Jesus' conversation with the woman was concluded, the disciples begged him, *"Master, eat."*

John 4:32-35 *"Then his disciples said to each other, "Could someone have brought him food?" "My food," said Jesus, "is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work. Do you not say, 'Four months more and then the harvest'? I tell you, open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest."*

The disciples did not understand that after Jesus witnessed to the Samaritan woman He felt full, satisfied. How does the worth of one soul compare with earthly food? Their minds were on the things of this earth to the extent that they had no interest in what Jesus was doing.

Therefore He encouraged them, "*lift up your eyes, and look on the fields.*" They did not consider that it was the proper time for the harvesting of souls, but He encouraged them to realize that there was no better time than the present.

What about us? Are we waiting for some future time to be a real witness for Jesus Christ? Meanwhile, thousands of people around us are missing out on the life Jesus died to give them. We need to get our eyes off of ourselves and our petty problems and needs and see the ripened fields around us. We can be so caught up with personal agendas and our needs that we forget about the mission to which we have been called. We need a burden for the lost, because a burden will make a way for itself. A burden will cause us to pray, to weep for souls, to fast, to share our faith, to love, to do all that is necessary to bring the lost to Jesus Christ.

What is our purpose in life? To be conformed to the image of Jesus. If that is our heart's desire then we will think like Jesus, feel like Jesus and act like Jesus. If that is our prayer then we need to be ready for God to answer it as He breaks our hearts with the things that break the heart of Jesus. If we really want to fulfil the purpose for which God called us then we will be asking God to give us a burden for the lost and to flood our hearts with compassion for those who are yet to know His grace.

This is serious stuff friends. This is what Christian maturity is all about: upward, inward and outward focus - all working in harmony. If you are brave enough, if you are prepared for God to answer your prayer, then join me now and ask Him to give you that burden for the lost. If that is your heart's desire, then pray this prayer with me.

Gracious and loving Father, I thank You and praise You for pouring Your love into my heart. I praise You for Your wonderful grace and mercy. You have transformed my life by the power of Your love. I thank You Lord for my brothers and sisters and this Church. I thank you for the teaching and the equipping that I have encountered here. I thank you for the love and care I have enjoyed. This is all precious Lord and I take none of it for granted.

Father I ask now that you would bring the third priority into place for me and for us as a body. I pray for the outward aspect of my faith. I ask Lord that you would give me a spiritual burden for the lost that stays with me as long as I draw breath on this earth. I ask Lord that the compassion for the lost which gripped the heart of Jesus will grip my heart also and not let me go until this whole city is on its knees before Jesus.

Lord I pray that You would release me totally from any sense of guilt or shame or obligation to witness to unbelievers. Remove the 'oughts' and 'shoulds' and replace them all with a deep and overwhelming compassion for all those people in this city and in my circle of influence who do not know Jesus. Prepare my heart for revival Lord by breaking it, just like Yours is broken as You weep over this city and the thousands of Your lost sheep who are yet to find their Shepherd. Lead me to them Lord. I don't ask for clever techniques or the perfect words to say, I just ask that You break my heart and release the heart of the wounded healer, Jesus, in me today. Empower the word of my testimony Lord as I share my story, which is really Your story, with those who need to hear. Amen

GROWING IN CHRIST – Part 8

'Our Mission'

by Rev. Robert Griffith

Growing in Christ is no easy task. As we saw last week, the implications of Christian maturity are far-reaching and at times quite threatening. When I say threatening I mean that we are challenged at the very core of our being: who we are; why we are here on this earth; what we do with our time, energy, money, gifts and prayers. In the last sermon I spoke about the necessity for us to have and to cultivate a genuine burden for the lost and a passion to meet their deepest need and bring them to Jesus.

Now when I say a burden for the lost, I don't just mean that we put more in the mission envelopes or sponsor an extra child with World Vision - as good as that is - it is not what Jesus had in mind when He said in John 20, *"As I have been sent, so now I am sending you."* If you have the courage, come with me now as the Holy Spirit brings into focus the mission into which we have all been called.

Matthew 25: 35-36 *"For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me."*

It used to be that if you wanted to see the great architectural wonders of the world - the Eiffel Tower, the ancient Pyramids of Egypt, the Washington Monument, the Tower of London - you had to travel to far-off places. No more. All you need to do now is open a book; or surf through the picture files on the internet, or drop by the nearest library and see detailed photos, descriptions, even scale-model reproductions.

It used to be that if you wanted to listen to the greatest music in the world you had to schedule trips to concert halls and hear the compositions performed by live orchestras. Not any more. Radio, television, CD's, MP3's and internet streaming all allow you to have the music whenever and wherever you want it.

It used to be that if you wanted to experience the different cultures and customs of the world, you had to travel across the world. Again, no more. Just go to parts of Sydney or Melbourne and you can visit little alcoves of almost every culture you can imagine. It turns out that in so many ways, you don't have to go far to see and experience the world. It's true for the wonders and breathtaking features of the world and it's true for the traumas and tragic realities of the world as well. You don't have to go far to see a whole world of hurt and need around you.

Many people are nearsighted. That means they have trouble seeing things that are in the distance. It's a common physical condition. It's also a common problem in human relations; to be able to focus clearly on things right around you (your family, your job, your home, your finances and your health) while not paying much attention to the things far beyond your own circle of existence. But did you know that an even more prevalent problem in the Church of Jesus Christ in our nation is the opposite affliction? Farsightedness, the ability to see things clearly at a distance while being unable to focus on the things that are literally right under our nose.

Consider worshipping Wendy - a committed Christian who never misses a Sunday service. One day in Church she hears some information about physically disabled individuals and the special needs they face in a world built for able-bodied people. Wendy wonders if perhaps her prayers might touch the life of some such individual somewhere far away.

She prays sincerely for physically challenged individuals all over the world. But then later that day at the supermarket, she fidgets impatiently, sighs loudly and rolls her eyes as a disabled gentleman ahead of her struggles to manoeuvre his shopping cart down the aisle.

Or, consider Charlie Churchgoer, who reads on this particular day about all the people in the world who are hungry, even starving; or perhaps homeless, cold or sick. He decides to drop a few extra dollars into the offering plate to help some hungry family in a third world country, perhaps; or to provide shelter for a homeless family through some missions organization somewhere overseas. Then, later that day he finds himself turning his eyes away, pretending not to notice as he drives past the homeless, those people he knows are currently without jobs, people whose gaunt expression belies a diet which is severely lacking in the essentials for a healthy life. Farsightedness. That's what I'm talking about. The ability to get so starry-eyed about what our missionaries are doing 'over there' that we overlook what we could be doing right here! We have not really put into practice the words of Christ himself, who said in Mark 10:45, "*The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve.*"

Now some of you may know that this word *serve* or *servant* as it's used in the New Testament, is not a picture of a household servant or a butler as we might picture today - a hired servant like that is one who is at liberty to pick and choose when and where they will serve and to set the hours during which they are available for service. The kind of servant Jesus calls you and me to be, by contrast, is more closely related to what we would call a slave - someone whose whole life is consigned to meeting the needs of another, without picking and choosing the time or the place; without setting hours of availability; without any expectation of repayment.

What does it take to get us to serve? What does it take to motivate you, to motivate me, to get our hands dirty and work in the life of another? It should take nothing more than the simple realization that a need exists and the love of Christ constrains us to help. If it takes more than that to motivate me, then I'm not being the servant Christ calls me to be. Instead, I'm just being farsighted!

How many times have you walked past a homeless person in order to get into a building? How many times have you been approached by someone asking for money for food, and you do the charade of fumbling in your pocket for a few seconds before shaking your head and saying, silently, "*Sorry, I can't help you.*" Or you ignore them completely. How many times have you slipped quickly past migrant workers and their families at the store, despite the obvious fact that they need Jesus just as much as anyone else? How many times have you said you'll do anything to further the work of the Kingdom of God in the world - and then looked the other way when an opportunity presents itself, up close and personal.

If we are really serious about the words of all the songs we sing about following Jesus, then we need to realize that where God is leading us might be just across the street into the life of someone with a real, immediate need. Yes it's wonderful to pray for revival and dream of the day when every knee shall bow and every tongue confess Jesus as Lord and Saviour, but how will that happen if not through individuals being ministered to by others who care? For many believers revival is an 'out there' word and it means nothing until we see the 'up close and personal' implications of that revival right under our noses.

Jesus is our teacher here in both word and in deed. He's our example in word because of stories He told like the Parable of the Good Samaritan, in Luke 10. Remember in our last sermon how we read where the priest and the Levite saw the man in need, but passed over to the other side of the road and strolled on by? That was because they were farsighted: They knew from the study of their own chosen professions that (a) there were plenty of needy people in the world, and (b) that God's people needed to be out there helping them; but they failed to engage with a real need right in front of them.

Don't make the mistake of judging the priest and the Levite in the story too harshly unless you to look in the mirror - for there's a little bit (quite possibly a big bit) of that attitude in every one of us. We know what God would like for us to do in that ideal situation, that perfect scenario, the one where we've got plenty of time and energy, and the other person is nice, clean, and able to repay us handsomely. But the situations of real life are seldom ideal; so we quickly make excuses; and we too "*pass over to the other side of the road*" and move on. The Samaritan, though, was the one who was truly willing to get involved. He was the one who realized that, if you're really serious about being a compassionate bearer of the message of hope and fulfilment in Christ, then you don't have to go far to find ways to get involved.

Jesus put this message into practice in His own life, too. In Mark 6:34, we read about how Jesus came ashore from the sea and was met by a great crowd. Mark says that Jesus was "*moved with compassion*" toward them, "*because they were like sheep without a shepherd.*" Some translations of the Bible say that Jesus simply "*had compassion.*" But it's really more correct to say that Jesus was "*moved with compassion.*" It's one thing to have compassion - when we watch television reports of families who have been displaced and rendered homeless by natural disaster or war, it's easy to feel compassion towards them. When we hear reports of people in your own community who are having a very difficult time because of financial hardship or physical problems, it's not hard to feel compassion welling up within us. But how often are we truly *moved* by compassion: specifically, moved out of our own chairs and moved into the lives of those who have the needs? Remember, we don't have to go far to find people who need the compassionate touch of a friend in their lives. If we were to allow ourselves today to be moved by compassion, we could find ourselves making a difference today in the life of someone around us.

There are three things, then, that we really need to recognize about the needs of the world which surround us. The first is what we've already talked about; that is, we must recognize how easy it is to reach out to those with such needs. It's easy because we don't have to go far to see the needs of the world; they are all around us - possibly next door to us, or across the street; possibly in the halls of the office or building where we spend our days, or behind the counters of the businesses we frequent each week. The needs are all around us if we simply have eyes to see.

The second thing we need to recognize about the needs in the world is how important it is to reach out when we see these needs. According to the New Testament, it's absolutely non-negotiable; any failure on my part to reach out and serve my fellow pilgrim in this world constitutes a denial of Christ's Lordship and an absolute refusal to do His will. Quite simply, Christianity without service, Christianity without compassion, is hollow Christianity, a mere shell of faith that has no substance with which to answer the realities of this world!

There is no other reason for us being here friends. If we are truly allowing the Holy Spirit to transform us into the image of Jesus, then increasingly we will be speaking the words of Jesus and doing the works of Jesus. We seem more content with the former than the latter. It's easy, then, to reach out to the needs of the world but we must do so in response to God's leading and serve out of the reservoir of love within us. Doing good works because we are supposed to is religion and God cannot bless religion. Our good works must flow out of the love of Christ which constrains us. All our acts of service are to be motivated by that love and are to be accompanied by the deep desire to lead the people we serve to the source of that love: Jesus Christ.

Thirdly, we must recognize how extraordinary the reward is for those who show compassion in this way. On one level, the New Testament challenges us to look all around us and see those who are hungry, thirsty, lonely, needing clothes or shelter, and to serve them; but on another level, there is a promise to all of God's people that says, take heart when you're giving of yourself and seem to be getting nothing in return – be assured, your reward is coming.

Matthew 25:34 *"Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you ..."*

Who's Jesus talking to here? Precisely the people who have been faithful in reaching out with compassion in these ways! There's no greater reward in the Kingdom of Heaven than the reward that awaits those who have devoted their lives to reaching out with compassion to all those who are considered least in the eyes of this world. You don't have to go far to find ways to 'give to the Lord' today. Look around your own life today; see what God might be leading you to do . . . to pray ... to give .. and where He may be leading you to go.

I wonder how our world might be if every disciple of Jesus began every day by asking the Holy Spirit to lead them to just one person in the world today whom I may bless or serve in some way. Just one person today, then another tomorrow. That's 7 people a week, 30 people a month, over 300 people a year who encountered the love of Christ through just one of His disciples. Multiply that across all believers in our city and our nation and see what happens! Revival will not just be something we pray for and sing about – it will be where we live!

It all comes back to those two words, doesn't it? Becoming and doing. Becoming more like Jesus and doing the works of Jesus. This is what embracing the mission of Christ is all about friends. We don't have a mission. The Baptist Church doesn't have a mission. Only Jesus has a mission and it has not changed for over 2,000 years. That mission has a Church. We have been called by Jesus to embrace His mission and He has promised to empower that decision as we join with Him in bringing all of God's lost children home. May it be so!

GROWING IN CHRIST – Part 9

'Responsibility'

by Rev. Robert Griffith

In our quest for spiritual maturity; in our desire to grow in Christ, I believe there are many obstacles to overcome and there are many significant issues to tackle. We have shared some of those already in this series. However, I firmly believe that there is one issue, one word in fact, which lies at the heart of Christian maturity; one foundation stone which is the key in building a strong faith and the key to our long-term effectiveness in the kingdom of God. That word is RESPONSIBILITY. Responsibility is the key to maturity and the bedrock of a fruitful Christian life.

Some may argue and say that Jesus is the foundation of a fruitful Christian life, but I want to be bold enough to suggest that Jesus is not the key to maturity. It is possible to have Jesus in your heart and be born again and still not be mature in Christ and still not be living a victorious, abundant Christian life. If you doubt that statement, just look around.

There are thousands of defeated, depressed, self-absorbed, powerless Christians right across this nation and they are all saved - they all have Jesus in their hearts. The reason they are defeated and beaten up is simply because they have not taken responsibility for their life, regardless of how hard it is, they have not made the right choices. If having Jesus in your life was the key to maturity, then we would all be instantly mature the moment we accepted His gift of salvation. That is clearly not the case.

I want to warn you up front that some of the things I say in this sermon may not resonate with your theology or your understanding of God. That's OK. All I ask is that you allow the Holy Spirit to show you the truth and if the words I speak are truth, then He will anoint them and they may very well change your whole life right here and now.

If anything I say is not truth and not from God, then He will take that away and protect you from error. I trust the Holy Spirit in you more than I trust my theology or your theology and so I know you will hear God's voice today if you do not harden heart and if you open up to Him now.

Responsibility is the key to maturity. What do I mean by that? Well, how about we go right back to when we were children for that is where this truth is seen so clearly. Every parent knows the challenges which face them as they try to train their children to take responsibility for their actions. I can see it now: little Billy is running through the house in hot pursuit of his sister; as they fly around the corner you intercept them. You look at Sally and say, *"You know you are not allowed to run in the house."* She immediately points to Billy and protests, *"But Billy made me do it - he was chasing me."* Your attempts to explain that someone can't chase you if you don't run away, appear futile. Sally is convinced it's all Billy's fault. You turn to Billy and he is indignant. *"It's not my fault! If she hadn't run away I wouldn't have had to chase her."*

How many thousand times have parents sat with their children as they have pointed the finger to everyone except themselves. This is part of growing up - a particularly hard part, I might add. Sadly, it is just part of our fallen nature to pass the buck when we are in a bind or things are not going well. It is really hard work training our children to take responsibility for their actions and reactions and not to allow anyone to force them to behave in a way that is unacceptable. It has been this way almost from the beginning. Remember the Garden of Eden? What a picture we have there. Just after the forbidden fruit was tasted, God asks Adam, *"What have you done?"*

Adam immediately points to Eve and says, “*She made me do it.*” When it was Eve's turn to explain she blamed the serpent. Refusing to take responsibility for our actions is part of our fallen DNA. The most obvious sign of immaturity is the failure to take responsibility for our life.

I wish I could say that this is something we all grow out of - like nappies and teething rings. Sadly however, that is not always the case. There are millions adults in the world (and in the Church) who are still pointing the finger anywhere but in the mirror. As we get older and smarter, we just get more people to blame. When we were kids we only had our brothers and sisters and friends to blame. As we move into our teenage years we start to blame the teachers and the school and our parents, for things that don't go our way. Then we really 'grow up' and learn to blame the Government and the Church or our latest Pastor who failed to meet our needs.

Then if we can't find someone with skin on to pass the buck to, we blame Satan and say we are “*under spiritual attack*” from the enemy. More often than not our only enemy is the person in the mirror who made some bad choices and doesn't want to face the consequences. I am not suggesting that Satan is not active, but I happen to believe that uninvited and unprovoked attacks are nowhere near as common as people claim. The vast majority of times we are 'under attack' it is the result of our own choices. Satan gets so much credit for our stupidity and bad choices. He will gladly come through the door when we open it - but we seem unable to take responsibility for opening the door in the first place.

Now of course the really brave ones even blame God - trying to convince themselves that God is testing their faith in some super-spiritual way when more often than not they are simply reaping what they have sown. Everywhere we look we see and hear supposedly mature adults blaming anyone they can for the consequences of their own choices - refusing to take responsibility for their actions and reactions.

There are countless situations in life where we have a choice to take responsibility for our life or relinquish responsibility and become a victim. That choice faces every human being every day of their life - we can choose to be the victor or the victim. We can maintain control of our thoughts, words, deeds and life or we can relinquish that control to someone else. There is not a child alive who has not tried to blame a brother or sister or friend for something they have done. Then as they get into their teenage years there are more people to shift the blame to and our schools and teachers become great scapegoats. If we are struggling academically it is because of bad teaching. The fact that we clown around in class, don't listen and never study seems to slip our mind. Teenagers also begin to shift the blame to parents for their attitudes and behaviour. They hear some pop psychologist tell them that they are a product of their environment and the way they were parented and so they begin to actually convince themselves that it is their parent's fault that they behave the way they do.

