

THE FORMATION OF SPIRITUAL LEADERSHIP

SERIES: PREPARING FOR SPIRITUAL LEADERSHIP

By Danny Hall

We have been talking about how God wants to prepare us to be his people, to walk out of church into the world to serve others, to be his eyes and ears and arms and heart, to take the gospel of love to the world. That all sounds really good when we're sitting in our pews and singing wonderful worship songs, and our hearts are lifted in the joy of who Christ is. But when it comes down to actually doing it, we often think, "How could that possibly be me?"

We have been asking in the last couple of messages (Discovery Papers 4733, 4734) how we can change our mission from impossible to possible. Well, it's an ongoing process of learning and growing. In our study of the Upper Room Discourse, we're learning that Jesus wants to grow us up into people who can put on the mantle of leadership in the expansion of his kingdom, just as he once prepared his disciples to do. As we follow the development of the teaching Jesus gave them, we're building a picture of how God wants to minister to us, to equip us and mold us into his people.

We'll study John 15:1-8 in this message. In chapter 14 Jesus talked to the disciples about how he was going to physically leave them, but that would really be a good thing. They had drawn their security from being disciples of the One they believed was about to ascend to the throne of Israel, but their faith was being shaken by Jesus' continual proclamation that he was headed to the cross. Their ambition and self-confidence were undermined by his predictions of their failure and betrayal, and by his having to wash their feet because none of them were humble enough to do it. With all of these things reducing their confidence, Jesus began to build in them a different kind of confidence. He first told them about their wonderful eternal home with the Father that would begin in the present life in their communion and fellowship with Jesus himself and extend into eternity. The security of that relationship was foundational. Then he explained that while he was leaving physically, the Holy Spirit would come to cultivate their relationship with him.

Now in chapter 15 Jesus will refine the idea of this relationship and give them more specifics. He has invited them to leave the upper room and walk out into the night with him, and with that he symbolically as well as literally heads toward what he came to earth to do. He is now moving full-bore toward the cross. But until that time he wants to continue to build up the disciples, to teach them what they will need to know in the days ahead. Their path probably takes them through some vineyards on the way down to the Kidron Valley, and Jesus uses the imagery of the vineyards to illustrate how the things he has promised them are going to be worked out in their lives.

Now, these disciples have no idea what they're getting into. They know only an enormous sense of inadequacy and fear about Jesus' departing and leaving everything in their hands. How can they possibly lead the kingdom and carry the gospel forward? They have come to love and follow him, but how can they be the kind of leader he is? We all wrestle with that. Part what we wrestle with is the kind of people we are. All of us have a sense of regret, failure, and inadequacy, and not just in terms of our qualifications for service. So how can we claim to be the messengers of God?

Understanding this, Jesus now begins to teach the disciples about how God is going to form them into the kind of people they need to be in order to lead his kingdom. Let's read John 15:1-8:

"I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit, He takes away; and every branch that bears fruit, He prunes it, so that it may bear more fruit. You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you. Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, so neither can you, unless you abide in Me. I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me, and I in him, he bears much fruit; for apart from Me you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in Me, he is thrown away as a branch, and dries up; and they gather them, and cast them into the fire, and they are burned. If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it shall be done for you. By this is My Father glorified, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be My disciples."

One of the things we must understand about being followers of Jesus is that our relationship with him is a transforming one. It changes us into a different kind of people. We have so much reduced the idea of salvation to forgiveness and getting to heaven that we've forgotten that the gospel of the New Testament is a gospel of growth, of development into the people of God.

The vital connection to Jesus

In this passage Jesus uses a vineyard as an object lesson to teach about how God wants to form us. He and the disciples are probably now walking through a vineyard. That picture is one that would be very accessible to them. Not only do they live where there are many vineyards, but the vineyard has been a theme of the teaching they have grown up with in their Jewish culture. In the Old Testament, the grapevine is used a number of times to depict the nation of Israel.

Now Jesus takes that picture and says, “I am the true vine.” He is saying, “I am the true Israel. All that has been promised about this nation and what God wanted to do for the world through it is now located in me, the Messiah who has come and in whom you have believed.” Jesus is the true fulfillment of the promises to the nation that have been rehearsed across its history. And now he invites them to be connected to the One who is the true vine of God. The ones who are vitally connected to Jesus are now the Israel of faith, the true people of God. This is a vine based not on ethnicity or on national borders but on faith in the One who is the fulfillment of all God’s promises.

