

Transformed Life

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[0 : 00] Hopefully in front of you you've got a service outline. If not on your phone, you can see a sermon outline there on the St. Paul's app.

I'm going to pray as we launch into this because John's gospel, when you start learning the Greek language, John's gospel is often where you start because Greek language in John is relatively straightforward.

But the difficulty is while the language might be easier, Greek language, the ideas in John are very complex. And so he sort of leads you into thinking the gospel is going to be easy, but the ideas are quite complex as we launch into this.

Let's pray. Gracious Father, we pray that you would help us to capture some of the essence of what the Lord Jesus is requiring of his disciples here. I pray that you would transform our lives as we remain in Jesus.

Help us to see what you require of us between your first arrival and your second arrival. Help us to remain in the vine and there bear fruit, fruit that will last.

[1 : 13] So help us understand this passage so that we might live lives that glorify you until you come back. Amen. In less than two weeks, James and I are heading to the US. We're attending a conference, visiting a church and doing some other ministry things.

And it's a trip that I've done a few times. I've slipped through the departure doors and into customs a number of times. And I've got to tell you, every time it happens, it never feels, it's never easy.

I never find that journey through two doors that easy. It's the feeling of leaving behind loved ones. Whenever Nat and the girls come with me to send me off, I find it particularly difficult.

I hang on this side of the customs doors for as long as I possibly can. I try to busy myself with paperwork and details. But I know that at some point real soon, I've got to embrace, I've got to say goodbye, and I've got to depart.

Of course, it's the exact opposite in the experience in the arrivals hall. You can't wait to get through customs to see your loved ones if they're there. Hopefully they're not later or something like that.

[2 : 26] You just can't wait. It's a moment of excitement. It's a moment of joy. It's not apprehension. As we pick up John's gospel today, we're in the departure terminal with the disciples of Jesus.

That's where we're sitting. In John 13, Jesus tells his disciples he's about to depart. And their world is rocked because they had hopes that Jesus would be the one who would overthrow the occupying Roman Empire and restore the promised land to Israel.

In John 14, what we looked at last week, Jesus comforts his disciples by telling them three things.

Number one, his departure will secure for them an eternal dwelling in the presence of God.

Number two, his departure means that he can send another advocate, one just like him, who will permanently dwell with them.

Not just the presence of God in the future, but the presence of God with them now. And Jesus says when this other advocate comes, it's going to be better because Jesus is beside them, but the spirit will be in them.

[3 : 48] They will even know and experience the father personally in prayer. Instead of just knowing the father through what Jesus reveals about him.

And number three, Jesus will come back and take them to be with him, with God forever in perfect peace and joy.

So there's a departure and there's a return. So what happens in the meantime? What are the disciples to do?

What are they on about? Do they just sit in the departure lounge or make the way to the arrivals hall upstairs or downstairs or wherever it is and just wait for Jesus to come back?

What are Jesus' plans for his disciples? Why they wait? What does he expect of them? So there's three things I want to draw out from John 15 this morning. Number one, the necessity of transformation.

[4 : 51] Number two, the organic nature of transformation. And number three, the means of transformation. In 15 verse one, Jesus says, I am the true vine and my father is the gardener.

And then again in verse five, he says, I am the vine and you are the branches. Now, all the conversation stopped at this powerful pronouncement.

You see, the force of Jesus' words to his first disciples is something like this. You know how all of Israel, God's historical people, is pictured as a vine that is meant to produce refreshing fruit.

Well, I, Jesus Christ, am the fulfillment of everything that that symbol suggests. And the key word here is the word true.

Those who follow Jesus belong to Jesus so that together with him, they become the true vine. Now, the word true is important because it replaces the old vine.

[6 : 13] Israel was the vine that God rescued from Egypt. Psalm 80 says that they were the root that he planted and grew throughout the land.

But it was a vine that was condemned by God because it produced bad fruit. As we just saw in Isaiah 5. Isaiah 5 says that God looked for justice, but saw bloodshed.

He looked for righteousness, but only heard cries of distress. Jesus Christ was the vine that was condemned by God. And the point throughout this passage in John 15 is that branches, those who put their trust in the Lord Jesus, must produce good fruit.

Jesus makes it the edifying mark of a true believer. It is how you identify a true believer.

Not by what they do, not by how successful they are, not by the things they do in the name of Christ, but who they are.

[7 : 30] Jesus says, the father who's the gardener, cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit. If there is no fruit in our life, then we had better reconsider the authenticity of our Christianity.

And the fruits, the fruit that God was looking for in Isaiah 5 were the qualities of justice and righteousness.