The really hard part is that there is a small element of truth in all these excuses, that is what seems to make them credible. Teachers, schools, peer groups and parents will all have an influence on a child and will shape them to an extent. However, and it is a very big **HOWEVER**, from a very early age, a child has the ability to choose how much influence other people have over them and if we teach our children nothing else we must teach them to make their own choices. As hard as that is sometimes, they must choose how they behave, what they think and how they live. They must learn that all choices have consequences.

The great thing about growing up is that there are lots of pressures, issues and problems which get left behind. Thankfully, learning to use the toilet is something most of us master in the early years of life and then it becomes second nature. So too with eating and reading and writing and all sorts of things that are a normal part of growing up. I wish I could say the same about responsibility.

It would be so nice if everybody learned to take responsibility for their own life when they were a child. The fact is, millions of people don't and they enter adult life looking like they are mature but acting like a child in regard to personal responsibility. There would not be a day that goes by when I don't see or hear someone passing the buck to someone else for the state of the world or the condition of their own lives. Just turn on the news or current affairs programs and you will find people trying to find someone else to blame for their sorry lot in life.

Now the hard truth is there are many things that happen to us in life which are not our choice and not our desire. Other people are certainly responsible for things they say and do to us directly and indirectly. There are companies right now facing collapse in this nation because of economic or market forces over which they had no control. None of those businesses are to blame for that and yet they must wear the consequences and make choices as to how they respond in times of adversity.

I remember many years ago how devastating currency fluctuations could be when I ran a Multi-national company in Sydney. I was importing 90% of our products from the U.S. and we lost lots of money when the Aussie dollar fell. I remember in one month the dollar fell just 3 cents against the U.S. dollar and that effectively wiped \$87,000 off our bottom line that month! And we were only a small company.

However, I also remember that I had a choice how I responded. I could rant and rave and scream at the government for their policies and plead for leniency from our creditors in paying our bills and try and shift the responsibility as far and as wide as I could ... or ... I could decide to take responsibility for my reaction to this crisis and make some pro-active, positive choices. I am pleased I chose the latter because by the end of that year we had lost over \$200,000 due to exchange rate fluctuations, yet we still posted a record profit. Had I done what many business leaders were doing at that time and thrown my hands up in the air and cried, "Unfair!" I believe the company may well have gone under in six months. The company didn't fold under the pressure - it is still operating today and it has five times the turnover it had when I left. That happened because someone took responsibility for a situation they didn't create.

So of course things happen to us which are totally outside our control - really bad things sometimes: the death of a loved one, terminal illness, financial ruin, slander ... to name just a few. But it is always our choice how we respond to those things. We can relinquish our responsibility and let other people or circumstances control our lives, or we can be mature and take full personal responsibility for what happens next.

I have always told my children that even when they may not be responsible for things that happen to them, they must take full responsibility for what happens next. Their response is totally their responsibility. Sadly, this is not a lesson we all learn well as children for there are still so many adults who spend much of their lives reacting and choosing to be a victim and not a victor. We think that the injustice or cruelty of something which happens to us in some way justifies an immature, irresponsible reaction on our part. Not so.

Look at Jesus. Things happened to Jesus that would cause the strongest of us to run screaming and yet not once did He lose control of Himself or the situation. Not once did He react to anyone. Not once did He allow someone else's actions to dictate His response. He took responsibility for His responses and He never faulted in this regard. Remember His trial and the ridiculous false accusations that came against Him? He remained totally in control. He never defended Himself, though the charges were false. He knew that He could get out of that situation or convict Himself totally with the words of His mouth, so He chose those words carefully so as to achieve His desired outcome, which surprisingly to all around, was the cross.

So friends, I want to exhort you to take responsibility for your lives and when things come against you that you have not asked for or caused in any way, take charge of the situation and take full responsibility for your response. Now I am not sure which is the harder word, what I have just said or what I am about to say. I will you be the judge.

There is no doubt that it's really tough to remain focused and in control and responsible when stuff happens to us that we don't expect, didn't cause and for which we are not responsible. But I would suggest it may be even more difficult for some of us to face the consequences of our own actions and be responsible for the solution. I would like to suggest that the vast majority of struggles we have as human beings are not in the first category I mentioned - they are not things which come against us from 'out there.' I would suggest that most of the issues we struggle with are the direct or indirect result of our own action or inaction. When that is the case, we need to be discerning enough to see the link between our own choices and the consequences we face. We then need to be mature enough to take responsibility for getting out of that mess the best way we can by making different choices.

For example, there are many lonely and hurting people in the world and in the Church who are simply reaping what they sow. There are thousands of people who have pushed others away or treated them badly or taken them for granted and eventually that kind of behaviour takes its toll and they wake up one day with no close friends; their family are no longer there for them and they are truly alone. That is sad, but sadder still is to hear them pass the responsibility for their condition to everyone else who have supposedly treated them so badly.

There are marriages all over the nation on the brink of collapse and tragically many of them are Christian marriages. Some of those marriages collapse because of the devastating actions of one of the partners and the other is seen as the innocent party. There really is no such thing ultimately, but clearly there are marriages where one person becomes the victim and the other the perpetrator. In that case the victim may not share the same level of responsibility for the situation, but they are still responsible for their actions and their reactions. There are many other marriages crumbling however, because both people act in ways which drive them apart. Year in and year out, their personal choices bear fruit and the consequences take over. The seeds which have been sown many years before and watered every day through their moods, attitudes and actions, finally bear fruit and it's all over.

I have sat with people in that situation many times and the first thing most of them do as they try to rise above the pain and devastation is to blame their spouse, or their mother in law, or the bank, or their boss at work or someone else. Whereas their first response should be to decide what they are going to do to improve this situation by making better choices.

You get passed over for a promotion at work: you have a choice, wallow in self-pity, jealousy, anger and cry 'unfair' or take charge of your life and decide what you can do about your attitude, work or commitment to convince them to consider you next time. You find yourself going under financially: what do you do? Scream at the banks? Why? They are just doing their job, a job you are were happy for them to do when things were going well. Do you scream at the politicians because of the effect their policies have on your ability to earn money? Well you can do that if you like, but do you really want to admit that some person you have probably not even met has got control of your life? When you pass the buck of responsibility to them, you are giving them charge over you.

Sometimes things happen which are totally outside our control and place financial pressure on us and we can only take responsibility for our reaction to that. However, I would have to say that the vast majority of people who find themselves in financial quicksand only have themselves to blame. We make uninformed, impulsive or irresponsible financial decisions which eventually bring the inevitable consequences and yet we still point the finger at someone else.

Worse than that, we cry out to God and ask Him to fix it and get us through this trial, this test, this time of hardship, or if we are really brave, we even call it a spiritual attack. God loves us so much and often He does lots of things to help lessen the consequences of our bad choices. But the bottom line is this: There are consequences which even God cannot or will not fix. He has given us the freedom to live our lives the way we want to and when our choices land us in hot water, more often than not even God cannot get us out – He can only walk with us through those self-inflicted consequences.

Cause and effect: if you keep walking across a busy highway with your eyes closed, eventually you will end up dead. It would be ridiculous for you to consider that to be a test or trial or an attack of the enemy and expect God to bail you out. Walking into the path of traffic with your eyes closed is a deliberate, clear choice and it brings disastrous consequences. It's an extreme example, I know, but the principle still applies to hundreds of choices you and I make every year. We live in a cause and effect world friends. We will reap what we sow and even God will not be able to undo that. If we make better choices we will live better lives. Be responsible for your actions and your reactions and you will see your life starting to come together in lots of ways.

Do you want to know a sentence that causes me to break out in a sweat almost every time I hear it? Here it is: *"I am under a spiritual attack."* Or words to that effect. When people explain their struggles in terms of Satan's activity in their life, I get very nervous and I pray that after this sermon, you will too. Do I believe in Satan? Absolutely. Do I believe the powers of darkness can come against us through no fault of our own and without us opening the door in any way? Yes, I do. Do I believe that such unprovoked, unexpected, uninvited attacks are the normal activity of Satan in the Church and in your life and mine? Absolutely not.

I believe that the majority of stuff that comes against us from the powers of darkness is avoidable and preventable if we would just grow up and take charge of our lives and stop opening the door to God's enemy through our bad choices, our disobedience and our sin. I really wish Satan did not exist, not just because he is not a very nice creature and we could well do without him, but because if Satan did not exist we would all be forced to look in the mirror when things go wrong and take responsibility for the consequences which follow our choices.

Yes, there are times when Satan brings unexpected sickness into our lives and our family's lives, but there are many other times when sickness is simply the result of poor diet, no exercise, not enough sleep and a ridiculously high stress level - all things which can drastically affect our health and wholeness and all things over which we have full control. Satan gets blamed for so much stuff in our lives. **There seems to be a demon for every bad choice we make.** How convenient is that? I firmly believe that we can be substantially (not totally) free from the attack of the powers of darkness if we would just make the right choices and not open the door to him.

Friends, it is for freedom that Christ has set you free (Galatians 5:1) and in that freedom you can choose life or death, prosperity or ruin, the riches of heaven or the rotting fruits of this earth. If you have the slightest inclination to grow in Christ; if Christian maturity is a goal of yours in any way; then take responsibility for your life and make the right choices. Jesus died to give you an abundant life - a life of blessing and power and fruitfulness and victory - but He cannot make that happen for you. You have to choose for it to happen. You have to take responsibility for your actions and your reactions.

When things are not working out for you; when the pressure is rising and you are not coping - don't point to the government, don't point to the banks, don't point to your creditors, don't blame the weather or your boss or your workmates, don't shift the responsibility to your wife or husband, don't look at your parents or your childhood, don't blame the Church or your Pastor and don't pass the buck to Satan or God either.

There is only one place to look when life is not working out the way you would like: in the mirror. YOU are the only person who can take responsibility for your life - nobody else can do that - not even God. Of course there will be circumstances over which you have no control. There will be situations arise in your life that are really horrible and that you never saw coming. But in every situation and in every circumstance of life, you remain in control of your response, your reaction and your attitude.

Friends, in Jesus name, here this: as a Christian, you have the life-changing presence of God within you to empower those right choices, but they are still your choices. God is there for you in every situation. This is far more than the power of positive thinking - we literally have the Holy Spirit of God to empower our choices. But it is still our choice how we act and react; it is still our choice whether we are the victim or the victor.

The key to maturity is responsibility. If you want to truly grow in Christ, you must do as Jesus did and take charge of every situation – regardless of how fair it is – and make the right choices as you ask, and continue asking, *“How then shall I live?”*

GROWING IN CHRIST – Part 10

‘Maturity: A Daily Choice’

by Rev. Robert Griffith

In my last sermon, I dared to suggest that one thing and one thing only lay at the foundation of Christian maturity and that was **responsibility**. Taking personal responsibility for every aspect of our lives is both fundamental and foundational if we are to grow up in any sense, but it is especially true if we are to grow in Christ and mature as Jesus’ disciples. It would be great if we all got to this point automatically as we reached adulthood and when we came to faith in Christ, but that is simply not the case and there are millions of adults who have never taken full responsibility for their own lives.

Now when I say “take responsibility” what do I mean? Surely every independent adult in the world has done that by virtue of the fact that they make their own decisions and set their own course in life. Not so - not completely anyway. In fact there are countless people in this world (and many of them are in the Church) who spend much of their days passing the buck to those around them in all sorts of subtle and not so subtle ways.

This happens so regularly and is so much a part of our lives we that may not even notice it. We blame our parents or our poor childhood; we blame our employer or our work colleagues; we blame those who lead us in local, state and federal Governments; we blame our spouse or our in-laws; we blame Satan or even God for our bad choices. It is part of our fallen, sinful nature to pass the responsibility for aspects of our lives to others around us and even those who have gone before us.

The bottom line is this: every day you are faced with choices. It doesn’t matter if you’re having a great day or a horrible day - you are faced with the same choices. In fact, there are probably hundreds of choices before you every day.

Let me suggest just a few:

You can choose to be sad - or you can choose to be happy.

You can choose to be a victim - or you can choose to be a victor.

You can choose death - or you can choose life .

You can choose to sulk - or you can choose get over it.

You can choose to focus on what God has already done for you - or you can choose to focus on what He hasn’t done for you yet.

You can choose to be offended - or you can choose to forget it.

You can choose to look at your sin and failure all day long - or you can choose to embrace God’s forgiveness, press on and leave the past behind.

You can choose to serve others’ needs - or you can choose to focus on your own needs.

You can choose to forgive - or you can choose to hold resentment in your heart.

You can choose to believe what God says - or you can choose to believe what your fallen mind and wicked heart tell you.

You can choose to please God – or you can choose to please man.

You can choose to pick the lilies and learn from your times in the valley, or you can choose to trample on the lilies, learn nothing and strive to get out of the valley as soon as possible.

You can choose to take charge of your life and act - or you can choose to let others take charge of your life by reacting

You can choose to trust - or you can choose to doubt.

You can choose to submit to God - or you can choose to go it alone.

You can choose to be yourself - or you can choose to be what others expect you to be.

You can choose to take people at face value - or you can choose to analyse them and look for a hidden agenda.

You can choose to see the good in people - or you can choose to focus on their shortcomings.

You can choose to love - or you can choose to hate.

You can choose to build up - or you can choose to tear down.

The list goes on ... and they are all your choice. It really is that simple. Every moment of every day you and I are faced with choices - the outcome of which can and does affect us, our family, the whole Church and the society in which we live.

Basically, the bottom line is this: life is an unpredictable and at times treacherous journey into the unknown. There are no guarantees other than God's love and grace and everything can change in the twinkling of an eye. Those who are maturing and growing in Christ will accept the simple truth that some days we are the pigeon and some days we are the statue. On the days when things are not going well or we are wounded or bruised in some way we just need to get over it.

We cannot afford to be offended or hurt when people or life or God don't treat us the way we would like. When our children are hurt - they cry, we tell them not to cry because crying about it and dwelling on the pain will not change anything or make it better, it will just make them feel worse. Basically, as gently as we can, we tell them to get over it. Well, guess what? Millions of kids didn't learn that lesson because they are still crying 20 years later when something doesn't go their way and the solution now is the same as it was back then - they just need to choose to get over it and move on.

Friends, we will not take this nation for Jesus while we are binding our wounds and complaining about our lot in life. We have to get over it - all of it - whatever it is that holds us back. We have to let it go and let God give us the ability to move on. Let me give you some tips which you can remind yourself of each day as you learn to get over it much quicker and the acrostic might help you memorise this.

Growing up is a choice

Enjoy what God has already given you

Trust God to supply your needs not your wants

Omnipotence dwells within you

Victor or victim: it's your daily choice

Every day is a new day

React or act: it's your choice

Incomparable riches are yours in Christ

Tomorrow is another day!

Every day we have a choice how we respond to ourselves, to others and to God. Every day we make subconscious decisions which have a powerful impact on who we are and what we do. For example when something happens to you which is unexpected or unwelcomed, you may have little or no choice about facing that issue or person. Yet you have a clear choice as to how they will impact your life. There are many things which are said and done to us over which we have no control - but as soon as we allow that person or that circumstance to trigger a reaction in us - we have lost control of our life. We have let go of the steering wheel and let someone else direct our thoughts and actions.

It is so easy to throw your hands up in the air and cry "unfair!" any child can do that, but the real grown ups (as distinct from those of us who pretend we are grown up) are supposed to maintain control and act in a way that minimises the negative impact of the situation and maximises the positive impact. Mature people will always see positive things in the midst of the worst disaster. When mature people fail they don't see failure, they see another learning experience. They see another opportunity to develop their sense of humour. So they get up, dust themselves off, learn some lessons and press on.

So what kind of choices have you made today? What kind of choices have you made this week? What kind of choices will you make tomorrow? Our lives are filled with choices. We must make choices constantly and we often do so without thinking much about them. We make significant choices and insignificant ones. It's the insignificant ones that we don't seem to think much about. But when you add up a number of them they become significant because they set the course of your life.

I want to suggest to you that every choice we make, big or small, is a choice for God or against God. Yes, I said every choice has that much significance. You may ask, "Does that mean then that whether I brushed my teeth this morning is a choice for or against God?" Yes it is. When you decide to take care of the body God gave you, with the means He gave you, then you act in favour of God – not to mention all of us who have to smell your breath!

When you decide to say a kind word to someone you act in favour of God Who cares about their feelings and wants to use you to encourage them. When you decide to turn away from the lust of your eyes then you act in favour of God Who desires that you should worship Him and not created beings. When you decide to honour your husband or wife or obey your parents, you act in favour of God Who wants to have order in family relationships that godly children might result.

Is it a decision for or against God whether I turn right or left at the first intersection I come to when I leave church today? Yes it is. Why? Simply because your time and where you go every minute of every day is valuable to God. The best use of your time and your whereabouts matter to God because you only have 86,400 seconds every day and when they are gone – you never get them back. What you do with every one of those seconds matters to God and only you can decide how you use the limited time you have. It's always your choice.

The Bible has a lot to say about the choices we make each day and the impact they have on our lives and the lives of others. Here are just a few verses to remind us:

Joshua 24:15 *"But if serving the Lord seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served beyond the Euphrates, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord."*

Deuteronomy 30:19 *"This day I call the heavens and the earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you: life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live."*

1 Kings 18:21 *“Elijah went before the people and said, “How long will you waver between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him.” But the people said nothing.*

1 Corinthians 10:31 *“So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.”*

Mark 8:34 *“Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”*

James 4:17 *“If anyone, then, knows the good they ought to do and doesn’t do it, it is sin for them.”*

Romans 12:2 *“Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will – his good, pleasing and perfect will.”*

Colossians 3:17 *“And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.”*

Colossians 3:23 *“Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters.”*

Matthew 6:33 *“But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”*

Psalms 27:4 *“One thing I ask from the Lord, this only do I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to gaze on the beauty of the Lord and to seek him in his temple.”*

Our life is full of choices – every day – but always remember this: *“Greater is He that is in you than he that is in the world.”* (1 John 4:4). So as we embrace the next chapter of our lives, let’s pledge to make better choices and why not start that right now by affirming the following choices together:

Lord, I choose life and not death.

