

Foundations for Life with God

Introduction to the Unit:

This unit is about laying down the foundation to change and bear fruit in our lives with God. When we first come to know God and to follow Jesus Christ daily there are certain activities we could do to participate in the work that God is doing in our lives. We call these activities disciplines or habits of life with God. These habits help us become like Christ for the sake of others.

First, then, we look at change: The need for it, the end of it, and the process of it.

Second, we learn how to live in submission to God and how to practice the Sabbath.

Third, we look at slowing down our lives through silence and solitude.

Fourth, we learn to serve others as a way of life.

Fifth, we learn to pray by following the pattern Jesus set in the Lord's Prayer.

Sixth, we learn 3 ways of studying and reading the Bible.

Seventh, we learn how to be witnesses of our faith as we promote the gospel.

Last we learn how to design a spiritual growth plan for a year.

In this first session we are going to answer several key questions about change.

Is there a need for change in our lives?

What is not helpful when it comes to change and what is helpful?

What is the single most important goal of change?

Is there a process of change that works?

What does the Bible's say about the way Christians change?

Let's take each of these questions in turn and deal with them.

Is there a need for change in our lives? The obvious answer is of course. When we begin to follow Jesus as his disciples we realize we have a lot of changing to do. God will always be doing the work of changing us as long as we are alive. Some of us have a lot of changing to do. By the way, a disciple is not a word that is reserved for those who are elite or advanced in the Christian life. A disciple is simply a learner or student. His teacher is Jesus. He learns from Jesus how to do his own life as if Jesus were doing in his place. In other words he lives with the help of Jesus. So staying connected to Jesus is the most important task of discipleship.

Often when we give our lives to Christ we stop doing some of the visible sins we used to do. For example, I stopped swearing the day I accepted Christ's rule in my

life. A week later I took all my jewelry and gave it away. I felt I no longer needed it. There are changes that happen immediately in our lives. We don't ask for them. They happen to us. But most change in our lives will happen gradually.

Every body gets some spiritual training as they grow up. Most get a bad spiritual training. We learn a lot of ways of living that are contrary to the way God desires for us to live. So we must change.

There are several sins that we fight to overcome all our life long. We must do it with intention, we must have a plan to change and grow.

For example, we will struggle all our lives with depending on God totally. We grew up learning to be independent. Now we have to unlearn this and put our lives in the hands of God and learn to depend on others in our church for spiritual growth. We will have stretches of time when we think we don't need God or others and do our lives apart from God and others. Even mature Christians struggle with self-dependence.

We will also struggle with lust. The media, the world, and our human nature are all bent to encourage us to live lives of lust and violate others so just we can satisfy ourselves: Power, money, control, sex. So we must learn to live without lust and control our human nature.

How are you doing with being a slave to what you own? We gather more and more and more, horde material things, and the more we gather and horde the poorer we feel inside. What we possess has a way of owning our souls sooner or later.

How about anger? Is that an issue in your life? What are you doing when it comes to controlling your temper? Can we change to the point where anger is no longer our first response to others? Do you have a wrong kind of anger or wrath?

Do you need to learn how to handle envy? There is a conspiracy out there that wants us to envy everything we don't have or can't have and are not supposed to have. We must learn to control our envy. It takes a lifetime of training to do it.

And pride. How are you doing with pride? Are you rejecting life and refusing God in any area of your life?

And what about gluttony? Do you take from this world more than you need while others don't have enough to live on?

What about laziness? Are you inflicted with being quick to leave for tomorrow what today should be done in the kingdom of God, and for the sake of others? Are we quick on the trigger of judging others with standards we ourselves are too lazy to keep?

Now if I asked questions about visible sins rather than these heart attitudes or internal struggles, I suspect it would've been easier to answer. But transformation is about heart change. Do you remember the old saying: "I don't smoke, I don't chew, and I don't go with girls that do?" Well you could be avoiding all of this visible sinning and still be in need of deep change because of pride or lack of humility. We want to study the disciplines of the Christian life in a way that brings deep transformation to our lives, in a way that helps us deal with heart issues before God and not just surface issues.

So yes there is a need for change. A common theme in the Bible is the need for change. In Romans 12:1-2 Paul appeals to us to present our bodies as a living sacrifice, not to be conformed to this world, but to be transformed by the renewing of our minds. The result of this change is the ability to know God's will, know what is good, know what is acceptable, and know what is perfect. And know in an intimate way not just in our heads. This tall order demands change in us.