He invites them now to see of what value it is to be connected to the true vine, Jesus himself. He begins to teach them about what God wants to do to transform them into the people he wants them to be. There are all kinds of rich and wonderful things in this passage, but two words represent important themes. Seven times Jesus uses the word “abide” in these eight short verses (he also uses the word in other parts of the discourse). And six times he uses the word “fruit.” There is a connection between abiding and fruit. Where there is no abiding, there is no fruit. Where there is abiding, there is fruit. Jesus wants them to understand that this connection is vital to living out their life of faith and becoming leaders of the kingdom of God, those who will represent him in the world. And as we trace through what Jesus says about abiding and fruit, we begin to see how God wants to take us through the process of transformation as well.

Let me give you definitions of these two terms. The word “abide” is sometimes translated “dwell” or “remain.” It has the idea of a consistent connection. It connotes a deep, close intimacy that lasts over time, as opposed to a casual acquaintance. It has the idea of Christ’s taking up residence in us, and our taking up residence in fellowship with him, however we want to picture that. So the key to understanding this word “abide” is the notion of intimacy with Christ.

We’re going to look a little more closely at a specific aspect of the term “fruit” in the next message, where we’ll hear Jesus begin to talk about the issue of love for God and for others. That is the ultimate fruit produced by a connection with Christ. But the term “fruit” simply means the reproduction of the character of Christ in us, our being formed into the image of Christ. All through the New Testament there is language of becoming more like Christ: “We all . . . beholding as in a mirror the glory of God, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory. . . .” (2 Corinthians 3:18.) It says we are “predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son . . .” (Romans 8:29). It talks about “the fruit of the Spirit” (Galatians 5:22-23). All of this is about radical reformation. It is certainly worked out through our own personalities; we don’t become clones of Christ. But as he lives in us, the qualities of his character begin to take root and grow within us. We display more and more of the person and character of Christ through the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives, because of our vital connection with Christ.

With that as our background, I want to give you some hinges by which God can turn this calling from a mission impossible to a mission possible. The first one is a *progression* that takes place.

Progression: transformed into Christ’s image

Notice the way Jesus talks about fruit. Verse 2: “does not bear fruit,” then “bears fruit,” then “bear more fruit.” Finally in verses 5 and 8: “bears much fruit.” The assumption is that there is going to be growth and development. This is absolutely key to our understanding if we are going to be the people of God. Our Christian culture has for a very long time located its understanding of the gospel in the idea of what it takes to get to heaven. Now, I am all for getting to heaven! But we have missed the primary teaching of the gospel: radical connection to God that transforms us into people who are like Christ.

All through the New Testament you see reference to “the believers.” That is almost universally a present participle in

Greek that literally means, “The ones who are believing.” It doesn’t mean, “the ones who have believed,” who have, so to speak, walked the aisle and made a profession of faith, and therefore are sure they are going to heaven. Believing is not some sort of legal transaction where you sign on the dotted line that you believe in Jesus, and then you have a guarantee about eternity. The title “believers” that is given to us refers to something dynamic. We are people of ongoing faith, people who are constantly trusting in that vital relationship. The net result of all this emphasis on only the eternal future and not on the transforming nature of a personal relationship with Christ is false transformation that goes on in our lives. We develop false indices of whether we are doing well spiritually.

I just read an interesting article in the *San Jose Mercury News* entitled “Brides-to-Be Say, ‘I Won’t’ Before ‘I Do’.” It’s all about how young couples who have been sexually active decide to abstain from sex for a period of time before they get married, in order to somehow deal with their guilt. It quotes one woman who says she “hopes that a period of abstinence will ensure that sparks fly during her honeymoon in Fiji and help clear her conscience about having strayed from the expectations that her church and family hold about premarital sex. ‘The closer you get to the wedding, and you are looking for a preacher and a church, you start to feel guilty,’ she said of no longer being a virgin.” (1)

This is an example of what happens when people wrap the gospel around some idea of future glory, but divorce it from a sense of ongoing, vital relationship with Christ. Then situations like this come up where people want to be part of a Christian culture, yet there are issues that they’re not sure about, and they end up doing crazy things to try to prop up the notion that they have faith so that they feel better about where they are.

I recently read a fine article in *Leadership* magazine by John Ortberg, who is one of the pastors at Willow Creek Community Church in Chicago. He outlines two kinds of false transformation that people often fall into when they are not committed to real transformation. Let me share a couple of his thoughts with you because they are so on point with what Jesus is getting at in John 15. The first kind of false transformation is what he calls “settling for the minimum”:

“Sometimes we mistakenly think that the Christian life is primarily about entrance to heaven. We’re content with conversion when God is calling for transformation. Rather than expecting the kingdom of God to revolutionize lives today, we hope it will happen in heaven tomorrow. Somewhere along the line we swapped out Jesus’ gospel—through him we can be transformed into citizens of the kingdom of God right now, today—for a gospel of heaven’s minimum entrance requirement.” (2)

The second kind of false transformation is what he calls “looking the part”:

“All groups want to define who is in the group and who is out. Groups tend to establish ‘boundary markers’ to make the distinction. Sociologists define these markers as highly visible, relatively superficial practices.” (3)

He notes, for instance, how in Jesus’ day the Pharisees had catalogued many external things, and those were the demarcation of whether someone was in or out. Conforming to boundary markers too often substitutes for authentic transformation.