Lord, I choose freedom and not bondage.

Lord, I choose victory and not defeat.

Lord, I choose to be thankful for what You’ve already done, before I cry out to You for more.

Lord, I choose to believe what You have said and not trust my fallen heart.

Lord, I choose to act and not react.

Lord, I choose to find You in the valley as I journey towards the mountain.

Lord, I choose to forgive and not resent.

Lord, I choose to bless and not curse.

Lord, I choose to believe and not doubt.

Lord, I choose to rejoice in times of hardship.

Lord, I choose to build up and not tear down.

Lord, I choose to serve the needs of others above our own.

Lord, I choose to get out of the boat and trust You!

GROWING IN CHRIST – Part 11

'Marks of Maturity – 1'

by Rev. Robert Griffith

What is the real measure of a human being? If you take the time to look closely you will notice that a human life is defined by a multitude of qualities, relationships, circumstances and possessions. When you examine a person more closely you discover the extent of their education, their experience in life, their career achievement, their success in raising a family.

It is easy to see how people are dressed, how they use language and how they appear to others. We tend to evaluate people in terms of all of these factors. But what can these things really tell us? Certainly we can learn some things by this kind of examination. These are external things and externals say something about us but they do not say everything about us. Indeed, externals cannot reveal what really is most important about us.

The problem with assessing people based on outward appearance is that appearances can often be deceiving. With a little thought a person can appear to be something they are not. We must look deeper. The old proverb which says 'you can't judge a book by its cover' is never more true than today. In the age of multicoloured and graphically designed book covers, we never really know whether what appears on the outside is really present on the inside. As always, we must judge a book by its content, not by its appearance. We should also judge our own life in the same manner.

Martin Luther King, Jr. touched on this key issue during his famous speech at the Civil Rights march in Washington in August, 1963. He said, *"I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the colour of their skin, but by the content of their character."* The issue is not about external appearance but internal character.

We are who we are on the inside. Your character is who you are when no one is looking. You can take the pig out of the mud hole and clean him up really well - but you can't take the mud hole out of the pig. As soon as he finds another mud hole, he will flop dead-centre in the middle of it. It's just his nature.

The Bible says a lot about Christian character. There we find that each of us is called to exhibit the character of Christ and we see many examples of this Christlike character. Today we will be examining some of the components of the Apostle Paul's character. Hopefully we will see some things which we ourselves possess and maybe other things which we should desire in our own character.

This issue of Christian character should be really important because your character determines your attitude and your attitude is contagious. So let me ask you today, is your character and attitude worth catching? The answer is critical. You see, our character will determine our influence. I have had many teachers. Some have taught me more than others but the ones who have taught me the most have been those who may not have had the most information to impart, but who showed me by their lives how to live. This should be the goal of every Christian. Let's look at the Apostle Paul.

Romans 1:8-11 *"First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is being reported all over the world. God, whom I serve with my whole heart in preaching the gospel of his Son, is my witness how constantly I remember you in my prayers at all times; and I pray that now at last by God's will the way may be opened for me to come to you. I long to see you so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to make you strong."*

We can learn a lot about Paul from these few verses in Romans and today I want to share five marks of Christian maturity we can distil from this short passage as we examine Paul's character.

1. A Thankful Attitude

The first thing we discover in Paul's character is thankfulness. Paul maintained a thankful attitude. His first personal words to these Christians in Rome were, *"I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you."* Paul had good reason to be thankful. Their faith was being reported all over the world. This should be true for all Christians. Still some would say that this was only polite conversation. I do not believe that. This truly reflected Paul's character. He had learned to be thankful.

In fact, this is rather remarkable. When you look at Paul's life you see that he had no easy time. Indeed, because of his commitment to Christ, he had suffered a great deal of persecution. He could have developed a bitter and resentful attitude as he was being persecuted from city to city, beaten, stoned, imprisoned. But his attitude was that of thankfulness. That's why we see Paul and Silas, locked up in the deepest dungeon of the jail in Philippi, singing at midnight! Only two kinds of people would do such a thing - fools or genuinely thankful people - and Paul was certainly no fool. He had experienced the transforming power of thanksgiving in his own life. He knew that thanksgiving was an essential element in everything he did. Listen to what he says about the key to effective prayer:

Philippians 4:6: *"Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God."*

All prayer should be offered with thanksgiving. The great Scottish preacher Alexander Whyte always began his prayers with an expression of gratitude. One cold, windy, wet, miserable Sunday his people wondered what he would pray. He prayed the following: *"We thank Thee, O Lord, that it's not always like this."* Whyte knew that there was always something for which to be thankful, even on a cold, wet, dreary day. We should learn the same lesson.

How do you rate in this category? Do you have an attitude of gratitude? Have the tough times in life made you bitter or better? Thanksgiving can make all the difference. It is a true characteristic of someone who is truly growing in Christ. It is a true reflection of the nature of Christ. Thankfulness is one of the most obvious marks of Christian maturity.

2. A Servant Heart

The next characteristic we notice is that Paul possessed a servant heart. He indicates that his ministry of preaching the Gospel was one in which he was committed to serve God with his whole heart. It is easy to miss this. This is not just religious talk. In fact, we find no such religious talk in Paul at all.

Notice the focus of his service - it is to God. Even though the preaching of the Gospel was directed at the people, Paul saw that his devotion was to God first. Paul's ministry was never man-centred; it was always God-centred. Our service should never be for people alone. It must always be for God and one of the ways we serve God is to serve His people. In fact it is because we first serve God that we can serve others. Notice also the depth of Paul's service. It was with his whole heart. His was not half-hearted service. It was whole-hearted service. This is the only kind of service God desires.

There's an interesting passage in 1 Kings 11. It is the story of Solomon, reportedly the wisest man in the world. Unfortunately this story is not about his wisdom. God had told Solomon not to take foreign women as wives. Solomon however, chose to disobey God and he married many foreign wives. Solomon did not just have one foreign wife, he had hundreds! The result was that Solomon allowed his heart to be turned away from God.

1 Kings 11:4 *"As Solomon grew old, his wives turned his heart after other Gods, and his heart was not fully devoted to the Lord his God, as the heart of David his father had been."*

What does this say to us today? The answer is simple. It says that 95% devotion is 5% short. God desires that we, like Paul, serve Him with our whole heart. How do you rate on this mark of maturity? Do you have a servant heart? Are you following God because of what you can get out of it? Or would you characterize your life as one that seeks to serve, first and foremost?

3. A Prayerful Concern

Another characteristic of Paul's inner character expresses itself in a prayerful concern. He called God to be his witness of how constantly he remembered his brothers and sisters in prayer at all times. In other words, Paul was concerned about these Christians in Rome whom he had never met. That concern moved Paul to pray.

This was not unusual for Paul. Prayer had become more than something he did on certain occasions. Prayer had become a way of life for Paul. Over and over in his letters, Paul emphasizes the importance of prayer. For example:

1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 *"Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus."*

Ephesians 6:18 *"And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints."*

Again, prayer is a characteristic of the nature of Christ. In the Gospels, we see that Christ would often sneak away and find a solitary place to pray. Sometimes He spent whole nights in prayer. Prayer was as natural to our Lord as breathing is to us. Prayer should be natural for the Christian, although it could be described as supernaturally-natural.

How are you doing in this area? Is your life characterised by prayer? Do you pray with concern and out of an attitude of thanksgiving for your brothers and sisters in Christ? Do you pray on all occasions?

4. A Submissive Will

Another mark of maturity that we see in Paul is that he had developed a submissive will. Notice what he says in the last part of verse 10: *"and I pray now at last by God's will the way may be opened for me to come to you."* Again no religious talk here. When Paul spoke of God's will he was not only indicating that he was concerned about knowing God's will, but he was also indicating that he was willing to submit to God's will in his own life.

Paul recognised something that all Christians should recognise. He recognised that Christ was Lord of his life. He understood that God had a plan for everything and knew everything that was going to happen and therefore the only way to be truly effective in life and ministry was if he submitted to the will of God, even if he didn't always understand it. Paul had developed a submissive will. He decided that he would render his will captive to Christ.

This is what it means when we talk about surrender. To surrender to Jesus Christ means that we willingly submit ourselves to Him. Submission begins in the heart. Submission is never imposed from without. True submission is a decision on the part of the one who submits. Otherwise it is not really submission.

The story is told of a little boy in a highchair. One day his mother found him standing up in the highchair and told him to sit down. He replied that he would not! She told him again. In defiance again he said no. After several repeated attempts to get him to sit down, she was at the end of her rope. She told him that if he did not sit down in that highchair at once there would be no ice cream for dessert. He could tell she was serious now so he sat down. After a very long pause, the little boy frowned at his mother and said, *"I'm sitting down on the outside ... but I'm standing up on the inside!"* He complied with his mother's request, but there was no submission. True submission comes from inside. Paul had a submissive will. Where are you on the submission scale? Are you giving lip service to God but really your 'standing up' on the inside? Have you truly surrendered your whole life to Jesus Christ or are you only allowing Him to have some parts of your life?

5. A Gracious Spirit

Another mark of Christian maturity is a gracious spirit. Paul demonstrates his true character when he says, *"I long to see you so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to make you strong."* He not only wanted to come to them, he wanted to give to them. He wanted to see them, not so that he might be the beneficiary of their goodness, but so he could bless them and impart to them some spiritual gift. He has a gracious spirit. So many people today are wrapped up in what they can get out of life. The popular mindset thrust upon us every night on television tells us that we only go around once and so we must grab all the stuff we can get. We've become a society of consumers rather than those who give first and foremost, with no thought of what might come in return. The word 'grace' literally means 'gift' and a gracious spirit is a giving spirit.

Too often today we hear preached the 'new' gospel of meeting people's felt needs. Even churches are chosen like this today. People look to see what kind of youth program, or children's program, or singles program, or music program or other program is available. Implied is the question: *"What can you do for me?"* Seldom is the question asked: *"What can I do for the Church?"* Former U.S. President John F. Kennedy, in his inaugural address, issued the powerful challenge: *"Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country."* It would be just as relevant to challenge Christians in the same way. *"Ask not what your church can do for you; ask what you can do for your church."*

These five attitudes of heart should be present in Christians who are truly growing in Christ. Where Christianity is genuine, Christians desire to serve. Of course this also reflects the character of Christ. Jesus is the ultimate example of what it means to lay one's life down for another. And He told us that we should do as He did.

Where are you in this regard? Have you come to the place where you agree with Jesus that it is truly better to give than to receive? Do you desire to impart a blessing to others every day or do you expect others to bless you first? A vital part of growing in Christ is being transformed from the inside out. Developing a thankful attitude, a servant heart, a prayerful concern, a submissive will and a gracious spirit is part of the process of becoming more like Christ. It is part of the process of being conformed to the image of God's Son. It is called maturity.

If you have been challenged by these characteristics and desire to see them grow in your life, you must understand that they come from a living relationship with Jesus. They come from a surrender of your life to Him and from a surrender of your whole heart.

As you live from that point of surrender and allow God to make sense out of all that you have experienced in life, you will find His character growing more and more inside of you. That's when you will know without doubt that you are truly growing in Christ.

GROWING IN CHRIST – Part 12

'Marks of Maturity - 2'

by Rev. Robert Griffith

Corrie Ten Boom in her book, *The Hiding Place*, relates an incident which taught her a very important principle. She and her sister Betsy had just been transferred to Ravensbruck, the worst German prison camp they had seen. Upon entering the barracks, they found them extremely overcrowded and infested with fleas.

Their Scripture reading that morning had reminded them to rejoice always, pray constantly, and give thanks in all circumstances. Betsy told Corrie to stop and give thanks to the Lord for every detail of their new living quarters. Corrie at first flatly refused to give thanks for the fleas, but Betsy persisted. She finally succumbed.

During the months spent at that camp, they were surprised to find how openly they could hold Bible studies and prayer meetings without any interference from the guards. It was several months later when they learned that the guards would not enter the barracks because of the fleas.

Do the circumstances you face change your attitude, or does your attitude change the circumstances? The real answer is that neither is true. But your attitude will change how you deal with your circumstances and determine the impact those circumstances might have on you. God will often use those circumstances to do a work in your life. You see, God is not after your comfort - He is after your maturity. Hello? Did you hear that? God is not concerned about your comfort - He is concerned about your maturity.

How would you describe those characteristics of Christian maturity that every Christian should possess? In our last sermon, I outlined five marks of maturity that the Apostle Paul possessed:

A Thankful Attitude, a Servant Heart, a Prayerful Concern, a Submissive Will and a Gracious Spirit.

In this sermon I want to add five more marks of maturity to that list. It should be noted, however, that all of these ten marks of Christian maturity come from a life that has been seasoned and tested through the tough times. Before I share these next five marks of maturity, let me read the next few verses in the passage from Romans we looked at last week:

Romans 1:12-16 “ ... that is, that you and I may be mutually encouraged by each other’s faith. I do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, that I planned many times to come to you (but have been prevented from doing so until now) in order that I might have a harvest among you, just as I have had among the other Gentiles.

I am obligated both to Greeks and non-Greeks, both to the wise and the foolish. That is why I am so eager to preach the gospel also to you who are in Rome. For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile.”

We learn the most from the difficulties we face. It is in the fire that we are refined. It is on the wheel of adversity that our character is moulded and shaped. When we can thank God for the fleas, then we have taken a great step in the right direction. Then we begin to really understand what God is looking for in our lives. Then we start to really grow in Christ. Let’s look at our next mark of maturity.

6. A Humble Mentality

One of the greatest stumbling blocks in the Christian life is pride. Pride keeps us from admitting that we have a need. Pride also keeps us from being in a position where we can receive from God. Pride keeps us from experiencing what God desires for us in our lives. Paul had learned both the destructive power of pride and the constructive value of humility. As a result, he had adopted a humble mentality.

Paul talks to these inexperienced Roman Christians about being mutually encouraged by each other's faith. Here was the great Apostle, the one who had accomplished many mighty works in the name of Jesus Christ, telling these young Christians that he could receive from them. He not only wanted to give some spiritual gift to them, he declared that he needed to receive from them out of their storehouse of faith. This indicates a genuine humility in Paul.

When we find ourselves in the frame of mind which leads us to believe that no one can teach us anything, we are in a very dangerous place. In fact, we are deluded. We are very much like those Christians Paul described in the Church in Corinth. They had divided into various groups based on the teaching of a particular person. Some were following Paul, others Apollos, still others Cephas (or Peter), and finally, some claimed they followed Christ.

What some fail to understand, however, is that all of those groups were wrong. Not only were those wrong who claimed to follow the human teachers, but so was the group who claimed to follow Christ. You see, they were all claiming that their way was right based on fringe issues. They were all puffed up in the pride of their position. Paul pointed out to them the error of their divisive spirit. Pride has no place in the body of Christ. Christ is not divided. When we are, we are not walking in humility.

We must be open to hear Christ speak to us through whomever He chooses. The youngest believer in Christ can be an instrument through whom Christ speaks. We all can learn from one another. In fact, we must. This is how we grow in our faith and it is through a humility of mind and spirit that we will be always open to receive from one another. This is the kind of attitude Paul maintained. This is the kind of attitude that is a mark of maturity for all believers.

7. A Purposeful Determination

While Paul maintained a humility of mind, he was far from passive. In fact, Paul had many plans which motivated him. He was possessed by a purposeful determination to accomplish the Lord's work. One can see this clearly in verse 13 when he says, *"I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that I planned many times to come to you (but have been prevented from doing so until now) in order that I might have a harvest among you, just as I have had among the other Gentiles."*

Paul understood that God had a plan for the way He was going to seek and save His lost children and so if Paul wanted to be part of that mission, he should make plans in harmony with the plan of God. He told the Roman Christians that he planned many times to come to them. His life had direction. He made plans and so should we.

Like Paul, our plans should not be simply pulled out of the air. We should never just make plans and ask God to bless them. Our plans should always be based upon our understanding of God's ministry in our midst at every point and that understanding is gained through prayer and the Word. Paul prayed and knew that God desired to use him to reap a harvest of people for the Kingdom. He understood clearly what God was doing. Christ was his example here – remember Jesus' own words when he said, *"I only do what I see the Father doing."* (John 5:19)

Therefore Paul could confidently assure the Christians in Rome that God desired for him to reap a harvest among them, just as he had done among the other Gentiles. Paul had a purpose. That purpose was the purpose of God at any given moment in his life. He was driven by that purpose. That purpose guided what he did and didn't do.

It is a mark of maturity when we have a purposeful determination that guides our life and ministry. Of course there may be many purposes, but all of them need to be birthed in prayer and study of His Word as we seek God's agenda in every area.

8. An Obedient Intent

Not only did Paul have a humble mentality and a purposeful determination, he was guided by an obedient intent. He understood fully just what God had done in his own life. He knew where he had come from and where he was now. He had been delivered by the power of God from a life of religious zeal without spiritual reality. He had possessed something of the knowledge of God but without the power.

Meeting Jesus Christ had changed all of that for Paul. Now he could serve Christ as one who could never repay the debt of love he owed and because of what Christ had done in his life he felt obligated both to Greeks and non-Greeks, both to the wise and to the foolish. This obligation was to share the good news of Jesus Christ with all people. This is exactly what He meant when Paul said in 1 Corinthians 9:16, *"Yet when I preach the gospel, I cannot boast, for I am compelled to preach. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!"*

There is a very real sense in which our obedience to Christ is not simply a choice. It most certainly is a choice to be made, but it is more than that. It is the fruit of the life of God within us. Because Jesus Christ has deposited His life in us, we are moved and motivated by that life. We are changed by that life. That life stirs us, challenges us, changes us and compels us. We are talking about more than an intellectual decision here. To encounter Christ - really encounter Him - means that we cannot leave that encounter without being changed. Christ makes all the difference in our lives.