And they are both inequalities. In John 15, the fruit Jesus speaks of is simply the reproduction of the life of the vine in the branch.

Jesus is looking for the fruit of his life in us. Jesus is looking for change, transformation of our character.

Which is what fruit in the Bible is, and especially so in the New Testament, where it's explicit. One list of such fruit is Galatians 5.

[8 : 47] The fruit, one fruit with a bunch of characteristics. The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance.

Which is patience and forgiveness of those who have wronged us. Kindness, that's unselfishness. Goodness, which is transparency and integrity. Faithfulness, which is courage.

Gentleness, which is humility and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.

And so what Jesus is saying in John 15 is that my expectation of you is for transformation. And I, Jesus, am the key to that inner change of your life.

How does the selfish person become unselfish? How does the controlling, manipulative person become a liberator? How does the coward become courageous? How does the whiner become grateful?

[9 : 53] How does the taker become a giver? How does the worrier become a rock? How does the bigot become understanding? There is no more relevant question for our society, for our culture.

There's no more relevant question for our city. There's no more relevant question for your family, for your marriage, for your friendships. There's no more relevant question for this church as we seek to grow together in humility and unity.

How do you get such transformation? And when Jesus says, I am the true vine, he's saying I am the key to growth and change for good.

Now, every bookstore in this city is filled with material on how to change and develop your inner potential.

They are mechanical books that give you a technique. Or they are moral books, morality books, calling you to try a bit harder and be a bit more virtuous.

[11 : 01] Or they are magic books telling you how to tap into some kind of power that you currently don't have. The Bible, Christianity, Jesus offers something different.

It's not a technique. It's not traditional morality. It's not new age spirituality either. Christianity says you need a vital connection with Jesus Christ, the only cosmic and concrete person who ever lived. Christianity is about a personal relationship with Jesus who is the cosmic Lord of all and drawing on his never-ending pulsating life.

And the promise here from Jesus is that change is actually possible. Don't you want that when you've been struggling with the same issue for 40 years?

Notice verse 16. You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit, fruit that will last.

[12 : 24] In fact, in Romans 8, we are told the entire work of Jesus in choosing us, in making us right with God, is so that we would change to be like him.

That's his purpose. Everything he did. All of his plans. All of it. The loss of his glory. The coming to be one of us.

His death on the cross. His resurrection. Everything he has done is for the purpose of fruit. His goal in Romans 8 is to change us into his image until we reflect his glory.

His goal is to take us from the squalor of sin and brokenness and make us great in his presence. His goal is to glorify us and to put his beauty into our lives. He's committed to taking his life and putting his life into us. We may be pessimistic about being able to change.

[13 : 38] And Jesus Christ says, I am the one who brought the universe into existence by just by the sound of my voice. And all of my power is committed to changing you and dealing with every flaw, every problem, every weakness, every sin in your life.

All of my power is directed in dealing with that. So there's the necessity of transformation because that's what God, that's what Jesus is doing in working in your life.

Secondly, there's the organic nature of transformation. This is, this is really important. In the last paragraph where Jesus leaves behind the vine and the branch metaphor, he says that we need to hear his word and we need to obey his commands.

Now, if we had just got that, if we just got that bit, you could easily conclude that Christianity was basically a mechanical and a moral thing.

In other words, to be a Christian, you just need to discipline. You just need the discipline to do a whole bunch of stuff. And it's just the discipline to be compliant to a whole set of rules.

[15 : 02] But the first part says that what Jesus is really after is to hook us into a vital and organic connection with him so that his life becomes our life.

Jesus is after organic change through a brand new internal dynamic, not mechanical compliance through external force.

I'll say that again because it's profound. Jesus is after organic change through a brand new internal dynamic, not mechanical compliance through external force.

What I mean is this. Imagine a work colleague. And maybe we've all dealt with these work colleagues over the years. A work colleague who isn't, let's say, not committed to their job. They arrive late. They leave early. Anytime there's lots of work on, the team's trying to work together, this person calls in sick. They're just not there.

[16 : 16] They're constantly undermining members of the team, gossiping about them. They're constantly complaining about the company, about the systems.

They're constantly looking for pay rises. And then one day, human resources, call them in and read out the list of you've done this, you've done this, you've done this, you've done this.

We've got a few issues with you. We need to... Unbeknownst to them or maybe known to them, they have been kind of being performance managed for a bit and these issues have been raised over some time.

But in this moment in front of human resources and the boss is sitting there, all of a sudden your colleague realizes for the first time, these guys actually think my behavior is really bad.

They actually are taking this seriously. And I am about to lose my job. And all of a sudden their behavior, they just realize for the first time, there's consequences here.

