

WEEK 3



DAY 1 – HOW WE CHANGE

You have more likely than not experienced how difficult it is to change, or perhaps have a friend or loved one wrapped up in addiction, destructive habits or wrong thinking. That lingering question, "why can't I stop?" or, "why can't they just change?" resounds in many life circumstances. The reality of the matter is that change is difficult, plain and simple. Each of us has a worldview full of preconceived notions, assumptions, and biases that are a result of our past experiences and choices. That's exactly what it means to be "formed." It is from this place we see the world, interpret reality and often struggle to change.

At the end of the day, what is required to change is not self-help, but a renewal of our hearts. If our inner being has been *formed* in a particular way, it may need to be *transformed* by Jesus. On this thought hinges the relevance of Jesus to humanity. He seeks to renew our whole person. Jesus called his disciples to make more disciples, renewing the world as they went along, one person at a time. Jesus has selected to accomplish this work of renewal, at least in part, in and through us.

While social institutions, laws, psychology, and self-help are not inherently bad, they will not bring about the type of change we crave. The change people seek necessitates a renewal of character that occurs from the inside out through an ongoing relationship with God, in Christ, through the power of the Holy Spirit. When we submit entirely to the way of Jesus, an inner change can begin to occur, allowing us to then transform not only ourselves, but the social norms, customs, laws, and, ultimately, the culture around us. When we begin to experience renewal, to indulge in the ideologies of a sick society becomes absolutely unbearable.

The ineffectiveness of human systems is precisely why Jesus did not instruct his disciples to go form a government. Jesus knew institutions always incorporate strong components of human arrogance. Rather, Jesus taught his disciples to bring the presence of the kingdom and its King (Jesus) to every nation, transforming them from the inside out.



DAY 1 – HOW WE CHANGE

Those who receive Jesus as their Lord become "...God's chosen ones, holy and beloved..." (Colossians 3:12). We are instructed to be "blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, in which you shine like stars in the world" (Phil. 2:15). These passages depict a group of people set apart, for a purpose, enacting change on the world around them, not the other way around.

It is through the Kingdom of God, and, subsequently, the church, that we find our deepest longings and desire for purpose and righteousness fulfilled. In joining God's Kingdom, we begin to transform from within. The "within" is where spiritual formation and change occur, in God's kingdom, by the presence of the Holy Spirit.

Inner renewal and spiritual formation are indispensable in bringing to fruition the peace, rest and freedom from oppression Jesus promised. Right on the surface of our conscious understanding reside some of the thoughts, feelings, intentions and agendas that govern our actions. These are readily identifiable and often dictate how we approach the world. However, there are often underlying "unconscious" thoughts, feelings and intentions that are also influential. We cannot be entirely certain of what we will do in circumstances foreseen or unforeseen. The psalmist rightly cries out to God, "Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my thoughts. See if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting" (Psalm 139:23 - 24).

In the following days we will look at ideas, problems, incorrect thinking and modes of living that prevent people from experiencing the fullness of discipleship and life with Jesus as he intended it. Keep in mind these are not formulas, but guidance to move you toward Jesus and away from the flesh (sin, destructive habits, distance from God).

BE with Jesus by spending 10 minutes in prayer concerning change in your own life.

BECOME like Jesus by acknowledging we don't have to accept cultural norms.

DO what Jesus did by allowing yourself to be formed by the spirit, not the flesh.

WEEK 3
DAY 1



DAY 2 – NAMING OUR IDENTITY

Try this experiment. In just a few sentences, describe your own identity. What conditions, qualities, beliefs, etc. distinguish you as a person? How did you do? It's a lot harder than you think. Many in the 21st century struggle profoundly with identity. In the West, we have experienced a profound change in the way we process identity. Even a hundred years ago, you would have experienced very different social expectations. Your status in society would have been dictated by your character. If you committed adultery or tax fraud, for example, it would have been taken very seriously, perhaps resulting in social alienation. Today, this mode of thought is relatively incompressible to many.

We often forget our society has gone through intense changes in the way we process identity. The manner with which we construct our identity is unprecedented in human history, no longer finding basis in an established set of norms, but in *individualism* and the personal pursuit of pleasure. People no longer look to social institutions or communities for fulfillment, instead seeking complete freedom from any obligation. Regarding personal freedom, Mark Sayers comments, "we have unprecedented personal freedom, but our freedom is accompanied by a haunting sense of being lost."