Obedience begins as an attitude of mind reflecting the mind of Christ. As we are being conformed to the image of God's Son, Jesus Christ, we begin to think like Him and anyone who thinks like Jesus will desire to please God and submit to His will at all times. So our obedience is more than an intellectual choice on our part, it is an unavoidable result of a real relationship with God. It was for Paul. It is for us, as well.

9. An Eager Expectation

The great Apostle continues to reveal his heart by telling these Christians in Rome that he was eager to preach the gospel to them. A characteristic that marked Paul's life was an eager expectation. He made plans. He desired to be obedient to Christ. But he approached his task with an eagerness based on his expectation that God was at work. What an important characteristic to have. What a significant mark of maturity.

Are you eager? All of us are eager about some things. We are eager to go to the beach, or to the mountains, or on holidays. But when we look at our own lives as Christians, how does the term eager describe us? Are we eager to serve? Are we eager to see the Kingdom of God enlarged, when it will cost us our time, energy, money and convenience? Our eagerness is a reflection of what we love. When we are in love with God, we will be eager for God's work to be accomplished and His will to be done. That eagerness will create an expectation that as we step out in faith we will see God at work.

10. A Bold Faith

One final characteristic in our text that marked Paul's life was a bold faith. He says without hesitation that he is not ashamed of the gospel. A mark of maturity in Christ is a boldness and confidence in Christ. It is an important lesson to learn. As Christians, we should never be on the defensive. Rather, we should be on the offensive. The Bible tells us that demons tremble before the power of God. Let the demons tremble – not us. Over and over God said to Joshua, "*Fear not. Be of good courage.*"

The reason why we do not have to fear is the same reason why God could tell Joshua not to fear. It is because God is with us just as He was with Joshua. God's power is just as real today as it was in the days of Joshua, and in the days of Paul.

Let remind you of those ten marks of maturity which should emerge in your life in Christ:

- > A thankful attitude
- > A servant heart
- > A prayerful concern
- > A submissive will
- > A gracious spirit
- > A humble mentality
- > A purposeful determination
- > An obedient intent
- > An eager expectation
- > A bold faith

Let me close by sharing a declaration made by one mature Christian disciple many years ago. I will pray that you and I can embrace this powerful testimony and make it our own. Maybe you could print it and put it somewhere in your home so you can read it every single morning. I can just imagine what the Spirit of God might do in you and through you if you proclaimed this every day:

I am part of the 'Fellowship of the Unashamed.' I have Holy Spirit power. The die has been cast. The decision has been made. I have stepped over the line. I won't look back, let up, slow down, back away or be still. My past is redeemed, my present makes sense, and my future is secure.

I'm finished and done with low living, sight walking, small planning, smooth knees, colourless dreams, tamed visions, mundane talking, cheap giving and dwarfed goals. I no longer need pre-eminence, prosperity, position, promotions, plaudits or popularity.

I don't have to be right, first, tops, recognized, praised, regarded or rewarded. I now live by faith, lean on His presence, love with patience, live by prayer and labour with power.

My face is set, my gait is fast, my goal is heaven, my road is narrow, my way is rough, my companions are few, my Guide is reliable, and my mission is clear. I cannot be bought, compromised, detoured, lured away, turned back, deluded or delayed.

I will not flinch in the face of sacrifice, hesitate in the presence of adversity, negotiate at the table of the enemy, ponder at the pool of popularity or meander in the maze of mediocrity. I won't give up, shut up, let up or slow up until I have stayed up, stored up, prayed up, paid up and spoken up for the cause of Christ.

I am a disciple of Jesus Christ. I must go till He comes, give till I drop, preach till everyone knows and work till He stops me. Then when Jesus comes for His own, He will have no problem recognizing me. My banner is clear: I am a part of the "Fellowship of the Unashamed."

GROWING IN CHRIST – Part 13

'The Power of Testimony'

by Rev. Robert Griffith

Last week in our Sunday morning worship service we were privileged to hear a testimony from a sister in Christ whom God had rescued from the hell of domestic violence and drug dependency and completely transformed her by His grace and love into the mighty woman of God she is today. It was a wonderful testimony. It was a personal testimony. Nobody else on this planet could tell that story – it belonged only to one person and yet when she shared her story with her fellow believers, something happened in the heavenly realm. I couldn't describe it or even understand it at first, but I just knew God was doing something above and beyond the journey of this one brave disciple.

Don't get me wrong, this testimony was amazing and God's power was manifest in and through the weakness and brokenness of this special child of God, but when a testimony is shared, something happens beyond the boundaries of that person's experience. A powerful Kingdom principle is triggered – one which most of us don't even know about and yet we should because the Bible has a lot to say about the power of testimony and the importance of testimony for the growth of the Kingdom of God.

In the days following that wonderful testimony, I found myself pondering this some more and trying to understand what I felt last Sunday. Then I saw it – right there before my eyes - just one sentence towards the end of the Bible which I don't ever remember reading before. I'm sure I have, but this one sentence which I found in Revelation 19:10 says this: *"The testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy."* That's the New King James Version. Other translations express it in a variety of ways but they all say the same thing.

As soon as I read those words, something happened that I can't fully describe, but it was like the words turned red and started to flash in the text. I had no idea what the sentence even meant at first – but it leapt off the page and gripped my heart in a way that made it clear to me that God wanted to do something with this sentence and that I should not let it go or pass by too quickly.

I love it when God reveals something to your heart first that your mind can't explain. That's because **your heart can fit where your head can't fit**. So at times God will invite us into things that we have some perception of – but that we can't fully comprehend. It may seem frustrating at first but after this has happened a few times in your life you learn to embrace this firmly because it's a wonderful way to learn. Sometimes God does His best work in us by revealing something to our heart that our mind just doesn't understand. This then forces us back to God in prayer and reminds us that the Holy Spirit is the ultimate guide to all truth and until the Spirit shows us more, this deep conviction will just sit there and force us to dig deeper, search the Scriptures and wrestle with this revelation until we can put some words together which make sense so we can share this insight. So let me share some of the insight God has given me over the past week as I have been wrestling with the power of testimony and how God has always planned to use testimony in His Heavenly kingdom.

Let me remind you of that sentence again from Revelation 19: *"The testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy."* So what is the testimony of Jesus? Basically it is the spoken or written record of anything Jesus has said or done. The Spirit of Prophecy is that prophetic anointing or prophetic mantle. So what is prophecy? Well prophecy has two dimensions as I understand it. One is to foretell the future. A prophet may describe something that is going to happen at some point in the future. But I think predominantly in the Scriptures and throughout Church history the prophetic is used not so much to foretell, but to change present situations.

The prophetic will be used to make a decree that actually changes the reality which an individual, a family, a Church, a city or a nation is facing. It's the Word of the Lord proclaimed which changes the environment into which it is declared.

So think of it this way, **the testimony of Jesus carries with it the weight of heaven to alter the reality of a problem or situation that we're facing in the kingdom of this world.** Or to put it another way, it is written into the DNA of the testimony of God's power at work, that it has that ability to actually change the reality into which it is spoken. But wait . . . there's more!

The testimony of Jesus most certainly changed the reality around Him every day He walked among us as thousands of people were healed, saved, delivered from oppression and even raised from the dead. But that was not the end of it. This verse says, *"The testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy."* This simply means that if Jesus did it once, He can and will do it again! The testimony of Jesus does not just create miracles – it creates faith for more miracles because Jesus is the same, yesterday, today and forever. His will, His mission, His compassion, His desire to bless and heal and save and deliver does not alter with the passing of time. If He did it once, He will do it again and again and again!

I remember back in the 1990's I was part of the organising team for a large Worship Conference in Sydney. There were about 1,000 people present and I remember after one worship time we discerned that God's power was present to heal and so we called a number of people forward with specific problems which the Lord had laid on our hearts during the worship time.

One of conditions was severe lower back pain. A number of people came forward and we were praying over them one by one and I was standing close to one lady who was being prayed for by a colleague and she shared her story about a nasty car accident, multiple operations and chronic back pain 24 hours a day for over 15 years. She was completely healed there and then and for the first time in decades she had no pain in her body whatsoever.

Out of the corner of my eye I noticed a lady in the second row who had not come forward for prayer, but she had heard the other lady tell her story and she witnessed her being healed right before her eyes. Without delay this lady pushed past all the people in her row and came the front and pushed her way into the line of people being prayed for and stood next to this completely healed woman.

Then she said something very simple which even sounded a little arrogant at the time, but God brought back this 30 year old memory to me last week and now, all these years later, I can see what God was doing that night. As soon as this second lady positioned herself next to the one who was healed of chronic back injury, she looked me straight in the eye and said, *"If God did that for her, then certainly He will do that for me."*

Now it was not until last week that I realised that this woman actually had a brilliant understanding of the kingdom of heaven. First of all, she affirmed that God is no respecter of persons, what He's done for one He'll do for another. He doesn't have us in categories where these people get special things, and these people get the crumbs. That's not how God works. So she understood that.

Secondly, she understood that God is the same yesterday, today and forever. So something He's done at another time He'll do again. So she spoke it out without any doubt and said, *"If God did that for her, then certainly He will do that for me."* So we asked the woman who had just been healed if she would join us to pray for this lady. She did and God healed this woman too. I lost count of the number of people with serious back issues who were healed that night. It was wonderful, but I now realise the theological truth which was playing out before my eyes all those years ago. It's a truth that I don't ever recall knowing until last week, even though it has been there since the Church was born.

It's a truth that the great Charles Spurgeon obviously wrestled with at some point in his ministry. Spurgeon was an amazing Baptist Pastor from England who preached to thousands of people for many decades and his sermons are still available in print and they are rich in theology still pack a punch. Now I have read most of Spurgeon's sermons over the years, I'm a big fan, but this past week I found something in one of his sermons from July 17, 1859 which I don't remember ever reading and God used these words from 163 years ago to open my eyes to a very powerful and very important truth about the testimony of God. Listen to what Spurgeon said:

"When people hear about what God used to do, one of the things they say is, 'Oh, that was a very long while ago.' But I thought it was God that did it. Has God changed? Is He not an immutable God, the same yesterday, today and forever?"

Does not that furnish an argument to prove that what God has done at one time he can do at another time? I think I shall push it a little further and say that what God has done once is a prophecy of what He intends to do again. Whatever God has done, is to be looked upon as a precedent.

Let us with earnestness, seek what God would restore to us ... that we may richly enjoy His grace and power today."

So there you have it - way back in 1859 - in a conservative Baptist Church of all places. The body of Christ had an opportunity to step into a reality that I don't think anyone else was seeing back then even though this truth is clearly revealed in Scripture. Spurgeon declared the nature and power of testimony, and the Spirit of Prophecy and revelation which accompanies it and he made this declaration with incredible conviction. But I can find no evidence that it went any further. It appears to me that this amazing proclamation of a powerful kingdom principle just got reduced to a good sermon, instead of an invitation to explore what might be possible if we actually treasured the amazing record of what God has done. *"The testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy."* It has always been there right in front of our face. In fact we can go way back before Spurgeon and even before Jesus ...

The Book of Deuteronomy is probably not the 'go to' book for most modern Christians but there are some hidden gems tucked away in this Old Covenant book which shed light on our reality right through the ages. In Deuteronomy chapter six we are exhorted to *"keep the commandments of the Lord, keep the statutes of the Lord, and keep the testimonies of the Lord."* Now we know what it means to keep a commandment - God says it and we do it. Simple. But what is keeping the statutes? Keeping the statutes of God is where He is teaching us His value system. So in a commandment, God is telling you *what* to think. In a statute, He's telling you *how* to think. Let me say that again. In a commandment, God is telling you *what* to think; in His statutes, He's telling you *how* to think - He's actually showing you His perception of reality and how He navigates life. So He says, *"Keep the commandments, keep the statutes,"* and then He says, *"keep the testimonies."*

How do you keep a testimony? Well I have spent some time contemplating this because it speaks to the heart of what I believe God wants to teach us all right now. My conclusion, through studying the Scriptures and especially the Gospel of Mark and the lifestyle of Jesus, is that keeping the testimony basically means that I hold the record of God's interventions among His people so close to me, that they become the lense through which I see the world around me and the present challenges of life. In other words, we are meant to interpret our current reality through our history with God.

Our history with God, indeed all of humanity's history with God, has now given us the right lense through which we can see possibility in a problem instead of just the problem; we can see the nature of God in a situation; we can see how God is going to become triumphant now in a particular difficulty.

This truly is quite amazing. You and I actually have the ability to steward the testimonies of God's supernatural intervention so well, that they become the place from which we think and act; the place from which we pray and believe. The place from which we minister in God's miracle-working power. The testimony of God's mighty works is not just an exciting and encouraging moment of reflection - it's much more than that. Imagine Elijah right now standing in front of you prophesying. That's what a testimony is. It is prophesying. This is the heart of God. This is the nature of God. This is the covenant of God, and it is available to you and me. That's what a testimony is.

Ok, let me put some more meat on these bones by taking you to Psalm 78.

Psalm 78:1-7 *“Give ear, O my people, to my law; Incline your ears to the words of my mouth. I will open my mouth in a parable; I will utter dark sayings of old, which we have heard and known, and our fathers have told us. We will not hide them from their children, telling to the generation to come the praises of the Lord, and His strength and His wonderful works that He has done. For He established a testimony in Jacob, and appointed a law in Israel, which He commanded our fathers, that they should make them known to their children; that the generation to come might know them, the children who would be born, that they may arise and declare them to their children, that they may set their hope in God, and not forget the works of God, but keep His commandments.”*

So God's people are being exhorted to train their children not only in the law of God, the commandments, but to train them in God's wonderful, mighty works, which is His testimony. It says it in verse five that he established a testimony in Jacob. So you can see this was a pattern of a value system for the spoken and written record of all that God has done which was to be given to this generation that they would give it to the next generation and they would give it to the next generation.

This passage also tells us why this testimony is so important – it is **so they may set their hope in God**. There's something about this testimony that conditions a child or an adult, to position themselves to place hope in God when a trial comes. Their instinctive response is, *“I'm going to trust God, because I know He's the God who works wonders. I don't understand what He's going to do. I don't know how He's going to do it, but I'm going to trust Him.”* Where did that come from? It came from those who declared the testimonies of God, over and over again.

What I want you to notice this – and it's a really big deal. This is what we do for ourselves; this is what we do for our children and grandchildren - we set the stage for them to have courage because it takes courage to obey God. We want courageous obedience, radical obedience in our lives. So here in Psalm 78, it says we keep the testimony going for multiple generations. Why? So that they will put their hope in God; so that they won't forget the works of God; so that they will have the courage to obey God.

All through the Old Testament we see the high price God's people paid when they failed to declare the testimonies of God. At those times when we do see the radical obedience of God's people we know that it's because they remembered the testimony of God. They had not forgotten His mighty works and wonders throughout their whole history as His people. That is when victory comes. That is when faith arises. That is when God's people are at their best, then and now!

What happens if the testimony of the Lord declines? What happens when we stop recounting the miracles of God? We see less miracles. Now when we see less miracles, we expect less miracles. If we expect less miracles, we talk about them less. When we stop talking about them .. when we stop testifying to God's miraculous works, then we stop expecting them.

There is this downward spiral which takes us very quickly to the point where the mighty miracles of God, the powerful wonders of God have just become part of our history. As Charles Spurgeon said, we just talk about what happened a long time ago, with no expectation of it happening again to us, through us or around us. Our pathetic narrative becomes, *“Long, long ago in a faraway place, God used to do these amazing things ...”* and the inference is, *“... but not anymore!”*

Tragically, this is where so much of the Church is right now. The powerful testimony of God is relegated to become part of Israel's history, not ours. The miracle-working, society-transforming signs and wonders of God become an historical account in the book of Acts; a distant memory of something that happened back then – on the other side of the world. It's no longer a current reality and therefore not even a current expectation.

Whenever the Apostle Paul was in trouble, he would revert to his personal story - his own testimony. It's not just the miracles of healing, it's the deliverance, it's salvation – which is the greatest miracle of all. Why did he do that? He did that because he understood that, *“The testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy.”* Paul understood that the signs and wonders and miracle-working presence of God among His people was not a temporary phenomenon God used to establish the Church. This was a normal day at the office for God and He wants us, He *needs* us to proclaim the testimonies of God day and night and pass them on to our children and build faith in them to believe that the God Who is the same yesterday, today and forever is the God Who desires to manifest His presence among us the way He always has.

In Hebrews 11:1 we are told that, *“Faith is the assurance of things hoped for and the conviction of things unseen.”* When we lose that assurance and our conviction fades away, we no longer believe the testimony of Jesus and therefore the cutting edge, nation-transforming spirit of prophecy is not evident or effective in us or in the Church. The book of Acts is most certainly an historical account of the birth of the Church.

However, for millions of Christians today, that is all it is. The book was called the Acts of the Apostles for a reason – it is a testimony of what God did in and through the Apostles and they did all that in the power of Christ, through His indwelling Spirit. So we could rename the book of Acts and call it, *‘The Testimony of Jesus’* because that is what it is. In fact, that is what the four Gospels are; that is what Paul's Epistles are and the New Testament letters and the book of Revelation.

In fact the whole Bible is meant to be read and celebrated as a testimony of God's powerful engagement with, among and through humanity. We have an Old Testament and a New Testament. What do you think the word testament means? It means TESTIMONY. Who's testimony is it? Ultimately it is the testimony of Jesus – the Creator and Sustainer of the universe; the Author and Finisher of our faith; the One Who secured our salvation through His life, death and resurrection. Jesus is our testimony and we are called to declare His mighty works day and night and never stop.

We heard an amazing testimony last week about the life-changing, healing, restoring power of Jesus in the life of a domestic violence survivor. We are meant to rejoice with those who have been delivered and restored through Christ, and we do, but what is God's end goal from every testimony – right throughout history?