Paul says be transformed: That sounds like a command and it is. Yet the form of the word is passive. It's like saying to a mouse "be eaten by a cat". It's a command and it's passive. The cat is doing the eating but the mouse is the one willing to be eaten. The bottom line is that change is a joint effort. God changes us as we train to change. Heaven helps us as we help ourselves is the right attitude when it comes to change.

Paul also says in Philippians 2:12-13 that we must work out our own rescue or deliverance from this world (salvation) with fear and trembling since it is God who is at work in us. Here Paul says God's responsibility is to work in us to change us, and that we are to take our human responsibility as seriously as God takes his divine responsibility.

So God put the need in us to change and will help us change. God the Father is for us. God the Son is with us. God the Holy Spirit is in us to help us change and grow and become like Christ. Is that enough gun power for you?

2. When it comes to change there are things we do that just don't help. If we learn to do the right things in the first place we would save ourselves a lot of trial and error and years of frustration.

A. Here's what doesn't work: Trying harder. Trying harder to become like Jesus has never worked for me. When it works it's short lived and kin deep. Try harder people say. You try and you still mess up. Keep doing the same thing until you succeed. If at first you fail, try and try again. Now I'm not saying that we shouldn't try. It's just that trying doesn't bring about inward change, which must happen for long lasting transformation. Any change that doesn't touch the deep parts of us is at best surface change.

B. Here's what else doesn't work: Willpower. Many believe that if we have enough willpower we will be able to change. Some have even made willpower and faith almost mean the same thing. But they're not.

Two days after making New Year's resolutions 95% of us give up on our willpower. We think we are weak because our wills are weak. We blame ourselves. We give up. We feel defeated. The will is not what changes us because the will has no power of its own to change us.

Our will is simply our capacity to make decisions. It's only a capacity, mind you. It doesn't do anything. Our will helps us respond to our impulses and to the impulses of others. We need a little bit more about the will. We use our wills to help us make decisions.

There are three things that influence our will.

- 1) Our mind influences our will. Our thoughts have a huge influence on our wills and our emotions. Change your mind and your feelings and you'll change your will.
- 2) Our body influences our will. Our bodies are constantly sending messages to our mind through our feelings: Get food you're hungry. Get up and go to the bathroom your bladder is full. Do this, do that.
- 3) Other people influence our will. Our peers put pressure on us to choose certain things over others, to feel this way rather than that way.

The will has no power of its own. Not because it's weak. But because the will is like a computer: It does what you tell it, or you program it to do.

Is there a sure way to insure change will happen? Change in the Christian life happens indirectly mostly. We change the way we think and our behavior follows and our environment changes. We do what we can do in order to change what we can't change in our own strength. By the way, we have come to a good point to define what a discipline is, which is what this unit is mostly about.

By definition this is what a discipline is: An activity that we do that helps us change indirectly. It lets us do what we couldn't do directly. Take, for example, loving our enemies. Loving our enemies is not something within our power to do. Yet we are commanded to do just that as part of our new life in Christ. We could try from now till the cows come home. Loving our enemies directly is not humanly possible. We could do it grudgingly. But doing it willingly and lovingly is what God expects. But then you go into your room, and you sit with God a while, and God speaks to you, and you get instruction from God and his Word to serve your enemy and pray for him. Soon your heart becomes softer and you find yourself taking the first steps of love, of prayer, of acts of kindness. What you could not do on your own now you do because you disciplined your way into doing it. You trained for it.

James Bryan Smith tells this story in the Good and Beautiful God of Peyton Manning who was the winning Quarterback in Super Bowl 41. It was a rainy night, and the ball was slippery. Rex Grossman, the quarterback for the losing team, fumbled several times. But Peyton Manning never fumbled. A few weeks after the Super Bowl a reporter discovered that every few weeks during the year Manning has his center (the one who snaps him the ball), Jeff Saturday snap him water-soaked footballs. He practices handling the wet football so he will be ready in case it rains—even though his team plays half of their games in a dome. Manning did what he could do (practice handling wet footballs over and over) to enable him to do what he could not without this preparation (play great in the rain).

So training is the opposite of trying. Paul said in 1 Timothy 4:8 to “train ourselves for the purpose of godliness.” He also said that he practices boxing in the gym so that when he is in the ring he would be prepared to box without feeling that he’s just beating the air for nothing. Training is the indirect, backdoor way to change.

