

## **To Make Us More Like Jesus**

Galatians 5:22-25, John 3:27-30

// When I was younger, I used to enjoy using a product that started in one form, but would be changed into something else. Often I would pick them up as souvenirs while on holiday, as a reminder of the places we had been to.

It would start as a postcard shaped piece of plastic, which would have a picture on it that you could colour in with the pens that were provided.

Once you'd done your colouring in, you cut out the shape and then it was time for the good bit - it went in the oven! After a short while, the plastic would shrink down until it was a couple of inches, then you put a magnet on the back and you could stick it on the fridge.

I've not tried it myself, but I understand that you can do this with crisp packets, too. They must be plastic, not foil, but they can be shrunk down to be used for whatever ornamental needs you might have.

This is one way of taking something through a transformation process so it can perform a new task, or be presented in a different way.

When we choose to follow Christ, and we submit our lives to Him, recognising Him as Lord, we begin a journey of transformation. It's a journey where our old ways are left behind at the cross of Christ, and we are changed and restored into the way God originally designed us.

It's not about being turned into a different person, but it is about being renewed - being perfected, restored to the place where we are fit for our original purpose. We leave what holds us back behind, at the cross, and the Spirit leads us into a stage of renewal.

As Paul says in his letter to the Galatians: *"Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires."*

This is transformative. The passions and desires of our flesh - our sinful nature - have been crucified with Christ. It's been done, once and for all.

Everything we've done wrong that has separated us from God, and everything we will do wrong in the future, until Jesus returns, remains at the cross.

The reason we still struggle today with temptations and desires that don't fit with God's will is because we are waiting for His return, when He will make all things new.

Passions and desires in themselves aren't a bad thing, it's just that they have become twisted and warped as a result of the fall.

So, while our salvation is found in the cross of Jesus Christ, which is a done deal, a fixed point in time that cannot be altered, today we continue on the path of sanctification. We're being restored on a daily basis.

Sometimes that might go well. Others, maybe not so much. It's not always going to be easy.

This is a question of discipline, working on an ongoing process towards a future glory. Sometimes that discipline can be something we find we don't really find very exciting or attractive, although we might think it's something that would do us good. When that happens, it might be the time to go to God and say "Lord, help me to want to want to grow."

For many of us, that kind of attitude might be the first step of humility we need to make. And He will put it to good use!

As we allow God's Spirit to work in us, and we draw near to Him, over time our selfish desires begin to subside. We find that our passions and desires begin to reflect God's passions and desires.

Psalm 37:4 tells us to "*Take delight in the Lord, and He will give you the desires of your heart.*"

At first glance that might sound somewhat transactional, or a kind of bargaining like a desperate parent with an errant child: "Please, please be good. There's some sweets in it for you if you are."

Instead, let's consider that this might mean that as we walk with Him and He continues to transform us by His Spirit, we come to discover that the desires of our hearts are the same as the desires of His heart. As we are renewed, we find that the things that we want in this world are the same things that God wants.

What might that look like? We need only look to the fruit of the Spirit for a clue: *“Love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.”*

These are what drive a desire to see justice done in a broken world. Love puts others first. Joy brings a sense of hope, without ignoring the trials that many are going through. Peace eases tension and brings calm when tempers flare. Forbearance and self-control allows us to let God do His will among us without restraint, it gives others the chance to be listened to. Kindness and goodness brings humility, and it's hard to stay frustrated around someone who displays gentleness.

One of the ways we can help the Spirit to work through us is by actively and intentionally acting out the kinds of things we recognise we would like to see in our lives. It's not about forcing it, and making the fruit of the Spirit appear in ourselves through our own efforts and strength, but it's perhaps like tending a tree in an orchard.

We take care to prune off the bad wood - choosing to avoid thoughts and attitudes that don't give glory to God - and we encourage the healthy growth. That could be making the conscious effort to offer an encouragement to someone whenever we can, or choosing to seek joy despite facing trials.