His end goal is that we believe what He did for one He will do for others. That means that until every domestic violence victim hears a testimony like the one we heard last week, God's will has not been done. The specifics of our journey are personal and apply only to us but the miracle-working power and presence of God at work in us belongs to everyone who needs the same deliverance and that is why the word of our testimony is so important, so powerful and so necessary.

When we finally understand the power of testimony and how its absence has contributed to the rapid decline of the Church's power, influence and relevance in the world, then everything will change and the Book of Acts will no longer just be an historic account of the birth of the Church, it will also be a running commentary of the Church of today – your Church and mine. Let me leave you with some of Charles Spurgeon's words again: *“What God has done once is a prophecy of what He intends to do again. Whatever God has done, is to be looked upon as a precedent. Let us with earnestness, seek what God would restore to us ... that we may richly enjoy His grace and power today.”*

GROWING IN CHRIST – Part 14

'The Power of Testimony'

by Rev. Robert Griffith

As we continue this *Growing in Christ* 'boot camp,' I want to share a verse of Scripture with you which I think is one of the most important verses in the New Testament to understand if we are really serious about maturing in our walk with God through Jesus Christ.

1 Corinthians 15:10 *"By the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them - yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me."*

Like a double-sided coin, there are two foundational truths in this Bible verse which appear to be very different and yet they are really part of the same coin and so they need to be held in balance. The first truth states that we are who we are by the grace of God. Understanding God's grace is a vital first step in understanding everything else in the Christian life. We must know and understand that we did not earn our salvation, we did not deserve it and there's nothing we can do to pay God back for it.

We were born into a lost and rebellious humanity and the condition of sin in which we found ourselves separated us from the experience of God's love. We were powerless to do anything about this. God gave us His holy law which defined our sin and revealed our need for salvation. Then generation after generation of His children failed to live up to the standard of His holy law and thereby failed to reach their potential as children of God, created in His image.

Then God stepped out of eternity and into time over 2,000 years ago when He became a man, in order to provide a way for all of mankind to be reconciled to Himself. That man was Jesus. He was also wholly God and did what no other human being had ever done. He obeyed the holy law of God fully and completely, thereby fulfilling the whole law as a man, on our behalf.

He also paid the ultimate price for sin. Not His sin, but our sin. That price is death and Jesus' death on the cross satisfied the requirements of the law which said that the wages of sin is death. The holiness of God burns against all that is not holy. The wrath of God is unleashed against all unrighteousness, and yet because of the overwhelming love of God towards us, His precious children, He allowed His holiness, His wrath, His judgement to burn against Jesus instead of us. Jesus died on our behalf – Jesus died in our place. Then His glorious and permanent resurrection from death three days later signalled victory over sin, death and Satan. That's the good news! That's the gospel and all those who accept that truth by faith can experience the joy, wonder and freedom of being reconciled to God forever.

Now all of that was done by God, for us. We didn't devise this rescue package. We didn't and we couldn't deal with the problem of sin. We were lost and headed for eternity without God. In His grace and mercy, God stepped into our lives and redeemed us. While we were spiritually dead in our sin, God made us alive in Christ.

That is why Christianity is the only hope for a lost humanity. No religion in the world can solve the problem of sin. All religions involve us desperately trying to reach God and relate to Him personally. All such attempts are futile. It was God, in Christ, Who actually came after us! God took the initiative. God reached into our fallen, fruitless, frustrating existence and declared us righteous, redeemed and reconciled, in Christ, through Christ and for Christ.

That is why we can and we must now declare that it is, *“By the grace of God I am what I am. I can boast in no one but the Lord - He has given me freedom and salvation and eternal life as a gift!”* If only I could wave my hand and know that each and every Christian walking this earth really knew God’s grace right now, in all its truth.

So many of the Church’s problems, tensions and divisions have come from an erroneous or incomplete view of the Grace of God and therefore the heart and purposes of God. There are thousands of people following God today who are still not personally familiar with this side of the coin and until they are, flipping the coin to the other side will not serve them or God at all. If you think you would like to know more about God’s grace, then I suggest you spend some time working through my 24 part teaching series [“Amazing Grace”](#) on our website. Even if you are familiar with that teaching, I recommend you re-connect with it again.

So assuming you do have a grasp on God’s grace, let me now flip the coin and tell you that whilst God’s grace is unconditional in that we do not need to do anything to earn it, receive it or deserve it, we must understand that the *effect* of God’s grace is conditional upon our choices and efforts.

Look at Paul’s words again:

“By the grace of God I am what I am ...”

Hallelujah! God is good! I don’t deserve it and nothing I do or don’t do will alter God’s love and grace which are poured into my life.

“but ... his grace to me was not without effect ...”

I didn’t just receive it ... I don’t just enjoy it and feel warm and mushy inside because of it ... His grace has an effect in my life. Why? Well look at why this grace effective for Paul:

“... because I worked harder than all of them.”

Paul is saying: *“This wonderful free grace of God which has been lavished upon me has been effective ...it has borne fruit ... it has actually done what it was meant to do ... **because I made a choice** to work hard in partnership with God.”*

Then, just to maintain the balance, Paul reminds us that even our hard work and effort is ultimately empowered by God: *“... yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me.”*

Listen brothers and sisters ... in Jesus’ name please get this because it’s a vital key to embracing the power, the glory and the reality of God’s kingdom. This is the key to living an effective, abundant Christian life. You will not grow in Christ unless you get this. Let me give you one sentence that will appear to be a riddle at first - but it will make a lot of sense when you understand what I mean by it:

**Our efforts are ineffective in securing God’s grace,
but God’s grace is ineffective in us without our efforts.**

This is what Paul is saying. This is what Paul proved in his life and ministry. Our salvation; our right standing before God; our forgiveness and cleansing; His gifts and power; the whole wonderful gift of salvation is given to us free - by His grace. There are no strings attached and no effort required on our part to secure it other than to believe.

That’s the first side of the coin and many of you know that side of the coin very well - it is polished and well-worn and you could articulate the truths contained on that side of the coin to most people. You know that you are saved by grace and live under grace.

However the other side of this coin is equally important and often neglected by those who think they understand grace. It is the side which says that this grace will be not be effective in us if we do not make deliberate and daily choices which open up the channel for God's grace to flow through us - rather than just to us. We are called to be rivers, not reservoirs. That's why Paul mentions God's grace and His hard work in the same breath - for this is a partnership.

In his letter to the Galatians, Paul said, "*It is for freedom that Christ has set us free.*" (Galatians 5:1). Freedom is an end itself as far as our relationship with God is concerned. However we also need to understand that God desires that we should join Him in His global campaign to bring all His lost children home. God invites us and longs for us to *respond* to His grace and be *channels* of His grace to a lost and needy world.

This is a pattern all the way through the Bible. We read of God's grace, love, mercy, forbearance and forgiveness - then almost in the same paragraph we are faced with the question, "*How then shall I live?*" In other words, what is my *response* to what God has done? What choices am I making each day so that what God has put in me - gets out and makes a difference in my life and the life of those around me?

Let me give you a down-to-earth illustration that we can all relate to easily. Imagine for a moment (it will be a nice moment, I'm sure), that I deposit ten million dollars into your bank account today. The transaction is legal. There are no strings attached. This is a free gift - it's all yours. You can do with it as you wish. You are the legal owner of this huge gift.

Now you can just leave that money in your account and not spend it if you wish. That's your choice. In ten years' time you will still be the owner of that money - it won't ever be taken from you. However, if you choose to use that money and spend it - then you will not only be the legal owner of the money ... it will also have had an *effect* in your life. There may be a few people in the world who would leave that money in the bank and never touch it, but I am sure you would agree that the vast majority of normal people would want that money to have an effect in their life. They would want to see the fruit of their gift. The best of those people would also want to see their gift make a difference in their world.

Well friends, at some point in eternity, God deposited far more than ten million dollars into your account. In fact, He made a whole range of deposits into your account. He transferred complete forgiveness; amazing grace; unconditional love, undeserved mercy; absolute holiness; perfect righteousness; abundant life; eternal life; a whole bank-roll of spiritual gifts; power; glory; majesty; healing; wholeness; peace; joy; patience; kindness; goodness; self-control. That's quite an impressive bank statement, you have to admit. In fact, the bottom line of your statement actually reads: '*The Fullness of God, in Christ.*' All those things I just mentioned, and much more, came with Jesus.

What you received in this heavenly direct-transfer is worth a thousand times more than all the money in the world. Money is great ... we may all wish we had more ... it keeps us in the life to which we would like to become accustomed! However the deposits made by God keep us in the life to which *God* has been accustomed ... and let me tell you ... the two don't even compare! One is superficial and lasts for a handful of years and the other is beyond description and lasts for eternity!

So we already know that money in the bank is only useful and effective if you choose to let it out and use it. So too with all the riches of heaven that God has bestowed upon you and me - they will only have an effect in our lives and through our lives **if** we choose to let them out and use them. 'If' is such a tiny word and yet what power it has. All through history this tiny word has made such a huge difference in life. All through the Bible we see this word. It shouldn't have that much power - it's just a two-letter word, a tiny word. But once it begins a sentence, it controls everything else that follows. Its power is certainly disproportionate to its size.

Sometimes I think when we read the Bible, we just ignore this little word. We seem really good at understanding what follows the word 'then,' but we overlook 'if.' We preach about 'then' and cry out to God for all the 'then' promises, but we disconnect it from the 'if' part. We read right through the book of Genesis. We read through the prophets, the Psalms, the minor prophets - into the gospels, into the epistles and we so easily ignore this tiny, but powerful word. The problem is that 'if' just won't go away. It's there on nearly every page of the Bible. In fact, one of the most powerful promises of God in the whole Bible begins with this little word. You know it well, I'm sure:

2 Chronicles 7:14 *"If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land."*

This little word is all through the Bible. It's in the Garden of Eden. It's in the story of Cain and Abel. It's in the story of Moses and Abraham and every other great man and woman of God. This little word 'if' is found right throughout human history. We live in a cause and effect world which is dominated by this 'if ... then' reality.

Now let me stress here that I'm not talking about a performance-based rewards system. I'm not talking about God rewarding us for our efforts ... I am talking about a more practical and pragmatic reality. I am simply saying that God has set us totally and completely free to choose life or death; heaven or hell, right or wrong, this colour car or that colour car; this Church or that Church; this job or that job. We are free to choose. Yes, God is sovereign. I affirm that. I have a very high view of God's sovereignty - but as a sovereign God He can do whatever He wants, am I right? Well friends, what He did with you and me is absolutely amazing and just a little terrifying at times. In His sovereignty, God chose to channel His sovereign power through the free choices of His beloved children.

God desperately wanted a free relationship of love with us, so He set us totally and completely free. We are free to sin or not. We are free to obey or not. We are free to worship or not. We are free to use the spiritual gifts He gives or ignore them. We are free to reach out into our community and change lives every day or stay safe within our fortress and die on the vine. We are free to believe what God says so clearly or ignore it and make up theologies which suit our personal agendas. We are free to receive the entire riches of heaven in the gift of salvation and then do absolutely nothing with them.

God invites us to love Him, serve Him and embrace the mission of Christ because we *want* to, not because we *have* to. That is why He set us totally free. That is why there are hundreds of "If ... then" pleas from God all through the Bible. Each one of those statements affirms our freedom to choose and affirms what God can and will do if we choose His way. The fabric of our faith must be woven together not only with God's grace, but also with the resulting obedience and action on our part which allows God's grace to have an effect. We may not want it to be that way. We might prefer to just sit back and watch God do His stuff - with us in the grandstand cheering "Go God, go God ...!!"

The power of 'if' can't be out-voted by popular opinion. It can't be outflanked by policy. Nothing can change this 'if.' It is God's 'if.' If we do what we're asked to do and what we were created to do ... then all the promises of God will unfold and bear fruit before our very eyes. We will cash cheques on our heavenly bank account every day and we will really make a difference if, and only if, we do it God's way.

If we choose to cash a cheque against our ten million dollar bank account, it will change the way we live and we will get to see the fruit of those riches. If we cash a cheque against the bank of heaven; that is, if we make daily choices which are consistent with the revealed will of God and His plan for His children, then it will change the way we live and we will see incredible, eternal fruit flow from the choices we make.

This tiny word 'if' certainly punches above its weight! No matter how much we'd like to get rid of it, it looms large in the text. We are forced to begin with that little word. It is a gateway to all the glory and riches and city-transforming power of heaven .. or .. it is a road-block in our whole journey with God. Everything we hope for and everything we ever dreamed of hinges on what we do with that one little word. So let me use this word one more time today and say this:

If we truly want to grow in Christ and mature in our relationship with our Lord, **then** we need to be able to affirm and embrace every word of the Apostle Paul as our own as we declare with him: *"By the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them - yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me."*

As a reminder in the days ahead, perhaps you could make a small sign bearing the words I shared earlier and put it somewhere prominent so you can read it every day as you look more closely at the choices you make and their impact on the mission of Christ:

***Our efforts are ineffective in securing God's grace,
but God's grace is ineffective in us without our efforts.***

GROWING IN CHRIST – Part 15

'Living in Two Kingdoms'

by Rev. Robert Griffith

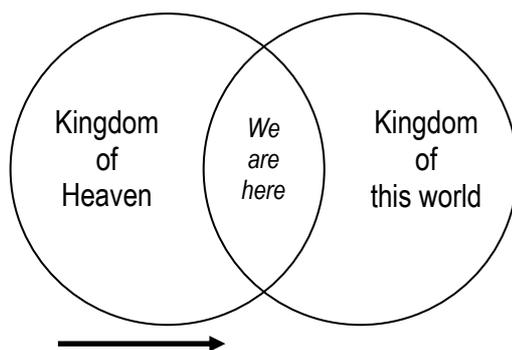
When you were born, you were born into this fallen world, the kingdom of this earth, the kingdom of Satan, as the Bible calls it. This is the finite, material, cause-and-effect world in which we see, taste, smell, feel and hear. It is the world which dominates our time and thinking most days. It is the natural world, the earthly realm.

This is the kingdom in which the vast majority of people in the world reside exclusively. Anyone who has not accepted the gift of God's grace and experienced the reality of the Kingdom of heaven is only aware of this earthly kingdom. This is reality as far as they know now.

However, you and I and the millions of others who are born again Christians do not only live in this earthly kingdom. The Bible says that we have been born again into a new kingdom - the kingdom of heaven, the kingdom of God. This is a supernatural world, an infinite realm and the eternal, everlasting kingdom where Jesus Christ rules as Lord.

Unlike this earthly, finite realm, the Kingdom of God is not perceived by our five senses. It is not visible, tangible and able to be experienced in the same physical way. It certainly impacts this physical world and our physical bodies but it also transcends them. It is a spiritual kingdom perceived by and experienced by that part of us we call our spirit.

That's why Jesus said to Nicodemus in John 3 that, "*.. flesh gives birth to flesh but spirit gives birth to spirit ..*" and unless we are born again into this spiritual realm, we will not experience its wonder, glory or power. It will not be real to us. It will be an illusion that is talked about, preached about and sung about by millions of deluded people called Christians. To one who has not been born again – their only reality is this earthly kingdom. So let's look at the two kingdoms as they are right now.



When Jesus came to earth over 2,000 years ago He ushered in the kingdom heaven - He launched a full scale heavenly attack on the kingdom of this world – a kingdom ruled by Satan. Jesus' intent was to rescue everyone who had been taken captive by the enemy. Through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the power and the glory and the reality of the eternal kingdom of heaven was released on earth.

So now everyone who believes on the Lord Jesus Christ, that is literally those who believe *into* Jesus; step into His life and embrace His life (as their own), His death (as their own) and His resurrection (as their own) they are born again into the kingdom of heaven.

That is, they have a spiritual awakening. Their spirit is regenerated by God's Holy Spirit. They are given a new citizenship - only this one lasts forever and is not of this world. They remain part of the kingdom of this world as long as they live and breathe here but they are now also a part of the eternal, majestic, supernatural kingdom of heaven which is moving more and more across to take over the kingdom of Satan so that one day there will be only one kingdom, one reality, one existence - the kingdom of heaven. When that eclipse is complete, Satan will be gone, sin will be gone, everyone will bow the knee to Jesus and all flesh will know the glory of the kingdom of heaven and all unholiness and sin will be removed for all time.

Until then, you and I and all believers live in that middle area where the two kingdoms clash - and I mean clash. This is light vs darkness; sin vs holiness; truth vs error; grace vs law; God vs Satan; right vs wrong; power vs impotence; glory vs shame. These two kingdoms are diametrically opposed to one another and so living with this dual citizenship is not easy and will always bring with it a degree of tension, pain, conflict and confusion. It's like we have a dual personality. It's like we are two people in one body sometimes. As wonderful as it is to be saved, redeemed and heaven bound - it is also a daily battle. That is what happens when kingdoms clash. Like it or not, we are caught up in the greatest cosmic battle we could ever imagine - but, of course, it's a battle Jesus has already won!

So when we pick up the Bible and start reading it; when we go to the Word of God to find help in working out my salvation, understanding how we should live and move and act and react as a Christian, it is absolutely essential that we understand this dual kingdom reality. We need to know that there are certain things which have happened and are happening in the spiritual realm, in the kingdom of heaven, which are not yet fully realised or experienced in this kingdom. We have to realise that although God has secured our salvation over 2,000 years ago in this earthly time line, we still have to deal with the realities of a fallen, sinful world where there are cause-and-effect consequences. Let me explain this by giving you some examples.

Sin

In the Kingdom of heaven, your sins are completely forgiven. They have been atoned for. There is no punishment for your sins anymore. Way back in the Old Testament God foretold the day when He would wipe away our sins and He did that through Jesus. Jesus atoned for your sin. He paid the price for it once and for all. Is there any sin in the kingdom of heaven? No. Are you in the kingdom of heaven? Yes! So in God's eternal Kingdom - Jesus has taken away your sin. Yet you still have to live in the kingdom of this world where Satan reigns and tempts us and lures us and inhabits our fallen nature and so we still sin don't we? 1 John tells us we are liars if we say we are without sin. We still stumble and fall. But our sin can never separate us from God. Our sin can never again have any bearing on our eternal relationship with God - that was secured by the blood of Jesus Christ in the kingdom of heaven. God does not hide His face from us because of our sin.