[17 : 22] And they break down in tears and they're begging for the job. They're sobbing and they're pleading. They've got bills to pay. They've got mouths to feed. They need this job. They'll do whatever it takes.

Just give me one more chance. I'll change. I'll change. Just give me one more chance. So HR are kind and they decide not to fire him in that moment.

And the person just walks out of there going, wow, I just dodged a bullet. The crisis has been averted. What happens now? They change.

They start to arrive on time. They leave when others leave. For a while. When they think things have settled back down, they start to slip back into the old habits.

First opportunity to gossip against someone. Yeah, I'll jump in on that one. You see, in that moment, the short-lived changes were mechanical compliance from external force.

[18 : 31] They weren't driven by any form of internal change. The alternative is they don't slip back into the old habits, but they get more and more unhappy about the mechanical compliance.

And they'll start looking for another job where they can get away with their behavior. You see, external force can restrain the heart, but it can't change the heart.

For a short time, it, in fact, might look like real change. It may look like real change. But if there's no connection to the vine, to Jesus, then it will show over time.

So here it is. It is very typical when you first get into Christianity that without realizing it, you move into all sorts of mechanical compliance instead of organic change.

How does this body, family, this church work? What do I need to do to fit in? We often put all of our focus on getting busy serving Jesus instead of friendship with Jesus.

[19 : 54] We put all of our focus on getting busy serving Jesus instead of friendship with Jesus.

And when you first become a Christian, you embrace the truth. You're not saved by good works, but you're saved by the grace of God to you in the Lord Jesus.

But that truth is so, so foreign to the human heart, it is virtually impossible to believe it.

And so we get busy doing Christian things like helping people, getting involved in the church and studying lots of stuff about this newfound faith that I have. You get rid of the obvious ones, the big sins, the juicy sins in your life.

And if you're not careful, you can subconsciously start to think, surely God must love me because I'm doing all this stuff. I'm making some big changes in my life. And if you're not careful, what you're actually doing is you start moving into a pattern of inferring the love of God rather than experiencing the love of God.

Surely God must love me. inferring his love rather than drawing on his love.

[21 : 20] And without really drawing on Jesus' life and listening to his words and praying to him and knowing him and walking with him and spending time with him, we are really just busy doing stuff for him.

And when you do that, after a little while, you start to realize that you aren't actually really changing much at all.

It's possible to discover three years, 13 years, 33 years, down the track, sitting in church, there's not much...

I'm really not much more loving. I'm not much more... I've still got the same passions and desires that I've had for the last 20 years. I'm no more joyful.

I'm no more patient. I'm no more humble. No better at taking any criticism. I'm just as sensitive as I've always been.

[22 : 27] I'm not overcoming the bad habits. There is, in fact, very little ongoing fruit. Just settle.

Got to a point and just settle there. Just been sitting there for decades. Friends, it's essential to keep coming back to the center of the Christian faith.

The branch is fruitful because it has the life of the vine. It doesn't get the life of the vine because it's fruitful. We are saved by grace and without His grace, we are not capable of producing the change that God requires.

Without His grace, without His life, we can't change. Jesus says, without me, you can do nothing. You can't change on the inside without me.

The Paris Peace Conference, also known as the Versailles Peace Conference, was the meeting of the victorious allied powers following the end of World War I to set the terms of peace for the defeated central powers.

[23 : 40] The peace conference began in January 1919, so 100 years ago now, and it ended a year later. That's a very long conference.

I suppose they had lots of things to talk about that were important. One of the delightful side stories, which is not recorded, I mean, the outcomes are recorded about the Paris Peace Conference. One of the delightful side stories from the conference was about members from the delegation of Arabia. These delegates, who were connected with Lawrence of Arabia, came from a harsh desert environment, nomadic life, living in tents, where, as you can imagine, food and water were relatively scarce.

They take them from that environment, and they put them in hotels in Paris for this conference. And the biggest thing for them was that there was running water in the hotel room.

Never discovered it before, never seen this before in their life. And when they vacated their hotel rooms, the hotel discovered that instead of taking the soaps and the pens like the rest of us, these guys from Arabia took the taps off the walls to take them back home.

[24 : 59] I think they had the assumption, they had the vision of running water in their tents. Get these taps and put them in the tents, and we'll have running water. It's cute.

They didn't know the taps were useless unless they were attached to the water supply. And that's what Jesus says in verses 5 and 6, I am the vine, you are the branches.

If you remain in me, and I in you, you will bear much fruit. Apart from me, you can do nothing.

A Christian is someone for whom Jesus is their life source. As C.S. Lewis put it perfectly in his book, Mere Christianity. He says, the Christian way is this, and he's pushing against the idea of just mere compliance, and just obedience to rules, and little bits of changes in habits.