We also find ourselves adapting our "identity" to various social situations. On occasion, we may be a "Christian," at other times hipster or someone who is well educated. We may have entirely different identities for different situations. One may have parts of an evangelical Christian worldview, a humanistic sex life and embrace pluralism (mashing together of worldviews). Often, these wildly competing and contradictory ideologies co-exist together. This phenomenon is so unhealthy!

In the 21st century, we experience a great deal of anxiety concerning who we are. We constantly feel the need to fit in, matching our identity to our circumstances. This is driven by the frenetic and ever-changing nature of our culture. It causes us to constantly examine and question ourselves and who we are, placing the burden of discovering identity squarely on the shoulders of the individual. The fear of social alienation pushes us to remain "relevant," even if we are exhausted by the attempt.



DAY 2 – NAMING YOUR IDENTITY

If we are unable to name our identity, it will be shaped by complex and ever-changing social constructs. A firm identity in Jesus resists the current of change and remains a firm embankment. A *known* identity can prevent the floodwaters of culture from surging over our thought process and shaping who we are (or who we are not).

There are many identities in the world. Today, people identify with sexuality, political affiliation, sub-cultures, nationalism, religion, spirituality or any number of affinity groups. The reality is that people tend to identify with someone or something (or many things). Humans simply have a proclivity to “throw in” with a cause, person or ideology. It’s as if we are ingrained with an innate desire to belong to something.

The hard question we all must ask concerns our identity. Do we have a firm identity in anything other than Jesus? This isn’t to say we can’t be passionate about other things, but where is our identity? Does your nationalism take priority over the Gospel? Does your political affiliation? Your sexual identity? These are hard questions that require deep introspection. In the end, if any other identity surpasses or supersedes our identity in Jesus, we will struggle to experience meaningful change.

“But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.”

- 1 Peter 2:9

Our purpose and identity should rightly be wrapped up in who we are in Christ, God’s own people, called to proclaim his acts. The first step in recognizing a misplaced identity is to do a self-evaluation. Describe your identity. Does it line up with apprenticeship to Jesus?

BE with Jesus by taking a moment in prayer to acknowledge you were created by God, not by other people.

BECOME like Jesus by asking difficult questions about your identity.

DO what Jesus did by prioritizing your identity as a child of God.

WEEK 3
DAY 2



DAILY RESPONSE

- How would you describe your current identity? Does it line up with apprenticeship?
- How has personal freedom and individuality shaped your identity?
- Do have different "identities" you use as different times? Are these healthy expressions?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....



DAY 3 – THE CULT OF ME

We unquestionably live in an age where our worth is tied to what others think of us. Our value is tied to the perception of others. And, when our value is tied to the perception of others, we become obsessed with ourselves. We are always considering ways to refine our persona, improve our appearance or re-brand ourselves.

Our society has become incredibly narcissistic (having an excessive interest in oneself). The opinions and critiques of others have assumed a place of high importance. Within this narcissistic framework, we are more inclined to notice our flaws as well as point out the seemingly positive attributes others possess in comparison to ourselves.

The meteoric rise in narcissism can in part be blamed on a value-free sense of self. This means our sense of identity isn't tied to anything in particular. There is no truth outside of the individual. There is no collective social mantra or ethos in the 21st century West other than individualism. The ethos "we are special," regardless of any concrete metric, simply serves to inflate the ego and contribute to narcissism.

Christopher Lasch, in his book *The Culture of Narcissism*, wrote that with the decline of religion in the West, narcissism has become the dominant identity or personality of our time. Narcissism is an arrogant insecurity, a "mirror mirror on the wall" mentality. Narcissism requires an ever-increasing stream of affirmation to assuage the ego. Narcissism is a bottomless pit that cannot be satiated.

While not inherently wrong, social media often encapsulates the pinnacle of narcissism. Designed to play on our deepest insecurities and desires for love, affirmation, and community, social media becomes an addictive aphrodisiac we must constantly revisit to fan the flames of an inflated ego. Carefully curated pictures and stories, not always representative of real life, serve to debase and detract from authentic relationships occurring in the context of genuine communities.