All those Old Testament verses about sin coming between us and God **no longer apply** to born-again believers. Our sin, with respect to our eternal relationship with God, has been taken away and the very code (the law) which defined our sin and which Satan used to accuse us, has been nailed to the cross! God still hears our prayers when we sin. God still blesses us with gifts and power and fruitful ministry when we sin. All that stuff unfolds in the kingdom of heaven where our sin is atoned for and taken away along with all punishment.

Yet back in this earthly realm, sin is still sin and it's as ugly and destructive and horrid as it has always been. Sin will still hurt you. It may even kill you physically if it's bad enough. It will destroy relationships. It will hinder the spread of the gospel and affect the credibility of the Church in the eyes of the world. It will cause others to stumble. It will lead little ones astray when they see it in us. It will open the door for Satan to march into our lives, re-armed by our sin, as he brings his evil ministry of distraction, discouragement, deception and death.

Sin is horrible. Don't do it. Flee from all evil. Stand firm against the schemes of the enemy. Your soul may be secure in the kingdom of heaven and your relationship with God may be secure in Christ but if you yield to the evil in this world and allow sin to reign in you then you will be living in darkness all your days on this earth and you will have to wait until you die to experience the abundance and glory of the heavenly kingdom. So don't sin. But please don't ever let anyone tell you that your sin has any effect on your relationship with God from His perspective - because it doesn't. This is the gospel. This is the truth. And that is why they call it 'good news.' That is why they call it grace.

Oh yes, let me assure you that if you continue to let sin have its way you will *feel like* you are a long way from God; you will *feel* punished; you will lose the *experience* of His grace as you allow Satan to have more and more control. But Satan is the one who accuses, not God. Satan is the one who brings guilt and shame back into your life. Satan is the one who convinces you that God can't hear you or bless you or use you because you are an unholy vessel.

So friends, in this cause-and-effect world, sin will bring horrible consequences into your life. You will reap what you sow. But don't confuse this kingdom for the kingdom of heaven where which you sit at the right hand of God dressed in the righteous robes of Christ.

Forgiveness

In the Kingdom of heaven forgiveness is complete. All your sin has been forgiven. Because there is no calendar in heaven that means there is no past, present or future. Therefore, your sin has been forgiven - period! That means back down in this earthly realm, all your sin has been forgiven through the death of Jesus on Calvary.

The sins of Abraham were forgiven in the wounds of Jesus thousands of years before Jesus entered time and space. The sins of your great, great, great grandchildren are forgiven in the wounds of Jesus years before they are even born. That is the reality of forgiveness in the Kingdom of heaven, where is no beginning or end. If you a resident of the kingdom of heaven, then are all your sins forgiven! Yet back down here in this cause-and-effect world, there are days when you and I might *feel* condemned and not forgiven.

Our experience can at times be very different to the reality achieved for us in Christ. That's why when the writers and translators of the New Testament have Jesus saying that God will not forgive us if we do not forgive others, they are not talking about what happens in the kingdom of heaven. The only realm that you and I can affect by our actions and our inaction is this earthly kingdom.

***Nothing that happens in the kingdom of heaven
is ever dependent upon what you or I do or don't do.***

Now let me assure you that in this world, if you harbour unforgiveness or bitterness in your heart then it will grow like a cancer and it will rob you of the experience of God's forgiveness in such a way that you will feel condemned. But it will not be God who condemns you; it will not be God who robs you of the freedom and glory and wonder of the experience of being forgiven and cleansed. It will be Satan, working through your own tortured conscience, empowered by your own unforgiving heart. In Jesus name, I pray that you get this.

You cannot lose your eternal salvation by your actions. You cannot lose your forgiveness by your actions. It is all wrapped up in the same wonderful free gift of God's grace. It is secured for you, signed with God's hand, in the blood of His own dear Son. It is finished. But back here, while we still have to struggle in this fallen, broken kingdom as well, we need to be diligent and not give the enemy a foothold by not forgiving everyone, every time - straight away.

Holiness and Righteousness

In the kingdom of heaven you are united with Christ, washed by His blood, clothed in His pure white robes, filled with His presence and therefore you are the righteousness of Christ and you are 100% pure and holy. You have to be - if you want to be in the presence of God. Do you understand that holiness and sin cannot occupy the same space any more than you can go forward and backward at the same time? It is simply not possible.

Therefore, as you approach the eternal throne of God in worship and prayer, you must be pure, white, stainless, holy and 100% righteous. What happens if you are not? You vaporise. You are burned up by the holiness of God. So how is that possible? His name is Jesus, that's how. Jesus did that for you.

Jesus is why you can pray. Jesus is why you can talk to God and hear God talk to you. Jesus is why you can climb up on your Father's lap and call Him daddy - because in the kingdom of heaven you are in Christ and in Christ there is no sin, no unholiness, no unrighteousness. You are spotless in the kingdom of heaven.

Back here in this earthly realm we are all working at letting that holy nature permeate our fallen nature. In this earthly kingdom we pray, we worship, we help each other, we hold each other accountable so that the holiness that is ours in Christ is seen more and more in our lives. Little by little, day by day, it overcomes the fallen nature in us, as the kingdom of light gradually eclipses the kingdom of darkness.

Spiritual Gifts

Take a deep breath – this one might stretch you! All of the spiritual gifts are in Christ and Christ is in you. Therefore, you possess the fullness of God in Christ which obviously includes all the spiritual gifts. That's right - prophecy, healing, discernment of spirits etc. They are all there. So what about the Bible passages that say, *"To one is given this gift and to another is given that gift.."* ?

Well those refer to the practical outworking of the gifts in this world. This is where it helps to study a little Greek. In the original language in which the New Testament was written, that verse could just as easily be translated, *"In one is released this gift, and in another is released that gift."* An interesting alternative, I'm sure you agree, and it'd actually a more valid and helpful translation.

No doubt you have heard teachers talk about spiritual gifts through the analogy of an orchestra. I think it is an excellent analogy but I actually use that picture very differently to most. Most teachers see each of us as one member of that orchestra, playing our one instrument and occasionally the really talented few might even play two instruments at different times. The conductor is Jesus and He determines which gifts operate by determining who He puts in His Church.

That's a great picture. However I see the picture very differently. I see Jesus as the whole orchestra and God the Father (through His Spirit on earth) as the Conductor. Now because you and I are in Christ, guess what that means? It means each of us, as believers, has the entire orchestra within us all the time because Christ is in us. The conductor can therefore release particular instruments in us at particular times as He sees fit and at times He may release half a dozen at once in some people.

The hard thing is that in this limited, finite, cause-and-effect earthly kingdom, we find that picture very hard to see and so we would rather walk by sight and revert to a far inferior view of spiritual gifts, thereby robbing the Church of so much power and effectiveness.

I could go on all day with examples but if you understand the essence of what I am saying then you will see this dual reality in everything you think, say and do and it will cause hundreds of difficult Bible passages to suddenly make sense.

The conflict we so often experience in interpreting the Bible is that we fail to have this dual kingdom concept firmly embedded in our thinking and so we will take passages that refer to our eternal condition in the Kingdom of Heaven and apply them to our daily lives in this world and get really frustrated and confused. Or we will take exhortations to live pure, godly lives and clean up our act and apply them to our lives in the eternal kingdom and end up with no assurance of salvation or forgiveness or anything. We must understand what it means to live in both kingdoms every moment of every day. After a while it will make sense and a lot of things will fall into place. Our ability to deal with sin will be far greater when we know that God is not our accuser. The quality of our love relationship with God will increase markedly when we are not trying to please Him with our behaviour or our performance.

Some of the most famous words of Jesus are also the most profound, in my opinion. I refer to what we have called the Lord's prayer. The opening words of that prayer sum up this entire sermon and if we recited those words a hundred times a day, just maybe we would start to see how we are really supposed to live. Jesus gave us a model for prayer and a model for life when He said we should pray, *"Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Your Name, Your kingdom come, Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven."*

I preached [a whole series](#) on three of those words not long ago and I would encourage you to re-visit that teaching. Those words send shivers up my spine every time I say them. YOUR KINGDOM COME. These are three of the most powerful words you could ever utter. What do they mean? The words that follow tell us. *"Your kingdom come"* literally means: *"Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."*

This is a prayer that asks God to speed up the eclipse. When we say, *'Your kingdom come,'* we are asking that the reality of the Kingdom of Heaven would become the reality in this earthly Kingdom. In fact, we are praying that one will replace the other. What a prayer! Just think about it. *'Your kingdom come'* means that holiness, righteousness, peace, forgiveness, security, salvation, discernment, love, grace, peace, etc. all increase ... as sin, evil, condemnation, fear, anxiety, ignorance, hate, law and all things evil decrease.

When we pray for God's kingdom to come, we are asking that the reality of heaven will become our experience more and more here on earth. It means that our life which is dominated by the now, the finite, the natural - along with sickness, poverty, weakness, ineffectiveness - will more and more be dominated by healing, riches, abundance, strength, power and rich fruit that lasts into eternity.

That is what's happening right now across the world. The reality of the kingdom of heaven is forcefully advancing against the reality of the kingdom of this world. In both a physical and spiritual sense, the lame are walking; the deaf can hear; the blind are beginning to see clearly for the first time; the power and the glory and the honour and grace and mercy and presence of God which saturates heaven is beginning to flood across the earth. Let's check this again to make sure we know the truth . . .

Are there any sick people in heaven? No. Well start praying for the sick now. The power of God to heal is increasing every day. If you are sick you should ask someone to pray for your healing. If you know people who are sick you should ask them if you can pray for them and don't stop praying and believing.

Are there any lost people in heaven? No. Well guess what friends? The kingdom of heaven is here in power and there are over 80,000 people every day coming into the reality of that kingdom across the world. The power of God is present to save and convince people of their need of Jesus. Have you tested the water lately and shared your faith with anyone? Have you told anyone your story? Have you overcome the enemy by the blood of the Lamb and the word of your testimony lately?

Are there any demonised people in heaven? No. Well there are millions down here who need setting free. Satan has taken God's children captive and his power needs to be broken. As you and I pray those words, *'Your kingdom come,'* and believe them - the demons will flee and prisoners will be set free right across this nation.

Throughout my ministry over the past 40 plus years I have sat in services and meetings where the kingdom of heaven flooded the room in a way I cannot describe and the powers of darkness manifested in people right across the auditorium all at once. There was screaming and yelling and cursing and then the power of the Holy Spirit packed those demons' bags and sent them out the back door in one massive purging and the peace of God fell on that place and healed people everywhere. There are no demons tormenting God's people in heaven and soon there will be none here either as God's kingdom comes and God's will is done here, on earth as it already is in heaven.

Are there any lonely, hurting, abused or rejected people in heaven? No. Well let's pray that the kingdom of heaven comes to our city through you and me as we reach out to the hundreds and hundreds of people around us every single day who go through life not feeling love or acceptance or grace from anyone.

If you want to see the power and reality of the kingdom of heaven unleashed in your community, in your Church, in your family, in your own life ... then perhaps you have the faith to pray this prayer with me right now:

May Your kingdom come, Lord, may Your will be done here in our city; here in this Church, as it is in heaven. Let the blind see, let the deaf hear, let the lame dance before your throne; let the prisoners rejoice in their freedom; let the demons flee for their lives; let bitterness die; let unforgiveness be gone; may there be no regrets; no tears of sadness - only tears of joy; let the righteous rejoice in the presence of their God; let the children run and laugh and play in the courtyard of their Father; let the army of God march into the enemy's camp and release all the hostages and bring them to freedom; let the power and the glory and the majesty and the excitement and the reality of Your kingdom flood our hearts, our minds, our Church, our city and our nation. In the mighty and matchless name of Jesus we pray, amen.

GROWING IN CHRIST – Part 16

'God told me ...'

by Rev. Robert Griffith

I want to share from my heart on an issue that is vitally important in the Body of Christ and one that causes great tension and confusion because of the poor teaching which surrounds it. It's an issue which I believe separates the mature from the immature more than a lot of issues and I am praying that you will receive this from God and not allow the enemy to trigger personal offence in you, something that should exist less and less in those who are growing in Christ.

The issue I refer to could come under several headings - guidance, discerning God's will, hearing the voice of God, prophecy etc. The title I have given this sermon, 'God told me,' should really have a subtitle, "Revelation or Blasphemy?"

That basically sums up the concern I want to speak about today. This issue is very sensitive, personal and confronting. Perhaps that's why I have only ever heard two people in my whole life even attempt to address it from the point of view of Christian maturity.

If I had a dollar for every time I have heard someone say "*God told me ...*" during my life, I would be a millionaire for sure. However, as you could well imagine, if God had in fact been the source of those countless statements which had His name on them, then He would be the most twisted, confused being in the universe! For there have been many contradictions within those "*words from the Lord*" - some of those conflicting statements even came through the same person at different times! So much is said on God's behalf which is clearly not God at all and that makes it really hard for many people to trust anyone when they share what they think is 'a word from the Lord.'

Herein lies our dilemma: how does a maturing believer negotiate their way through this jungle of revelations, messages, dreams, visions, prophecies, tongues and words of knowledge - only some of which will be from God? There is a theological aspect to this and time does not permit us to go into an in-depth study of how we might hear the voice of God. That is for another time. For the purposes of this sermon, I want to speak about a more serious aspect of this issue – and that is the wisdom and maturity required when intentionally or unintentionally speaking on the Lord's behalf.

I believe the line between prophecy and blasphemy is a very fine one indeed and millions of sincere believers cross it every day. I know that blasphemy is a strong word and I only use it because I cannot find a stronger word! This is a very serious issue. To share anything at all on behalf of the Lord, places the believer in a very dangerous position.

Taking the Lord's name in vain refers to something far more serious than using His name as a curse or an exclamation. When I mention the term 'blasphemy' to Christians, I guarantee that 98% of them will immediately think of people using the words "God" or "Christ" in their speech and I suggest that most Christians would also think of non-Christians as being the ones who are most guilty of blasphemy. I only wish that was true.

Brothers and sisters, I want to suggest to you today that the vast majority of cases of real blasphemy - the kind that really offends the Lord and damages His cause enormously - come from the lips of His own dear children. Christians, who are yet to fully mature and understand the importance of treating the Lord's name with respect; sincere, born-again believers are, I believe, the ones most guilty of the sin of blasphemy and the sad truth is that most of them have absolutely no idea they are doing it.

It has become cultural in many parts of the Church to make statements like, “*God told me*” or “*The Lord said to me ...*” or “*The Lord wants us to ...*” or the most common one of all, “*The Lord gave me (or led me to) this passage of Scripture.*” Now before you get defensive or feel threatened, let me say very clearly that the Lord does in fact speak to us today and the Lord most definitely can lead us directly to a passage of Scripture; and the gift of prophecy, though incredibly misunderstood and misused, is still alive and well in the Church today. I affirm all that. This is not a theological issue for me. I am not questioning the fact that God speaks today in a myriad of ways to believers who have ears to hear. I am talking here about the issue of maturity, responsibility and respect for the Word of God and quite frankly, I believe there are millions of Christians who simply need to hold their tongue and exercise caution, wisdom and discernment before they speak on the Lord’s behalf.

Friends, I want us to understand that the Word of the Lord is very, very precious and very sacred and very powerful and we need to handle it with the utmost care and respect. The reason I believe Churches are not more clearly and definitively guided by God on a day to day basis is because we have so many people speaking on behalf of the Lord that no one knows what He is really saying.

Let me get more personal and practical here. I am not discouraging you from listening to God in prayer and through sermons and as you study the Bible. I am not dissuading you from letting God speak to you through dreams and visions and other means. I am simply exhorting you to be discerning and very careful in how you report what you believe God has said to you or may want to say through you. You may be in a prayer meeting or a sharing time in a service or one-on-one with a brother or sister and you feel convicted and believe God is saying something to you which you want to share or you feel He is saying something to someone else through you. So you just go ahead and say something like, “*God just told me this*” If you are a little more subtle you might say, “*I think the Lord might be saying this*” Sounds harmless enough doesn’t it?

Millions of sincere believers do this often. But have you ever stopped to think of the implications of us speaking on behalf of the Creator of the universe? Have you had the gift of prophecy or the gift of teaching affirmed by your Church leadership? Do you speak on God’s behalf with the blessing of your Pastor or Church leaders?

If the answer is no, which it will be in most cases, then on what authority do you speak on God’s behalf? ‘*The Priesthood of all Believers,*’ I hear you say? O yes, the precious doctrine of the priesthood of all believers - upheld by good Baptists and all sincere Christians around the world ... and the most misquoted doctrine in all of Church history! The doctrine or belief of which I speak affirms that every believer, from Pope to pauper; from Senior Pastor to toilet cleaner; every man, woman and child who names Jesus as Saviour has the right and the privilege of direct access to God. Under the new covenant, sealed by the blood of Jesus, the curtain covering the 'holy of holies' of God’s presence which was only ever entered by a High Priest once a year, has been destroyed - opening the way for every one of us to enter the presence of God 24 hours a day. Hallelujah!

That means every believer can hear from God and communicate directly with God without any priest in between because Jesus Christ has opened that door to the throne room once and for all. That is what the doctrine of the Priesthood of all believers affirms (and that is ALL it affirms) and that is great news - the great news which triggered the Reformation centuries ago. So yes, you can hear from God and you are supposed to hear from God. But nowhere, absolutely nowhere does it say in reformation theology or in the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers or anywhere in the Bible for that matter - nowhere does it say that because we have the ability to hear from God that we will always hear from God accurately. We are still fallen, fallible human beings and we get it wrong sometimes and have to accept that whilst God guarantees to speak to us all the time, there are no guarantees that we will hear Him accurately all the time.