He says, you've got it so wrong. The Christian life is much harder and easier. Christ says, give me your all. I don't want your time.

[26 : 11] I don't want your money. I don't want your work so much as I want you. I've not come to torment your ordinary self.

I've come to kill it. No halfway measure. Hand over your whole ordinary self, both the things you think are innocent, as well as the things you think are wicked.

I will give you a new self instead. In fact, I will give you myself. My own will will become yours. My own life will become your life.

So, how do we get this vital connection with Jesus so that his life, this change from the inside out is happening in our life?

So, last point, the means of transformation. There are four things in this passage and, frankly, I could spend a whole lot of time on each one of these things.

[27 : 12] They're all connected in one way or another. And we need all four of these things to have a vital connection and to see character change.

All four of them are essential. They're interconnected, and they're all essential. Firstly, verse 2, there's the knife of the Lord. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful.

Secondly, there's the joy of the Lord. In verse 11, I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. Thirdly, there is the friendship of the Lord.

In verses 13 to 15, greater love has no one than this to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command. I no longer call you servants because a servant does not know his master's business.

Instead, I've called you friends. For everything that I learned from my Father, I have made known to you. A really crucial one. Christianity is not, it's about being friends with Jesus, it's not about being servants of Jesus.

[28 : 26] Finally, for number four, there is the love of the Lord. Verses 9 and 10. As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love.

If you keep my commands, you'll remain in my love just as I have kept my Father's commands and remain in his love. I love the connection between commands and love and also, beginning of the passage, Jesus says, remain in me.

And then, here he says, remain in my love. So let's just grab one of them. One that I think pushes against and rubs against our comfort-loving culture, and that is the knife of the Lord.

We won't grow in true Jesus-like character without pruning. It won't happen without pruning.

The end of verse 1. My Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch of me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so it will be even more fruitful.

[29 : 35] Now, Jesus is making a remarkable statement. He's saying here that when the knife of the Lord comes into our life and things get taken off, these are things that we love and hopes that we have, when that knife comes into our life, we think it's a waste.

We see all the prunings and we go, that's a beautiful flower. That's a beautiful looking branch. What are you doing cutting that one off?

Jesus says that God is a good and skilled gardener and he knows how to prune for our good. He's, I'm not a skilled and a good gardener.

I run into a branch, I'm not going to have another cut, you're off branch, you're gone. I did that to the tree out here years ago, ran into it, walking under there one night, bang, next morning, not going to happen again.

I pruned a plant in my garden about a month ago, it's now dead. the secateurs get brought out with a great deal of fear and trepidation.

[31 : 12] I'm not sure if I'm killing it or not. God is not like that. He knows what to prune for our good. Now, let me clarify here, God isn't looking out amongst people and asking himself, what will it take to make them look great?

What will it take to make them be great? I'll send terrible things into their life. That's not what's happening here.

This is not what Jesus is saying. What Jesus is saying here is the knife comes on everyone. For some it prunes, for some it cuts off, but the knife comes on everyone.

He's saying the same knife is on every branch. God's is the way. It's because we wrecked the world at the beginning of the true garden in the garden of Eden when we decided to reject God and run it our way.

And because of that, this world's wrecked and we face the consequences of living in a wrecked world. because we don't know how to run the world.

[32 : 24] In the same way if I got the keys of my car and handed them to a five-year-old and said, there you go. It won't be long and the car will be wrecked. Not long at all.

Everyone faces trouble and evil because of living in a broken world. And what Jesus is saying here is that if we are hooked into him, the same troubles and the same evils, that happen to everyone in this life, will make you soft, not hard.

They will make you more human, not less human. They will make you wise, not stupid. They will make you into a great person, not into a small person. That's what he's saying.

If connected to Jesus, the knife will cut us and make us for more growth and for more inner transformation. But if we're not connected to Jesus, the very same troubles, the very same evils that come to everyone's life will cut us off.

It will cut us off if the things that are being cut off, the branches that he's cutting off are our vine.

[33 : 37] If those things are our life, if they are our life source, when they're taken, they destroy us.

Like the person who must be married, when they finally get married, this is my life source, and all of a sudden the marriage is a disaster, and they grow in more and more in bitterness.

happiness. It's the difference between enjoying and feeling the loss of the thing that's been taken away, and that thing in fact being your joy.

When Jesus isn't the vine, but something else is, that is it's your meaning, it's your hope, it's your joy, we are crushed when it's lost.

