

Growing in Christ

Part 1: 'By Their Fruit'

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*.