The Bible affirms that every single believer has the right and privilege and even a responsibility to hear from God, but at no point does the right to hear from God give us the right to speak out what we hear and apply His name to it. It is the God-given right of every single believer, from the oldest to the youngest, to hear the voice of God. Through the Bible, or dreams and visions, or a host of other ways. That is our birth-right as believers - thanks to Jesus. However it is not our birthright as believers to speak on the Lord's behalf unless we have the gift of teaching and are expounding his clear, unambiguous Word from the Bible or we have the gift of prophecy. And in both cases, these gifts will be discerned, affirmed, blessed and monitored by the senior leadership of the local Church.

Now I know that before today, many of you will not have thought that sharing something you believe the Lord gave you personally came into the category of prophecy - but it can be nothing less! The moment you align any word, conviction, statement, vision, dream or revelation with God, you are using the Lord's name and when you use the Lord's name in that way you are operating in only one of three areas: teaching, prophecy or blasphemy. If you have not had the gift of teaching or the gift of prophecy affirmed by your Church leadership, then that leaves only the third area in which you can operate: blasphemy – using the Lord's name in vain. God gave us permission to hear His voice by the blood of Jesus Christ - He did not give us permission to speak it out whenever we feel like it.

OK let's take a breath here. This is a hard word for some, I know. But it's a word we all need to hear if we are to grow in Christ and if the Word of the Lord is to have any integrity in our midst, we need to respect it far more than we do. Now let me show you a way through this hard word without softening its impact at all. In fact, I actually want to wind up the heat in one sense in not only admonishing you to treat the Word of God with great respect, but to exhort you to trust the power of God's Word more. Let me explain.

The Bible affirms that the true Word of the Lord will never return void and it will always bear fruit - for when God speaks – stuff happens and we need to trust in the power of His word far more. So I have a theory. Do you want to hear it? Tough luck if you don't - here it is: I believe that the reason most Christians feel the need to tell people what they believe God said to them is because they don't trust God to anoint His word.

For example, when I get a conviction that God is saying something to me or through me and I want to share it with someone else - I have a choice at that point. I can trust God to bring fruit from the truth of His Word to me and just share it as something I believe, without any reference to God, trusting Him to anoint His Word. Alternatively, as most people do, I can supposedly add credibility to what I say by using the Lord's name and saying that God revealed this to me. If I really want to make it sound impressive, I can even say, *"God told me to tell you this ..."*

Now stay with me here - this is a difficult one because I believe there will be stuff that God gives you which will have an effect on others around you, even if He has not affirmed the gifts of prophecy or teaching in you. Yet I also believe He might want you to trust Him and the power of His word and just share it as a conviction or a thought or a passage of Scripture.

**If it is truly God's word then it will carry God's anointing and
it will bear fruit in God's time and God's way.**

You do not need to add God's name to His word in order to give it credibility. Hello? Are you with me still? Let me share my own experience here. I have more right than most of you to say *"Gold told me ..."* I have a prophetic teaching ministry and gifting and I have a responsibility before God, affirmed by the Body of Christ, and my local congregation, to proclaim His Word every day across the Church and into the world.

And yet, I probably use terms like *“God told me ..”* or *“The Lord said ..”* less than most people in the Church. Why? Because I have an awesome respect for the Word of the Lord and I trust God to anoint His truth as I speak it. My respect for God’s word causes me to be very careful that my comments come under my teaching and prophetic gifting and are not blasphemy. I am sure I have been guilty of the latter like many of you ... but less guilty than most because I rarely use the Lord’s name other than in reference to what He has clearly said in Scripture.

I also don’t *need* to use His name, for I believe what God said and know that He will anoint all truth and it will cut like a two-edged sword and I do not need to apply His name to it in order to give it more ‘punch’. I go to a lot of trouble to make sure that all of my preaching is Biblically sound and can be supported from Scripture. But I also know that the Apostle Paul called preaching ‘foolishness’ because in so many ways it is fundamentally flawed. We are imperfect, fallen humans who can get so many things wrong and yet we preach the life-changing truth of God’s word. Why? Because this is the way God set things up and I trust the Holy Spirit in you more than I trust you and He will guide you to His truth in my teaching and you will be blessed.

I sincerely believe that all my preaching and teaching embodies the unadulterated, perfect, life-changing word of God. I don’t have to use His name or quote a Bible reference every paragraph. If it is truth, then it’s truth. If my words contains His Word then He will anoint them and His Word will not return void. The anointing is on the Word - never the person. Did you hear that? The anointing is on the Word - not the person. That’s why Paul could say that whether Christ was preached from good motives or bad - the fact that Christ was preached was the main point because the anointing is on the Word.

That’s why I can stand here now with the sin and inconsistencies in my life and be the mouthpiece of God which changes your life and turns this nation in its head for Jesus - because the anointing is on the Word, not the person. Remember that next time you hear someone say a particular preacher is anointed. No they’re not. They’re a sinful, fallible human, called by God to preach and God will anoint His Word embodied in that preaching.

So we don’t need to use terms like *“God told me”* or *“The Lord gave me”* or *“God wants me to ...”* because the anointing is on the Word and if God speaks to you or leads you in some way and you feel led to share it - just share it. If you need to, change your vocabulary and start saying things like, *“I would just like to share something that has been special for me ... trusting the Lord to speak to You if He chooses.”*

We do not need to add credibility to our words by using the Lord’s name. We need to trust in the power of His Word which may be embodied in our words and trust the Holy Spirit at work in the hearts of the listeners. Even if you are 100% sure it is God speaking, there is no need to say so. The anointing is on the Word of God. If what you say embodies God’s Word - it will not return void - it will bear fruit - God will see to it.

If you feel God is leading you, as He most certainly will at times, to a Bible passage to read in a worship service or a Home Group meeting or one-to-one with someone - then go for it - just read it! Say nothing other than, *“I would like to read from the Scriptures, trusting God to anoint His Word to me or anyone else here at the moment.”* Or say nothing at all. You don’t have to ‘sell’ God’s word. It carries its own power and its own guarantee! We must never lose sight of the fact that we are fallen flesh, sinful by nature and therefore a long way from being perfect. That means we make mistakes. (What a shock!) In fact, sometimes we make huge mistakes. Sometimes we make huge mistakes in the name of the Lord. We survive them – and so does God. That’s how we learn and God is incredibly gracious. We just need to accept the fact that we get it wrong now and then and be very careful in how we use the name of the Lord.

We are surrounded by many voices every day which compete for our attention. The voice of the world, the voice of Satan and his demons, not to mention our own imperfect minds which are open to the influence of anyone and everyone. Then into the midst of that bombardment comes the voice of God. It sounds like an impossible task but we can learn to hear Him above all others - it takes time and it's not always easy. But God wants us to draw near to Him and hear Him speak to us and guide us and answer our many questions. So we need to persevere, but with caution and great respect for the Word of God.

This is not an easy sermon to preach, because the very last thing I want to do is discourage you from hearing from God. The opposite is my heart's desire. I want each and every one of you to know the joy of hearing from a personal; living God every day. I just want you to respect what you hear and be very careful what you do with what you hear from God.

As children growing into adulthood, there were some lessons in responsibility and maturity which we really didn't enjoy learning, but we knew we had to learn them if we were to grow up and be effective, responsible adult members of the community. So too in our spiritual journey. There are some really hard lessons we must learn as we mature in our relationship with God and I believe the one embodied in this sermon is one of the hardest, but also one of the most important lessons we will ever learn. So I encourage you to be brave enough to receive this word, and concerned enough about its implications, to take it on board and let it change the way you think and act in relation to God's word to you and to others through you.

Do you remember the story of the boy who cried "wolf"? My fear is that we are approaching that stage with the huge number of people across the Church who are crying "God said..." My fear is that when God does desire to speak a clear, powerful, urgent and unambiguous word to His people ... we may not hear it because we have lost the ability to clearly discern and separate His voice from the many fruitless and contradictory utterances which have masqueraded as God's Word.

The sooner we stop using the Lord's name in vain, the sooner His true Word will start to cut as the two-edged sword it really is. I pray that the Word of the Lord will be released right across the Church and this nation and that we will trust in the power of that Word to bear the fruit God intends. I pray that we will choose this day to respect His Word and do all that we can to allow its clear passage into the hearts of those who are yet to trust God.

Let those of you who have spiritual ears to hear - listen very carefully to what the Lord has said today and may His Spirit protect you from hearing anything other than His life-changing, nation-transforming Word. Amen.

GROWING IN CHRIST – Part 17

'Coins and Railways'

by Rev. Robert Griffith

I want to address what is a difficult, confusing and controversial issue facing the people of God. It's a really important issue because it touches every other doctrine and it affects everything we think, say and do as believers today. So obviously this is an issue we need to wrap our heads and hearts around if we truly desire to grow in Christ and navigate our dual journey in the kingdom of God and the kingdom this world.

We all know about balance in so many areas of life. The balance of weight on a see-saw which is necessary for it to work properly; keeping our balance on a bicycle or motorcycle and not leaning too far one way or the other, lest we fall and injure ourselves; balancing our time between work and home, to name just a few. There are so many examples in life of the need for balance.

When 'balance' is mentioned in regard to the Christian faith and particularly in reference to the Bible, the meaning is not as clear but it is just as important. What is it that we need to 'balance' in the Bible and our understanding of God?

Basically we need to accept the fact that the Bible and the theology we draw from it has many facets, somewhat like a diamond. Each part of the truth is valid, acceptable and necessary for us to see the 'big picture'. That is why there are many 'doctrines' or 'theological perspectives' which have emerged over the years. Each one is valid and each one needs to be clearly understood, but kept in balance with all the others.

This has often been referred to as interpreting Scripture through Scripture. In other words, we need to be careful not to emphasise a particular perspective or truth from the Bible so that it conflicts with another truth in the Bible. Like a diamond, all the facets remain together to produce the whole. They are not to be viewed in isolation.

Two of the most important and foundational 'facets' or truths of the Christian faith are the ones I wish to address here: The Sovereignty of God and the Responsibility of Man. These are two truths taught all the way through the Bible and which need to be firmly grasped by any sincere believer who desires to worship and serve God in a manner which is consistent with His revealed will and purpose. Taken in isolation, or separated too far from each other, either of these truths can lead us into error. In fact, I would go so far as to say that the further you separate these two equally important truths from each other, the closer each one comes to being heresy and false teaching.

Let's loosely define the terms first. The doctrine of the sovereignty of God teaches that God is all powerful and can do anything He wishes, when He wishes, how He wishes and He is not accountable to anyone and does not need to explain His actions to anyone. He is totally in control of the universe and everything in it. He may choose to limit or channel that control as He gives us, His special creation, certain freedom and responsibility, but at no point is He not sovereign. At no point is His hand not at work in some way in all the circumstance of life - good or bad.

The doctrine of the responsibility of man teaches that God has bestowed free choice upon us and He has set us totally and utterly free in Christ by His glorious mercy and grace. We are responsible for all the choices we make and those choices have consequences - good and bad. More than that, God has actually given us many exhortations to do certain things and live a certain way in order to participate more fully in His divine plan to save His lost children.

There are many statements in the Bible in which God effectively says: "*If my people will do this ... then I will do that.*" The obvious inference is that if we don't - He won't. There are many Scriptures which seem to support that truth. So we have this apparent tension all the way through the Bible between these two truths which seem to be opposed to each other: (a) God can do what God wants to do no matter what we do or don't do - because He is sovereign, and (b) God at times chooses not to do what He wants to do until we do what He has called us to do – because we are responsible.

If you have been a Christian for very long you will most certainly have run up against this tension. I see it all the time - not just in the Bible but in our prayers and our discussions. I could sit in any group of Christians during a discussion on any issue and I would be able to see people coming from both of these perspectives. That is OK if we take all those views together to formulate our 'big picture' of God. However, it is possible for us, depending on our life's experience and the teaching we have had, to venture down one of these two roads a little too far without acknowledging the balancing of an equally valid truth. This is where all heresies, cults and dangerous sects have come from. Most of them begin with solid, Biblical, irrefutable truth. If that truth is held in tension or balanced with other equally valid truths then all is well. It is when one truth is elevated or emphasised at the expense of the other that we run into error and the results can be devastating.

I have experienced this in my life as I have wrestled with God's Word and sought to know the whole truth about God. I remember my days as a young Christian when I would passionately argue the Sovereignty of God at the expense of everything else and I upset and probably confused people around me. Thankfully I wasn't in the pulpit very often back then, so the fallout was not that high. I had taken a solid, Biblical truth and removed it from its wider context, amplifying it in such a way as to produce a half-truth and a half-truth can be more damaging than an outright lie because it is more believable.

This tension exists all the way through the Bible. There are passages from cover to cover which emphasise the sovereignty of God and there are just as many passages which emphasis the freedom and responsibility of man. Some days, to our tiny, finite minds, these passages appear to contradict one another but they are actually part of the same story, the same truth, the same reality.

This is where the title of this sermon will make sense. *Coins and Railways* both come to mind when I think of these two truths in the Bible. If you study one side of a coin you will notice every letter, word, picture, dent etc. When you turn the coin over you are faced with an entirely new picture - so different, in fact, that it is like you are looking at a totally different coin. Yet this is actually one coin, not two and even though the two sides are very different, they are in fact part of each other and can never be separated. Even if you found a way to separate the two sides, the coin would be destroyed. So too with the God's sovereignty and our responsibility. They are the two sides of the same coin. They are both the truth and if you separate them, you have a half-truth, which, in reality, is a lie.

Building a railway line is another excellent example. Everyone knows that you need two tracks for a standard railway and that those two tracks must be exactly the same length, height and size, and perfectly parallel, otherwise the train will be de-railed and tragedy will befall everyone on board. Each railway track is vitally and equally important. It would be silly to debate whether the left track or the right track was more important - they are a set. They belong together and must remain together at all times. They should never been seen as being in opposition to each other and they should never cross each other. In fact even the slightest movement away from being exactly parallel and perfectly balanced will result in a catastrophe.

Can you see why this is such a clear analogy for us today? There are two equally important and vital truths running parallel to each other all the way through the Bible and throughout the history of human experience. These are the 'tracks' upon which the whole Christian Church runs, if you like.

One track declares powerfully that God is sovereign and He can do whatever He wants to do - with us - without us - through us - or in spite of us. He is God and we are not and He will do whatever He wants and He is not answerable to anyone and will, in fact, often do very strange things (from our perspective) and not explain Himself to anyone. The sovereignty of God is one track.

The other equally important track upon which our entire Christian experience rests, declares that God has set us completely and wonderfully free by the power of His glorious Grace and we are therefore able to choose good or evil, right or wrong and our choices have a direct and deliberate bearing on what God then does. If we do certain things, He responds in certain ways. Our personal responsibility is the other track.

In our tiny, finite minds these two truths appear to cross each other and mankind has struggled with this tension from the beginning of time. Scholars and theologians have locked horns and argued against each other trying to push one view further than the other, implying that they are incompatible. This is understandable - for it is really hard for our tiny minds to work out how these two truths can co-exist. We will see in a moment why this tension has been the most difficult and controversial struggle in the history of the Church. As we look at some Scriptures, you will see why the railway and coin analogies are so applicable.

You see, you cannot have one side of the coin without the other. In the manufacturing process, they are both produced together. So too with a railway line. When you construct a railway line, you don't lay one track for miles and miles and then come back and lay the second track. Both tracks must be laid together and if you have ever seen them building a new railway line you will notice that one track is never more than a metre or two ahead of the other. They grow together.

I would suggest to you that this is exactly how we should build our theology - our view of God and His children and this world. These two truths need to be established side by side and kept parallel at all times. However, many of us don't enjoy that privilege and often we find that one track is way ahead of the other - so far ahead for some people that they are not even aware that there are supposed to be two tracks!

So let's look at some Scriptures and see if we can keep them in balance as we construct this theological railway. Just remember, these verses are not meant to cancel each other out or counter each other. These are all true, in and of themselves. This is the Word of God. However, they are meant to be kept in tension; they must be balanced; they have equal importance; they are parallel. Even if we cannot understand how that can be, it MUST be, if we are to know the full truth.

TRACK 1 - God is Sovereign

John 6:44: No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him, and I will raise him up at the last day.

Daniel 4:35: All the peoples of the earth are regarded as nothing. He does as he pleases with the powers of heaven and the peoples of the earth. No one can hold back his hand or say to him: "What have you done?"

Romans 11:33-36: Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out! "Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counsellor?" "Who has ever given to God, that God should repay him?" For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen.

Psalms 115:3: Our God is in heaven; he does whatever pleases him. Isaiah 46:10: I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come. I say: My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please.

TRACK 2 - Man is Responsible

Matthew 23:37: "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing.

James 5:16: Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.

2 Chronicles 7:14: If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land.

James 4:3: When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures.

Matthew 7:7-8: "Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened.

Romans 9:20-21: But who are you, O man, to talk back to God? "Shall what is formed say to him who formed it, 'Why did you make me like this?'" Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for noble purposes and some for common use?

Ephesians 1:11: In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will ...

Matthew 10:29: Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father.

Acts 17:26: From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live.

2 Corinthians 12:9-10: But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

Job 42:2: "I know that you can do all things; no plan of yours can be thwarted.

John 9:2-3: "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" "Neither this man nor his parents sinned," said Jesus, "but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life.

Romans 8:18-20: I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope

Romans 8:28-31: And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified. What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us?

1 Timothy 6:11,12: But you, man of God, flee from all this, and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness. Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called when you made your good confession in the presence of many witnesses.

Matthew 18:19-20; 21:22: I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer.

John 15:7: If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you.

James 1:5-7: If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him.

But when he asks, he must believe and not doubt, because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That man should not think he will receive anything from the Lord;

Romans 10:13-15: "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in?

And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent?

Luke 13:24: "Make every effort to enter through the narrow door, because many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able to.

Ephesians 4:3: Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.