WEEK 3
DAY 3



DAY 3 – THE CULT OF ME

We cannot mistake connectivity for connection. The reality is they simply are not the same. Statistically, people are spending more time on social media and less time with friends and family. There is a direct correlation between social media use and depression, anxiety, and loneliness. Social media focuses on the reward center of the brain. Likes, shares, re-posts, views, etc. affirm the need for egocentrism (focus on me).

Narcissists tend to lack empathy for others, feel entitled to special privilege (unearned), and believe they are superior to other people. As narcissism increases in our society, quality relationships become fewer, work environments become strained, depression increases and anxiety rampages. This is “the cult of me,” the result of a worldview focused exclusively on pleasure and individualism. Beneath the surface, people are paralyzed by not knowing who they really are, and, when we don’t know who we are, it is difficult to determine what we should or shouldn’t be doing.

When we don’t know who we are, we become slaves to the momentary and transient feelings we may have or the whims and ever-changing fluctuations of culture. It is really difficult to progress when we don’t have a path on which to move forward. When you have a clear direction, it’s easy to begin taking steps. After a while, you will look back and realize you have made significant progress.

The reality, as has been true with most of history, is that our culture is sick. Let’s not romanticize any “golden era,” but rather look to the Gospel as our constant. The tough reality is that many of us find it difficult to change because we are conforming to a sick society and its standards, including extreme individualism, narcissism, and a disjointed worldview.

BE with Jesus by taking a walk in a park or neighborhood. Turn your phone off and focus on God’s good creation.

BECOME like Jesus by taking a good long look at your social media accounts and what they represent.

DO what Jesus did Jesus by focusing specifically on someone else and their needs today.



DAY 4 – RECONSTRUCTING OUR IDENTITY

“Then God said, “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness...So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them...”

- Genesis 1:26 - 27

If we are going to gain an understanding of our identity, we must first grasp who we are in relation to God. If we are going to experience lasting change and redeem our culture, we have to re-image ourselves in this context, as unique image bearers. This identity stands in stark contrast to the fluid, fragmented identity offered by contemporary culture. We must return to the source of our identity, God.

Each day we are offered alternate images of who we should be. As we commute to work, consume media (tv, news, etc.), notice a billboard or engage with social media, there are tacit invitations to assume a different identity. We are invited to prioritize sex, wealth power, politics or any of the multiplicity of options as our primary identity. In the midst of this, we must continually remember our true nature, that of image bearers. Jesus, as the exact image of God (Col. 1:16 - 17), came to illustrate what it means, practically, to be image bearers. Mark Sayers relates, “He lived a life of holiness, a life that improved the world, that brought a world struggling under the burden of sin, corruption, and death back to its original purpose to give glory to God. Through his life, death, and resurrection, Jesus showed us the way to be truly human, to be truly ‘the image of God.’”

“So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation...”

2 Corinthians 5:17 - 18

Our identity should also be firmly wrapped in creation-history. God created us to care for creation and to live in perpetual communion with him. Through the work of Jesus, the effects of the fall are being reversed and shalom (peace and wholeness) restored. We are called to take part in this ministry of reconciliation. God has always chosen to work in and through humanity to accomplish his works. Our identity is wrapped up in the redemptive process currently taking place. We are called to live according to the righteousness and reconciliation brought by Jesus Christ.

WEEK 3
DAY 4



DAY 4 – RECONSTRUCTING OUR IDENTITY

So what does our identity have to do with change? Well, our identity influences our actions. The apostle Paul encouraged his readers not to be influenced by the patterns and culture of this world, wrapped up in momentary desires, but to renew our minds according to the will of God.

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect.

- Romans 12:2

If our identity is disjointed, conforming to the image of the world (the flesh), the natural outworking will be an inability to begin conforming to the life God has called us to live, a life pursuant of holiness and partnership with God in his restorative work. In reconstructing our identity, we must first triage our current identity. Note, you can't reconstruct something before tearing it down. It's possible this day may have been unsettling, helping you to realize your identity is wrapped up in things incompatible with what God is calling you to. Another possibility is that your identity is disjointed, preventing you from experiencing the fullness of God in Christ Jesus.