“As I was growing up, having a ‘quiet time’ became a boundary marker, a measure of spiritual growth. If someone had asked me about my spiritual life, I would immediately think, ‘Have I been having regular and lengthy quiet time?’ My initial thought was not, ‘Am I growing more loving toward God and toward people?’

“Boundary markers change from culture to culture, but the dynamic remains the same. If people do not experience authentic transformation, then their faith will deteriorate into a search for the boundary markers that masquerade as evidence of a changed life.” (4)

How many of us have been caught in that trap? What God wants is to begin to transform us from bearing no fruit to bearing fruit to bearing much fruit, continually growing in our relationship with him.

The second hinge we see that turns all this from impossible to possible is the *process* of transformation. To help us think about the process by which God is working in our lives, Jesus gives us three ideas: cleansing, abiding, and obeying.

Process: cleansing, abiding, obeying

Jesus talks about a procedure by which God graciously cleanses us and thus makes us more ready to be vitally connected to him, allowing the life that comes from the vine to flow into us who are the branches, that fruit might be produced. This cleansing procedure has two phases. First, in verse 2 he says, “Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit, He takes away.” This is a statement that has caused a lot of consternation. Jesus seems to be saying, “If you are not bearing fruit, you are thrown aside.” People have tried to solve this by saying, among other things, that he’s talking about people who were never really believers. But Jesus says, “Every branch *in Me*.” These are branches that are connected to him but that are not bearing fruit, and he takes them away. Verse 6, by contrast, speaks of those who do not abide in him, who are not vitally connected to the vine. For those there is the consequence of judgment.

The key to verse 2, however, is a proper understanding of the term “take away.” The Greek word can be translated several different ways, one of which is its normal usage in this context: the idea of lifting up. “Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit, He lifts up” better conveys what Jesus is saying here. I don’t know much about vinedressing, but I’ve tried to learn a little bit. One of the things I noticed when we lived among vineyards in Vienna was that there are times when the branches sag down and begin to touch the ground. Then they aren’t very productive, so they have to be literally lifted up onto supports that keep them spread out in a way that permits the fruit to grow.

What is behind Jesus’ picture here is that in many areas, our lives need the disciplining, correcting, lifting work of God. Our lives can droop down because of the burden of our own weakness, sinfulness, or contact with the world that sullies who we are and what we’re doing. And if it weren’t for the gracious hand of the vinedresser, God himself, lifting us up to bring us out of the morass of our own sinfulness, we would be unproductive. Jesus describes the people here as bearing no fruit. There is no vital connection with Christ, no character of Christ flowing through their lives. They are not living out and proclaiming the gospel, and the lives they touch are not being changed. Their lives are totally unproductive for God’s kingdom. What may very well need to take place is God’s disciplining, lifting-up work, elevating them out of the dirt where they have fallen, and placing them where they can receive the nourishment of God.

One of the great promises of Scripture is that if we are God’s children, he will discipline us (Hebrews 12:6). So part of what happens in our vital connection with Christ is that we allow the vinedresser to do the work of lifting us up out of whatever is keeping us from him, of disciplining us to change us, to bring us more into the place where he wants us to be.

Now, the disciplining and purifying hand of God can come in many different forms. When I was a new pastor in Mississippi, there was a young man named Mike in our church, and he had all kinds of issues. He was in everybody’s face, criticizing everything. Everything you did was some kind of sin. No matter what I did, this guy complained. Every time I preached a sermon, I knew that Mike was cataloguing everything he didn’t like about what I said, and he was going to let me have it. One time he had some burr under his saddle, and he wanted me to come over to his house and talk to him. I knew I was going over there to get it with both barrels, so I just let Mike blast away at me, and we discussed the issues.

It would have been so easy to dismiss Mike as some blowhard, but when I walked out of that, God did something in my heart that has helped me ever since. He said to me, “Danny, you cannot afford not to listen to him, because behind all his negativity and legalism, maybe he’s seeing something in your life or in your heart that I want to deal with!” I began to trust God every time someone criticized me or made a comment about me (because Mike was the first in a long line). I said, “God, give me the grace to react not out of anger or defensiveness, but by processing it through your Spirit to see whether there is any truth there, and if there’s not, if it’s just bluster and they’re off the mark, fine. But if there is a kernel of truth somewhere, take it and form my life in a way that is pleasing to you.”