2 Peter 1:5-10; 3:14: For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness, love. For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. But if anyone does not have them, he is nearsighted and blind, and has forgotten that he has been cleansed from his past sins. Therefore, my brothers, be all the more eager to make your calling and election sure. For if you do these things, you will never fall,

Hebrews 12:14: Make every effort to live in peace with all men and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord.

Can you see why it is so important to build this railway two tracks at a time? The above list of passages all come from God's Word and yet if you cover up one side and read down one column only, then do the same for the other column, they will be as different as two sides of the same coin.

So how does this relate to the real world each day? Well, the most obvious area in which we need to make sure both tracks are firmly in place is prayer. God has made it abundantly clear that our responsibility in prayer is very real and that there will be certain things He chooses not to do unless we pray. We have a huge responsibility in that regard and a wonderful privilege to be part of God's redemptive plan on earth.

However with both railway tracks firmly in place we must understand that God is not compelled, bound or forced to say yes to any of our prayers and in fact He will often say no. Sometimes we later see the reason for Him saying no. God saw the big picture and His will was fulfilled better for us and His kingdom by not granting our request. Yet at other times we have no idea why He said no and have no right to complain, because God is sovereign He can do whatever He chooses. We also must understand that because God chooses to not act at times unless we pray, that does not mean that He cannot act without us. To say that God won't do something unless we do our part is very different to saying that God can't do something unless we do our part.

The whole issue of healing and suffering is a classic example. If these two tracks are not firmly in place and exactly parallel in our minds as we pray for the sick and ask God to relieve people's suffering, we are in for a really tough time.

There is no question that God heals and wants to heal. There is no question that God's original plan for us never included sickness, disease, suffering or death. But it is also clear that the freedom He gave humans included the freedom to open the door to the enemy of God to bring all that stuff into our lives. We rebelled against God at the beginning and have paid the price for that rebellion ever since.

So along comes Jesus and redeems us. He deals with the problem of sin and ushers in the Kingdom of Heaven. But the ongoing consequences of the fall, of man's sin, remain in this world in which we live. Yes, our eternal souls are in the kingdom of Heaven and we are experiencing more and more of that reality as His Kingdom comes and His will is done and that certainly includes healing. But we still reside in the kingdom of this world in which sin, sickness and suffering will remain until the end of time.

It is the 'now, but not yet' reality of the Kingdom of God. It is the two kingdoms eclipsing like planets and we are caught in the middle with this dual citizenship. We are resident in this world where Satan reigns as the 'Prince of the Power of the Air' and yet our eternal citizenship is in the Kingdom of God where God is all-powerful and sovereign and where there is no sin, sickness, suffering or death. That is why we will experience the realities of both kingdoms - all the time. Sickness will still be a reality - so will supernatural healing. The more the kingdom of Heaven pushes against, advances into the kingdom of this world, then the more we will see the realities of heaven emerge. But we will not see them all the time. We will pray for people to get better and they will not. We will pray for others and they will be instantly healed. A lot of this is just the reality of living in a war zone. There are casualties and we cannot predict who will get hit or when or how hard.

However, the truth remains that even in this unpredictable war zone, God is still in control. He can, and often does, override the powers of darkness in this world and we see amazing things happen. At other times He does the exact opposite. He chooses to work in and through the bad things in this world for His glory. Joni Earekson-Tada is a classic example. Paralysed in a diving accident as a teenager, Joni had Christians everywhere praying for her healing. Could God have healed her? Of course. Was there enough faith floating around in her and others around her to believe for that healing? Absolutely! So what happened? The simple answer is God chose to work through her suffering and disability rather than to remove it. That woman has now touched millions and millions of people across the world with an amazing ministry spanning 40 years and she has only been able to do that because God did not heal her all those years ago.

I don't have a problem with that picture. It fits very well on the two railway tracks God has given us. It just doesn't fit well on the single track that some people run on. I know God can and does heal and save and restore when we pray. I have seen many miracles unfold before my eyes in answer to prayers I have prayed. I have also watched people die as I pray for their healing. I have felt the conviction of God to believe for healing for people and not stop praying and I have heard the voice of God say, *"Stop. This is my plan for this person for now. Pray for strength and insight, not for healing."*

I know many would think that God would never say that but that is exactly what He said about Joni and thousands like her who have touched more people through their suffering and infirmity than they ever would have if they had been healed. God did not send that tragedy upon them any more than He is the author of sin. But in His sovereignty, He will at times choose to NOT heal if He can bring greater glory to His name.

His ways are higher than ours and He remains a sovereign God Who can and will do whatever He chooses. We are grateful that He often chooses to do things through us, in answer to our prayers and that is a wonderful privilege for us, nothing more - nothing less. It's a privilege, not a right, not a guarantee and not currency with which we buy the favour of God.

The only guarantee God gives us is that whatever we ask in accordance with His will, as it is being played out that day and that hour, He will do it. We just have to accept that there are times when we just do not know or understand His will and His higher purposes. Yet we will continue to ask, all the time, for He has encouraged us to do just that.

I am sure people wondered why Jesus walked right past so many desperately sick people beside the pool of Bethesda that day and picked on one man only and healed him. I think even Jesus may have wondered, but He only did what He saw the Father doing and that day God wanted to heal one man beside that pool and one man only. On another day, like on the Island of Malta years later, God chose to heal everybody in sight and He did so through the Apostle Paul. God can do that, because He is God and He doesn't have to answer to us.

I want to encourage you to read through all the Scriptures listed above (even though they are only a small selection) and allow God to firmly lay both tracks, firmly instil both truths deep in your heart. He calls us to trust Him and believe that He can and will do mighty and wonderful things through our prayers and obedience and service and surrender. He calls us to work with Him and be available for Him to channel His life-changing power through us as we touch the lives of others. But He also calls us to remember that He alone is the source of all power and all authority and He will pour that out upon His people as and when He chooses and that we are not calling the shots, God is and sometimes God will act in ways we neither like nor understand.

Yet, if our personal relationship with Him is growing stronger and stronger each day; if that is our highest priority at all times - drawing near to God and relating to Him in the most intimate, personal way possible; if that is our main agenda at all times, then we will not be confused or concerned when things do not work out the way we would like because our faith in our living, personal God is far greater than our faith in His ability to answer our prayers and give us what we want. We will be confident that He will always hear us and always answer us and we will be equally confident that His answers are the best ones for us, for His kingdom and for His glory.

GROWING IN CHRIST – Part 18

'Don't Cling to the Firewood!'

by Rev. Robert Griffith

It's late autumn - time to start gathering firewood for the winter. That's where I am, early one morning many years ago, on a farm the other side of Blayney in central western NSW - all alone with a pile of firewood I had cut previously - loading it into my trailer. Then I see them ...

They're just a young couple, I can tell. These mouse-holders who have taken up residence in the woodpile are just starting out in life. They've built a home under the pile of firewood I am loading into the trailer. We have just had one of our first frosts. So have this mouse couple. It's about zero degrees.

But at the bottom of the woodpile their nest would be dry and warm in all but the wettest of storms, ready for the young ones that would surely be coming soon. They had set up such a comfortable, peaceful, predictable home. Which reminded me our first home as a married couple all those years ago. We too we so excited, so optimistic, so comfortable, so predictable.

These are tiny mice, equipped with miniature jumping legs, their little bodies only 3-4 cms long - if you don't count the tail. I must seem like some huge brutal giant as I ruthlessly deconstruct their carefully built lives, one log at a time. I feel sorry for them. Such cute little creatures, so hopeful for the future, yet so filled with terror at what is happening to them.

"What's going on, dear?" the mouse bride cries.

"I don't know," her husband answers.

"Nothing like this has ever happened before."

He's wrong, of course. Change is always with us. But, thankfully, it's not too often that our entire lives are altered forever by external events. But it can happen. Some of you have been there, I know:

- > The death of someone close to you ...
- > A painful divorce ...
- > The loss of a job ...
- > The failure of a business ...
- > An illness or injury ...
- > Wayward children that break your heart ...
- > An ugly dispute in your family ...
- > A major split in your Church ...

Suddenly, life is not the same and probably never will be again. Everything is different. We try to cope - sometimes in healthy ways, sometimes in self-destructive ways.

So I keep loading the firewood into the trailer. I'm about to stack it higher when I see one of the tiny mice clinging to a piece of firewood in the back of the trailer. Another few seconds and he would have been crushed by the next log.

So I pick him up by his long tail, gently place him on the ground, and go back to get more logs. When I return he is still at the same place on the ground where I put him - stunned and paralysed by this unexpected disaster in his life, barely able to get out of harm's way.

Does that sound familiar? Ever been stunned in the midst of a disaster in your life? Change comes and turns us on our head, and life goes on in spite of us, and yet we feel frozen in time, paralysed by the shock of what is happening and in vain we try to cling to yesterday's props as they are being dragged off the set. A new chapter is being ushered into our lives and we frantically cling to those familiar things in the previous chapter.

But we can't, not safely anyway. When the upheaval is major and the very foundations of our world are shaken or even removed - we just have to start again. We have to re-build. We have to set up our home in the new reality of this chapter of our lives. Whether we like it at first or not. All too often we are hurt or disillusioned because of our inability to let go, so attached to the past, or an image of the past, that it's impossible for us to truly welcome the future.

I still remember my first chapter in this life - as a young boy running around our farm at Forest Reefs, near Orange. I remember our long driveway out to the main road and the day a 3 year old version of me walked all the way to the front gate with my little Globite suitcase full of undies, socks, one shirt and a toothbrush - having just announced to my mother that I was running away because she was so mean to me expecting me to tidy my room two days in a row! I also remember her helping me pack and wishing me a safe trip, knowing I would get to the gate, contemplate the frightening world beyond, and run back to mum!

Apart from traumatic moments like that, being a young boy for me was pretty good. Life was so simple. School was great back then: Kindergarten to Year 6 all in the one room at the little Forest Reefs School. Great times. Then it happened ... I woke up one day and I was a teenager, with pimples and attitude surrounded by people who just didn't know anything! I never asked for that change - it just happened - and whilst being a teenager was a heap of fun too - some days it was horrid and I just wanted to go back to being that little boy on the farm, but I couldn't.

Then, just as I was finally getting a handle on what it meant to be a teenager - I was married! Then another new day dawns - I discover am are going to be a father. But my anticipation was short-lived and the devastation of a miscarriage ends all that excitement of having our first child.

But time heals and another new day comes and our first child finally arrives. More change, more adjustment, far less sleep! But within weeks of her arrival, a phone call comes that rips my familiar woodpile apart completely, as news of my father's sudden death rings in my ears. He was with us only 54 years.

Another change, another chapter, a most unwelcome one at that, another adjustment, another need to move on and start again and not cling to the past. Then before I know it, I have a quiver full and I am well into the mid-life crisis I have worked so hard for over many years. I have it all now: the mortgage, the car loan, five lunch boxes lined up in a row every morning, school fees, homework I don't understand, report cards I wish I didn't understand, credit cards I understand all too well! And then there's the sleepless nights, the doctor's bills, the dentist's bills and the queues to use the bathroom!

Each new chapter in life requires huge adjustments and strong determination to go on regardless because you can't go back. You must embrace the new day and move on, not clinging to the past, but praising God for what you had yesterday, as you reach out to embrace what He has planned for tomorrow. Change requires courage, and heaps of it sometimes.

Think about Joshua in the Bible: for nearly forty years he has been an understudy to the great leader Moses. Now Moses has gone and leadership is thrust fully upon Joshua. Ahead is the Jordan river running at flood peak, and beyond that are the fortified cities of Canaan - the 'Promised Land' that seems so elusive. Talk about change! Joshua has change swirling all around him.

Then into that turmoil, God speaks: *"Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid, do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go"* (Joshua 1:9).

So our little mouse couple looks up as their world is crumbling around them. One by one the logs that comprise their home are disappearing, and soon only open sky is above. What will they do?

What do you do? Do you cling to the firewood and risk being crushed by it? Do you cling to the past, to what you know and recognise and risk being burnt? Or do you cling to God's promise to you for a new day? God has promised to be with you wherever you go. God has promised never to leave you or forsake you. What God asks of you is faith to overcome your fear, courage to meet your discouragement and confidence to draw on His strength. He just wants you to trust Him.

The only thing constant in this crazy world is change and if we are to be fruitful and fulfilled and make a difference in the life of others, we have to learn to master change, or change will always be our master. No part of our lives will endure unchanged for very long. But the LORD our God is not of this world and He is unchangeable. God is forever. You can put down your roots into God and that is the only way you can ensure you are never totally uprooted again.

My heart goes out to this trembling mouse couple. I've been where they are, and so have many of you. I hope that after I left them that day they were able to drag their nest into another shelter in the woods to keep dry and warm that winter. I hope that Mr. Mouse finally got over his shock and got with the program. I hope they got to grow older and wiser and were not so traumatised by the change that occurred the day they seemed to lose everything.

Brothers and sisters, when change comes and our lives are disrupted and the familiar is replaced by the unfamiliar: Don't cling to the firewood! So much of what we hold dear in this world will be gone soon. A lot of it may not even matter in ten years, let alone in eternity. Things and people and issues that give you an ulcer today will barely be remembered in the next chapter of your life and will probably be totally irrelevant in the life to come.

Too many of us and those we love and care for are still clinging to yesterday's grand old trees which are today's firewood and tomorrow's memories. We have to move on, start again, every time change comes uninvited, and be thankful for the former chapters and firmly embrace the next chapter, no matter how hard it might feel at the time. No matter how much you wish you could turn back the clock - you can't - not even God can do that.

But a word of warning here: this is an impossible task, and you will remain paralysed and frozen in time like my mouse friend, if you don't have your roots firmly anchored in the unchanging love and grace and power and reality of God. As we shared together recently, we cannot embrace the challenges in this earthly kingdom without our hearts and primary focus being rooted and grounded in the eternal Kingdom of God.

God is the still point in this ever changing world. God is the anchor when the storm comes. God is the rock we stand on when we are overwhelmed in the flood. Only in the eternal, unchanging God can we grow roots into eternity and make some sense of this life on the hard days.

Everything else will pass away - sooner or later. It will all be firewood in someone's trailer and if we cling to the logs of yesterday, if we put our faith in them, if we hang on to what defined our world in a previous chapter of our lives, then we and the ones we care about and have responsibility for will get badly burned and we will lose our focus and our ability to start again and make a real difference in this world.

So what firewood might you be clinging to today which perhaps you hadn't realised until now?

- > Past relationships?
- > Places you once lived?
- > Jobs you once had?
- > Churches you were once part of?
- > Pastors or mentors you were blessed by in the past?
- > Ministries you cherished
- > Songs you used to sing
- > The style of services you once enjoyed?

All memories which flood in at those times when you are struggling to embrace the new chapters in your life. Remembering fondly how things once were in your life is not a bad thing, but wishing you were back there or things could be the way they once were will cripple you and prevent you from seeing what God is doing in this new time in your life. The wind of the Spirit blows where it wills and we cannot direct it, we can only adjust our sails and trust God with the next destination.

A ministry colleague and friend of mine from the USA once shared a childhood story with me which was as profound as it was simple. Some of you have heard me share this before. When he was a young boy, Ken used to holiday at his grandparent's farm and he loved following his grandpa around and doing all the chores and when the chores were done, he always headed for the same place: a huge old pear tree in the paddock next to the house. It was enormous and it was perfect to climb and so young Ken spent hours and hours over many years perched high on a branch in this pear tree pondering his rapidly changing and exciting life.

One day some years later, the unthinkable happened. A huge storm tore through the region and Ken's grand old pear tree was totally uprooted and brought to the ground. His grandfather broke the news to Ken on the phone and he was devastated and convinced his parents to take him out to the farm that weekend.

Ken stood silently with his grandpa as they both looked at this once majestic, magnificent tree which had given them all rich fruit for decades, and Ken a special place to be for his whole childhood, and they both wept. After a long silence, Ken asked, *"So what are we going to do now, Grandpa."* The wise old man smiled and said carefully, but deliberately, *"We are going to pick the fruit, and burn the rest."*

Friends, that one statement has stayed with me ever since Ken told me that story, and as each new chapter unfolds in our lives, especially those which might be ushered in through pain, upheaval and heartache, our job is the same as Ken's Grandpa that day on the farm: we too need to pick the fruit, and burn the rest.

We need to celebrate and acknowledge all the great things about that season in our lives and hang on to those memories of the good days and the wonderful people, but we then need to burn everything else: all the disappointments and the pain; all the regrets; all the failures; all that once was standing tall and strong and majestic but now lies dying on the ground. Burn yesterday's props and move on to the next scene in our lives.

The good memories will be with you forever, they are part of the fruit. Ken had tears rolling down his face as he told me about losing his beloved pear tree decades earlier. His memories were strong. The fruit was precious. But, he didn't cling the firewood. Ken never returned to the place that tree used to be because there was nothing there to return to but a gaping hole and a pile of ashes. He moved on and trusted God for a new tree, a new chapter and a new hope. By God's grace, may you and I do the same as we embrace whatever tomorrow brings.

Let's pray

Gracious Father, I thank you and praise you for those two little mice and the lesson they taught me all those years ago and I pray they have been our teachers again today as they cry out to us in warning and say: "Don't cling to the firewood."

Release in us O Lord, the ability to be thankful for the past whilst intentionally embracing the future and not turning back. Remove those chains which bind our hearts and minds to past hurts, failures, sins, disappointments and unrealised expectations - which serve as a ball and chain around our feet - constantly tripping us as we try to run the race of life.

Remind us every day Lord, that unless You build the house, we labour in vain; unless You are the construction manager of our lives, they will not work as they were meant to and we will not achieve our greatest potential or find the abundance and fulfilment and joy that is our birthright and privilege - and Your heart's desire for each of us.

Lord God, give us steadfast hearts that cannot be dragged down by false loves; give us courageous hearts that cannot be worn down by trouble; give us righteous hearts that cannot be side-tracked by unholy or unworthy goals. Give to us also, our Lord and God, understanding to know You, diligence to look to You, wisdom to recognise You and a faithfulness that will bring us one day to see You face to face. Amen.

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