This is what I sometimes refer to as the difference between emulation and imitation. If we emulate the fruit of the spirit, all we do is perform an act. We are merely applying particulars to ourselves, but they're not an indicator of any change from within us.

If we imitate, just as we are called to be imitators of Christ, we recognise that these are good characteristics that we would like to have at work in our own lives.

So as we imitate, just as a child imitates its parents or peers as it is shaped through its upbringing, these attitudes become part of our own nature, as we display them *with the Spirit in us*.

This isn't limited to attitudes and behaviour though, the fruit of the Spirit has the potential to shape and influence the art that we make, the relationships that we form, the songs we write, the sermons we preach, even the coffee we offer to others!

It's been said that the best thing to hang on the wall behind a customer service desk is a large mirror - people find it hard to stay angry and aggressive when they can see what they look like at the time.

There's something about the fruit of the Spirit that has a wonderful way of holding up a mirror to others. There have been many people who have come and gone in my life who have displayed many of these traits, and I've found it to be so inspiring. By identifying faithfulness and gentleness in others, I find myself wanting to be more like them, and to follow that thought to its logical conclusion, ultimately it means that I want to be more like Jesus.

Paul writes to the Galatians: *"Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit."*

I wonder how many of us have had the awkward situation in which our own pace is unevenly matched with those we are walking with.

When Abi and I were first dating, the first time we walked with our arms around each other wasn't that easy. We have totally different strides. It took time to get used to each others movement, there was some adapting that went on, until soon we were walking together harmoniously.

It's the same with the Spirit. Our natural 'spiritual strides' aren't the same. It takes time, walking with Him on a daily basis, gradually getting into a rhythm. Part of that might come through your quiet times with Him, or through becoming more aware of your thought patterns, or making the effort to do something kind for someone each day.

There's power and energy to be found here.

Through walking closely with God, we become more like Him, and more like the people He's made us to be.

The fruit of the Spirit that we are told of all point towards the overall characteristic of humility, and that's not always something that comes very easily to some of us.

We all have our own aims, ideas, and agendas, but very often the great challenge is to put our own goals and desires to one side for the sake of others and for God's kingdom.

John the baptist showed this in himself so clearly when he said "*He must become greater; I must become less.*"

In the laying down of our self for the sake of God's purposes, we will find the Spirit at work in us, through us, and around us.

John had the strength of character to recognise that although he had been given an incredible opportunity in ministry, it wasn't about him at all, but rather all that he did was for the plans and purposes of God. That takes some serious humility.

One commentator has called John's statement here the "great principle of ministry" - that Jesus must be ushered to centre stage, as the person doing the ushering steps back to allow the Lord to be glorified.

Have you noticed the way we often feel the need to justify ourselves. It's often tempting to 'pad out' our CVs for fear of not looking impressive enough, which perhaps suggests that we're often unable to be fully confident in our own level of achievement, training, or experience.

Another commentator notes the overly impressive nature of press releases he receives about writers and speakers.

“Very few speakers and writers are ordinary people,” he writes, “they are ‘world travellers’ or ‘noted lecturers’ who have addresses ‘huge audiences’. They are always in ‘great demand’, and their ministries are described in such ways that they make the apostle Paul” - or perhaps John the baptist - “a midget by comparison.”

We don't need to fall on our own devices, because we have the Spirit. If we want to go to anything as an indicator of our identity, ability, or value, let it be this: “I am a child of God.”

That's the bottom line. It's not about what we do, or what we've done. It's not about if we've been good or bad. We are God's children, and He has given us His Spirit. The question is, are we willing to let Him restore us into the children He has always intended us to be?

“He must become greater; I must become less” - may we be willing to let go of our own desires for the sake of His own. May we grasp what it means to walk in humility, to become more like Him each day.

“Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit” - may we daily strive to match our stride with the Spirit, listening to His voice as He leads and guides us. May we find strength in our souls as we move in rhythm with Him.

**Chris Marsh // 12th May 2014**