There is a danger to learning the disciplines of the Christian life: To think that the disciplines are changing us. This is a real danger. The history of the church is a witness to this danger. The disciplines do not change us. They are the means for change. The disciplines are the vehicle God uses to drive our lives toward change into Christlikeness.

3. So we need to change and we need to change by training ourselves. The third thing I want to talk about now is the goal of change. Here we’re going to look at several Scriptures. So get yourself ready to look in your Bible. After we look at these verses you’ll get the right answer to the goal of change, I’m sure

A. It’s God design from the very beginning of time that we would change into the likeness of Jesus Christ: Romans 8:29... Paul is saying here that from the very beginning of time, when God made humanity from dust, he had a particular shape or image in mind he wanted it to be. This copy was planned and it was to be a copy of his Son, the Original. We are made for Christ and to be like Christ.

B. It’s also God’s intention that we adopt a life of change now, in the present, in imitation of Christ: 1 John 2:6. We walk as Jesus walked. The HS in us is teaching us Jesus, is working Jesus into every nook and cranny of our lives. It will take him a lifetime to do it, but he’s doing it. It’s in his job description to do it. He will not fail. Our character needs changing. A rich, bright, and eager young man runs to Jesus one day blurting out this urgent question: What must I do to inherit eternal life? He and we are all seeking to live meaningful and fulfilled lives. We want our lives to be complete in the present so they can be complete in the future. He and we are still lacking something, a goal to live for, a completion. So Jesus suggests to him that what he needs is a complete makeover, he needs to be turned inside out. He needs a larger purpose than himself, an outward-looking purpose: Put God’s kingdom first, and put your neighbors (the poor ones) before his own fulfillment and prospects. He wanted one more commandment to live by, one more moral rule that would take

him over the top. Jesus says: that won't do. I'll either make you to become a different sort of person altogether, or there is no deal. Jesus is challenging the young man to a transformation of character.

C. Finally, it's God's will that in the future our conduct and behavior (the outcomes of our character) would also be changed to the point that we will be as he is: I John 3:2. One day God wills that we behave, and act the way Jesus acted throughout his life. That the character that pulsated in him will also drive our every thought, deed, and emotion. I'm so looking forward to that. But I must learn and train to do it. After all a disciple is a learner, a student, a pupil, an apprentice who when the Master Teacher forms him he will be like his Master Teacher (Luke 6:48).

So God designed, intended, and willed that every disciple of Jesus learn from him as teacher how to do the Christian life.

And these are not the only passages; there are many others that talk about imitating Christ as the goal we are aiming to reach: Ephesians 5:1-2; 1 Corinthians 11:1; 2 Peter 1:4; Galatians 4:19; 2 Corinthians 3:18; Romans 12:1-2; Philippians 2:1-4; 1 Thessalonians 1:6; Hebrews 13:7; Phil 3:17; Matthew 5:48.

This is no small thing. It's the main thing of the Christian life. It's the primary calling of every Christian, young and old, pastor and church member, follower and leader alike. All of us share this same calling as the main calling of our lives. Our secondary callings change. Some of us do the work of teaching, plumbing, nursing, pastoral care, receptionists, and denominational leaders as our secondary callings. But the main calling is to follow Christ and learn from him how to do our lives in his kingdom, under his rule.

4. Is there a process that helps us understand how change takes place in our spiritual walk? I believe there is. Although the Bible does not spell it the way I will here, I believe the pattern is not foreign to the Bible. Dallas Willard explains this model for change in this way (this is only one model of change).

For any change to take place we must first receive a vision. When the people of Israel were to leave Egypt, God gave them a vision. When Jesus left his disciples and he presented them with a vision of change of themselves and the world. Whatever it is that we need to do begins with a vision. Sometimes we may not know exactly how to say what this vision is but we do have a mental picture of what we want to be like or to accomplish. Let's say I want to learn a new language. I envision myself speaking it, being able to write it, and understanding people readily. That's a vision.

To take our earlier example of Peyton Manning. Manning saw a vision of himself playing in the rain without fumbling the football. For the disciple, there is no need to invent a new vision. The vision for our lives and our growth is already given: Becoming like Christ for the sake of others. We see ourselves following Jesus in

obedience, in repentance, in trust, in love, in godliness, in holiness, in mercy, in denying ourselves and carrying our cross daily to follow him.

