

Growing in Christ

Part 2: 'The Mirror Never Lies'

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 liberating. 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.