In the darkest times of our lives, when Ginger and I were going through all kinds of things and my heart was running from God, he used physical illness and horrible job situations to bring me to the point where I was willing to submit myself to him, to vitally connect with him again and to see him begin to move in my life.

The second phase of God’s gracious cleansing procedure is pruning the branches that bear fruit. You might think there is nothing uglier than a vineyard that has just been pruned. It’s just stumps everywhere. If you didn’t know anything

about vinedressing, you might say, “They’ve ruined those beautiful grapevines!” But if the vinedressers don’t prune the branches, they’ll get too many leaves, which will impede the flow of nourishment from the vine to the fruit.

Pruning in our lives eliminates everything that keeps us from being vitally connected to the vine. This is God’s gracious work of showing us the areas of our lives that keep us from pure devotion to him. We live in a media-saturated, recreation-saturated, job-saturated world. We need to cut back on the things we are so full of, which keep us from developing the vital connection with Christ that he wants us to have. We may have an obsession with our job, a relationship, or recreation. These things may not be sinful; it’s just that they represent a colossal drain on our ability to draw on the nourishment of the vine in order to be fruitful people.

The second idea Jesus gives us to understand the process of transformation is abiding. The cleansing step allows us to have a deeper, more unsullied devotion to Christ, a more vital connection to him. We are less distracted and weighed down by sinfulness and selfishness, and then we are set free to pursue and love him with singleness of heart, to abide with him. That in turn allows more cleansing, and the more we are cleansed, the more deeply we are able to abide. It’s a self-reinforcing cycle. If we are to be people who make a difference in our world, and accept the mission that God has given us, then we must abide in Christ, and do the things that allow us to grow in our vital connection with him.

The third idea Jesus gives us to understand the process of transformation is obeying, or bearing fruit, living out the life of Christ in the world. As we saw in the last message (Discovery Paper 4734), Jesus taught them, “If you love Me, you will keep My commandments” (14:15). And we so easily get it out of order; when something is wrong spiritually, we start thinking of all the things we need to do for God, when it’s love for him out of which obedience has to flow. Now Jesus gives us a similar picture: it’s vital abiding in Christ out of which obedience grows. We don’t obey and do our way into a relationship with Christ. This is the heart of new-covenant living and leadership. We are men and women who are so vitally connected to Christ and so deeply in love with him that the transformation process of God is happening in our lives, and the fruit of obedience grows out of that. Our changed lives are then able to proclaim Christ as we live for him day by day.

There is a *progression*: God expects us to grow. There is a *process*: cleansing and abiding in him, out of which obedience is produced. Finally, the third hinge on which our mission in life turns is the *end product*.

End product: a life that glorifies God

In verses 7-8 he says, “If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it shall be done for you. By this is My Father glorified, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be My disciples.” The end product is a life that genuinely makes a difference. It is a life in which we see powerful answers to prayer as we become conformed to Christ’s image, begin to see the world through his eyes, and then pray in alignment with his will. Our whole life is transformed to bearing fruit, and ultimately the result is the glory of God.

I want to point out one more thing that Jesus refers to twice in this passage: his *words* are agents of change in our lives. That is the answer to the question of how we allow ourselves to enter into God’s gracious work of transformation. Jesus says in verse 3, “You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you.” And he says in verse 7, as we just saw, “If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it shall be done for you.” God calls us to be rooted in the communion he has with us in his word, and then the Holy Spirit opens up his word to us, helping us to see more and more who Jesus is and who we are in him, building our faith, enriching our lives. We must be men and women who live in the Scriptures, not merely as an academic exercise, but rather as this vital communion, hearing the voice of God speaking to us.

Most scholars believe that John wrote this book late in life, when he was the only one of the original disciples still living, a patriarch of the church in the latter part of the first century. Around this time he also wrote the letters we call 1 John, 2 John, and 3 John. If you read through 1 John carefully, you will find that it has the same themes as the Upper Room Discourse: abiding, loving, and transformational relationship with Christ. As John passed down his final words of spiritual wisdom, his emphasis was on abiding. He wrote, “And now, little children, abide in Him, so that when He appears, we may have confidence and not shrink away from Him in shame at His coming” (1 John 2:28). The key to joy, fruitfulness, and vitality in our spiritual lives is maintaining our vital connection with Jesus, abiding in him, and allowing God to do his transformational work in us.

NOTES

- (1) Elizabeth Hayt, "Brides-to-Be Say, 'I Won't' Before 'I Do,'" *San Jose Mercury News*, August 17, 2002.
- (2) John Ortberg, "True (and False) Transformation," *Leadership*, Summer 2002, Vol. XXIII No. 3, P. 101.
- (3) Ortberg, P. 102.
- (4) Ibid.

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7th Message

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[Back to Index page](#)

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