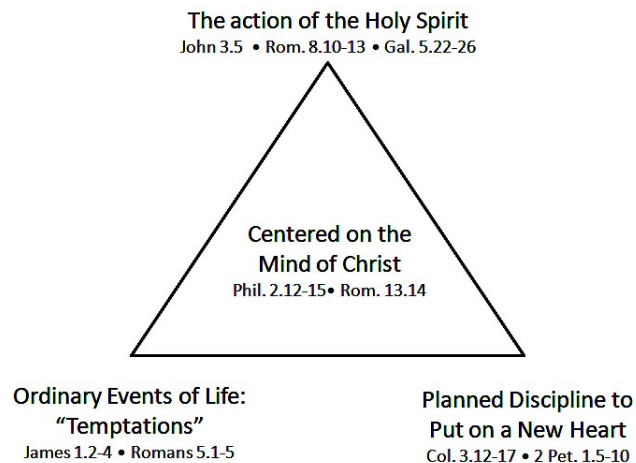
Next we need to intend our vision. That is we must put feet to our vision. We have to bring the vision about intentionally. Let's take Manning again. Manning made sure that he found time on his calendar. He called his center and scheduled a time to practice every few weeks. They went to the field. Dressed. Warmed up. They wet the footballs. And I don't know all they did. But they didn't just have a wish to bring about their vision, they planned, and they made sure it was going to get done. It's the same thing in our Christian life. In our intention to carry out our vision to follow Christ, we make space in our lives, set times aside to practice, plan to be with others for accountability, and mutual encouragement, and whatever else we need to accomplish our vision.

They could have done all of that and never been the better for it. The last thing we have to do in order to bring our vision to completion is to actually practice or use the means at our disposal. Again Manning had a vision, put his intentions to practical use. But then got down to snapping wet football after wet football until it no longer slipped from his hands. It became second nature to Manning not to fumble under pressure. And when the time came to play in the rain, he was ready and did not fumble. Had he not had the vision, the intention, and the means, he would have been no different than his opponent and would have fumbled as often or more while playing in the rain.

For the Christian life, the means of intending our vision are the disciplines of the Christian life. The ones I mentioned at the beginning of this session: silence and solitude, submission, praying, studying the our Bibles, witnessing, serving others, and keeping to a scheduled time of rest and refreshment.

5. Now for the last part about change. Change as we've been using it in this session is really about spiritual growth. One can change for the worse, I suppose. But the change we are talking about is change for the better. It's about development in our walk with Christ. There are three biblical ideas that work together to bring about spiritual growth in our lives. Let's end our session with these. Dallas Willard calls this the golden triangle of spiritual growth. So draw a triangle on a piece of paper.

The Threefold Dynamic ("Golden Triangle" of spiritual growth)



The Holy Spirit is God in us. Jesus is God with us. The Father is God for us. All three are involved in our spiritual growth. The HS indwells us but he is also the agent of our renovation or bringing the life of Christ into us.

But then the HS does not work separately from us. He uses the ordinary and the local things of life to bring about this change. As life happens with its troubles, discouragement, brokenness, opportunities, the HS takes each of the and does not waste an thing. With our cooperation he maximizes our training to conform us to Christ's image.

But we must jump on the bandwagon of change and do our part. The Christian life demands our efforts and our work. James tells us that our faith, our trust relationship with God cannot remain in our heads. It has to punch a clock. Faith without works is a corpse. There is a beautiful illustration from Mark 2:1-12 about this...

Often we make the mistake of putting grace on one side and works on the opposite side. The truth is that grace and works are not opposite truths. They are complimentary. Grace is opposed to earning, which is an attitude that some have. Some believe that they earn God's favor by doing certain things that please God. That's wrong headed. But grace understood as God enabling us to do what we can't do in our strength is the right truth to believe.

Then there are the means of this grace. The way grace comes to us is not on the wings of idleness and laziness. Rather, grace is hammered out on the anvil of disciplines, or habits that Christ practiced, his disciples practiced, the early Christians practiced, and even the first people of God practiced. Practices like keeping the Sabbath, and fasting, and studying the word of God, and meditation, and prayer alone and prayer with others, and worship, and service, and any other activity that trains us to pay attention to God, to our souls, and to others.

So, in conclusion to our first session: We have set the foundation for the disciplines of the Christian life that any novice can incorporate into his life. The foundation is this: That as long as we live we need to be continually changing, have a plan to change, know to what end we are changing, and understand how God changes us. In the next session we will begin our learning of the disciplines we have developed for this unit.