The first step in reconstructing our identity is to examine those areas in our lives where our emphasis may be misplaced. Be honest and remember we all struggle. Do you have beliefs that are incompatible with scripture that you purposefully overlook due to a cultural imposition? Are there areas of sin that have crept in as a result of conforming to the patterns of this world? Have you prioritized your Church community and fellowship? Most importantly, have you submitted to God entirely, realizing you are a unique image bearer with a unique purpose?

In Matthew chapter 28, Jesus famously commissioned his disciples to go out and make more disciples. This bit of scripture is called the "great commission." Jesus said, as you have been apprentices, now go make apprentices. Our identity, as unique image bearers, is to submit to Jesus as apprentices while simultaneously teaching others to follow him. It's when we submit to this reality, the reality of our unique identity, that we will begin to experience growth, change and a life of fullness.

BE with Jesus by praying about different identities that compete for your heart, submitting them to him.

BECOME like Jesus by focusing your attention on him when alternate identities compete for your attention.

DO what Jesus did by exemplifying the image of God in your life.



DAILY RESPONSE

- How does Jesus, as the exact image of God, set an example for our identity?
- In constructing or reconstructing your identity, where might your emphasis be misplaced?
- Do you have beliefs that are incompatible with scripture? Ask why you maybe not be willing to let them go, or haven't been willing to this point.

.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....



DAY 5 – THE REALITY OF EVIL

A truth often ignored as superstitious in the 21st century is the reality of the devil. The devil carries out a continual disinformation campaign aimed at derailing change and keeping people bound in addiction, narcissism, misinformation and wrong thinking. The chief weapon of the enemy is trickery and lies. John 8:10 says, "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy." The very language of the enemy is deceit.

"He was a murderer from the beginning and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks according to his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies."

- John 8:44

Often, it is through the opaque lens of lies and deception that people remain far from God, seemingly unchangeable. The reality of an enemy simply cannot be overlooked or dismissed. In a culture that disregards spiritual things as superstitious or outmoded, it can sometimes be difficult to incorporate this type of thinking into our daily lives. And, by no means should we continually think about the devil. Yet, it's equally incorrect to dismiss the reality of evil in our lives. After all, we see it all around us.

In his well known work, *The Screwtape Letters*, C.S. Lewis depicts a classic reversal story illustrating the spiritual struggle that continually ensues behind the scenes. In his story, Satan is referenced as "Our Father Below," while Jesus is termed, simply, "the Enemy." Wormwood, an underling "tempter," exchanges letters with his uncle Screwtape concerning the temptation and attempted derailment of a young man. They discuss the subtlety of temptation; how to utilize everyday circumstances to mislead, confuse and sabotage their "subject."

Although this narrative is fictitious, it illustrates well the reality of spiritual warfare that occurs regularly and the need to be solidly grounded in our identity as apprentices to Jesus, as Christ-followers.

WEEK 3
DAY 5



DAY 5 – THE REALITY OF EVIL

We must remember the devil is not on par with God. The devil is not omniscient or omnipresent like God. He is not all-powerful, nor can he overcome Jesus. As is noted in the scriptures, his chief aim is to deceive and draw people away from God, as was the case with Adam and Eve in the garden.

His limited scope allows only for distortion of what is righteous. As darkness is an absence of light, so too sin, and the lies of the enemy, are a distortion of God's truth and goodness. So what can we do about the reality of the devil? First, we must realize he has been completely and utterly defeated by the atonement of Jesus.

Second, we have to realize the world, the flesh and the devil are enemies of our soul, seeking to derail the truth of the Gospel in our lives. To experience change, embrace our identity and live a full life in Christ, we must navigate away from these enemies of our soul.

In doing this, we need to fight lies with the truth. John 8:32 relates, "**you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.**" The best tool to combat the reality of the devil is the concrete witness of scripture. To know well the promises and truth therein is our primary tool to make void the lies of the enemy.

Ask these questions and write your answers down on paper: (1) What's a lie I believe about God, myself or the life he has for me? Now, what's the truth God is calling me to believe? (2) What's a desire of the flesh I'm struggling with? Now, what is God's spiritual truth concerning that desire? (3) What is a lie about the devil our society has normalized? Now, what is God's truth concerning that lie?

BE with Jesus by submitting to his truth in your life. Spend 10 minutes in prayer, asking for guidance.

BECOME like Jesus by simultaneously acknowledging the reality of the devil but supplanting his influence with the truth.

DO what Jesus did by reaching out to someone who is far from God.