But if Jesus is your life source, then when you get pruned, what you do in that moment, like a plant, when it gets pruned, it draws, it draws on the life source, it draws on the trunk, it starts to heal and grow again.

[34 : 58] We draw on his word, we draw on his promises, we draw on his commands, you listen to him speak to you through his word, you draw on his love, you draw on the friendship that you have with God, you draw on his joy for you and over you and of you, you see Jesus Christ was cut off from God.

See, that's the thing we've got to remember here. When we are in that furnace, when we're facing the knife of the Lord, we must see that Jesus Christ was cut off from God. He went to the cross for us so that we only ever have to face being cut back from God, being cut back by God.

As Isaiah says, Jesus was cut off from the land of the living. He was only ever cut off, he was cut off so that we only have to face being cut back.

As hard as it might be for us at times, it was infinitely harder for him. The more we think about what he has done for us, the more we're able to take the cuts.

Through the knife of the Lord, you draw more and more on the love of the Lord. recently, I've got to say personally, I've been feeling the knife of the Lord in a range of areas, but one area especially that has been really challenging me in terms of the knife of the Lord in difficulty is as a father.

[36 : 41] It's been particularly tough lately. God has been pushing me to my limit of my capacity and what's been surfacing for me is one of the controlling idols of my heart, which we've all got them, but one of the controlling idols of my heart, which is control.

It's so much easier when your kids are one, two and three, you just pick them up and you can't do that as they get older. And so it draws up and it pushes you to your limit and draws up what is default setting of how I would behave.

What I'm finding at the moment is that I'm seeing it more. God is bringing to my life more. I'm not liking it. I'm confessing. I'm discovering more in God's word about his control over the circumstances of my life and everything.

I'm finding that I'm praying more for his enabling, for his wisdom, for his love, for his joy. I'm slowly resting on him more. I've just realized that what God has been doing in my life over here in drawing an idol of my heart to the surface through this circumstance is absolutely essential for St. Paul's right now as well.

Isn't it good the way he does that? that this idol is not just about me being a dad, but it's about me being a husband, it's about me being a man, it's about me being the leader of this church as well.

[38 : 21] See, right now we are seeking to equip leaders and to push decision-making right now. And an idol, sorry, not idol, a mentor of mine said some time ago, one of the differences between our system, the way we sit, one of the things that we love in Anglican churches compared to his system, which is a major hindrance for us, is that we love order and control.

We love it. Maybe, you know, so, and so I've been reflecting on that and God's been cutting back, cutting back, cutting back, help me see, you don't have control.

You think you do, but you don't have control. You can't even control the people you brought into this world, for goodness sake. You can't control that. And so what I'm realising is the big thing, the big desire of my heart to develop here in this church, to see people in this church empowered and released for ministry, the hindrances are not just systems, systems, they're not just structures, but hearts.

And it begins with my heart. Oh, how difficult it was, and yet how beautiful it was to, and I'm grateful for, for a very quick rebuke from a brother on Friday afternoon that saw this default setting of mind come to the surface.

Just very quickly, uh-uh-uh. Not your call, Steve. That was so... the sinful side.

[40 : 14] What do you mean not my call? I'm the senior minister of this church. Control, Steve. Holy Spirit, control, control, control.

What is it for you that God needs to work in your heart? C.S. Lewis writes in Mere Christianity, we must not be surprised if we are in for a rough time.

When a person turns to Christ and seems to be getting on pretty well, he now thinks it would be natural if things now went on more smoothly. When troubles come along, though, when troubles come along, illnesses, money troubles, new temptations, you begin to get disappointed.

Why is this happening now? Didn't I already give myself to God? God. It's because God is forcing us onward and upward to a higher level.

He's putting us into situations where we have to be much more braver, much more patient, much more loving, much less in control than we've ever dreamed before.

[41 : 23] It seems unnecessary to us. It's only because we've not got the slightest idea of the tremendous thing that he needs to make of us.

Imagine yourself, he says, as a living house. First, God comes in to make some repairs and you understand what he's doing. He fixes the drains and the leaking roof and you understand, yeah, that important work that needs to be done.

You're not surprised. But then, he starts knocking the house about in ways that hurt abominably, if I can say that word.

And it makes no sense. What's he up to? Then the explanation comes that he's building a very different house than the one that you thought he was building.

He's throwing off a new wing in this direction. He's putting up a tower there. Now, he's making this courtyard. You thought you were being made into a decent little cottage.

[42 : 39] He's building a palace because he intends to live in it. Jesus said, I am the vine, you are the branches, I have appointed you for greatness, and I'm fitting you out to live with me in greatness forever.

I'm cutting you back, not cutting you off. I'm cutting you off. I'm cutting you off.