

## How Change in Your Life Happens

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John: The Jesus I Never Knew Series

John 15:1-17

This is an exciting day here at Vineyard. Over the weekend we'll be doing baptisms. We're going to watch people from our congregation, many of whom are very new converts to Christ, publicly declaring their allegiance and commitment to follow Jesus. I do want to ask those of you who are members of the church to stay at the end of the service and watch your brothers and sisters get baptized. The reason I emphasize this at each baptism is that we have a flood of folks go to the exits. This is a family time. The people who are getting baptized are part of our church family.

Marlene and I took a week of vacation, and then last weekend I had an opportunity to go down to Rhema Christian Center and preach there. We engaged in a pulpit exchange with Rhema. Last month pastor LaFayette Scales came here and did a marvelous job of preaching for us, and then I was invited to go to Rhema where I had a delightful time. The people there are incredibly warm and my message seemed to have a good effect on the church there. I also heard that Eric Pickerill and John Cook did a fantastic job here in my absence. I'm grateful that we have so many folks who can preach the Word with profit here.

Some of you probably don't know that I have served on the national board for the Association of Vineyard Churches that this church is a part of. But I've served on our national board for over a decade. And in that role, I've had the opportunity to oversee quite a number of pastors and churches. Right now I think there are something like 80-85 churches that I indirectly oversee in about five states. In my role as a regional overseer for the Vineyard, I've had the unfortunate opportunity to learn about pastors and leaders whose lives have completely gone off the rails.

Just a month or two ago, in another region of the country, a Vineyard pastor was found to have forged about 150 checks from the church for his own benefit and placed the money in his own account. Another pastor had such an out-of-control anger problem that he threatened physical violence with several staff members and left a curse-filled message on one of his church member's telephone answering machine. This poor member came home from a vacation, pushed the playback button on their telephone answering machine, and heard their pastor ranting and raving, using the most vulgar language – a life totally out of control.

Dallas Willard, who for years has taught at the University of Southern California and for a number of years chaired their department of philosophy, spoke at our church about 8-9 months ago. He also wrote a wonderful book titled "Renovation of the Heart." And Dr. Willard, in that book, tells the story of an out-of-control pastor. This pastor became enraged about something that a colleague on staff did during a Sunday morning

worship service. He pulled this colleague aside and absolutely screamed at them, threatening them. What the pastor didn't know was that his microphone was on. And not only was the whole building filled with his rant, but the people in the parking lot could hear this pastor screaming because they had speakers outside. A few weeks later the pastor was called by the Lord to another church. Sadly, it is the most common thing in the world to come upon Christian leaders, pastors, and people who have enormous areas of life that are totally out of control.

As a pastor, I've had the unfortunate experience over the years of having many spouses with tears in their eyes approach me and say, "He promised that he would stop drinking." Or "He promised me that he would stop using pornography. But now I see that it has started up again. He's been living a double life. I found more pornography on his computer." Or "I've begun checking the history of his computer use and I see that he's visited another chat room."

I've spoken with dozens of parents who very distraughtly said to me, "I thought my teenager, my son or daughter who is in their 20's, was telling me the truth. That they were no longer using drugs. Or they were no longer being sexually active. But now I come to find out that I was just being lied to. My child was doing the same old stuff that they swore to me they were no longer doing."

A car salesman, who goes to another church, put it plainly when just a few weeks ago he asked me the question, "Rich, how come the people I know who go to our church never seem to change? They are Christians, but they seem to struggle year after year with the same patterns of bitterness and anxiety. They seem to have all of the same problems year after year in their marriages. How come the Christians I know never seem to change?"

Many Christians conclude that change is not possible. Maybe outbursts of anger, or addictive behaviors, or being a gossip, or constantly feeling anxious or hopeless is just our lot in life. Maybe this side of heaven, most Christians will always be grouchy, irritable, petty, judgmental, or unforgiving. We rationalize the lack of change that we see in our lives and in the other Christians around us and say, "Well, after all, we're only human. You can't expect perfection. Doesn't the Bible itself teach us that the heart of man is desperately wicked and that sin will continue in us until we die?"

Maybe there are just a few extraordinary people who learn how to become loving, kind, or free from major addictive behaviors. Maybe there are only a few people, we'll call them saints, who can rise above the pettiness, the irritableness, the nastiness, and the lustfulness of most Christians. The problem with the view that the vast majority of Christians ought not to expect change in their lives, and that it's only for the special few, is that the Bible seems to promise more. The Bible is written for ordinary followers of Christ, not just monks, professional Christians and Mother Teresa.

And the Bible tells ordinary followers of Jesus that they can expect to see certain things in their lives. For example, in Philippians 2:1-4 the apostle Paul says,

*If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.*

The apostle Paul believes that it is possible, and indeed ought to be the case, that Christians functioning together in a church ought not to be selfish, that we should be united together, that we should defer to one another. It ought to be normal in churches to not have people be self-interested and self-seeking.

Paul goes on, in Philippians 2:14-16, to say:

*Do everything without complaining or arguing, so that you may become blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation, in which you shine like stars in the universe as you hold out the Word of life...*

Paul apparently believes that the common characteristic of a Christian would not be a grumbling Christian, a complaining Christian, and a Christian who is constantly irritable and grouchy. Rather that Christians would be radically different than the world around them, in the way that the stars shine brightly against a very dark backdrop.

Just one more text, and there are literally thousands of texts like these. The apostle Peter speaks to ordinary Christians and says:

*Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy. (1 Peter 1:8)*

It was Peter's expectation that ordinary Christians would love Jesus and have lives filled with faith and joy. Why don't we see most Christians living the way the Bible describes the Christian life being like? Why don't we see most Christians excited about sharing our faith? Looking forward to connecting with God in worship and prayer? Being filled with hope rather than hopelessness? Being happy about the opportunity to tithe our income to the Lord and being very generous toward the poor and toward missionaries?

My deepest belief is that most of us, as followers of Jesus, even after years of following Christ, do not understand the method Jesus employs for transforming his disciples. I think the issue of life change and the lack of life change in disciples is as simple as not understanding the methodology, the dynamic, the "how" of how life change comes about. I've called today's talk How Change in Your Life Happens. Let's pray.

I mentioned Dallas Willard, who taught a seminar a few months ago, and his book, "The Renovation of the Heart." Dallas came up with a very helpful summary of the method

that Jesus offers his followers for change. Very simply, Jesus' method for change involved first of all giving people a vision of change. It involved vision.

Secondly, Jesus' method called people to be deliberate and intentional about change.

And finally, Jesus offers people a method. He gives people the means for changing.

Dallas summarized this by the acronym "Versel.M." – Like vim and vigor.

Vim literally means power, energy, and strength. In this case, the power, the energy, the strength, the ability to change.

So, let me give you a simple example. Let's say you realize you are overweight and you need to lose 35 pounds. How are you going to lose those 35 pounds that you've been carrying around for several years?

Well, it's not going to happen by being sorry that you are overweight. You are not going to lose those pounds by feeling guilty about being overweight. You are not going to lose those pounds by feeling bad about yourself, or just ashamed of yourself. But this is the way we think that change happens for us as Christians. Well, I'll change by feeling bad about myself, or sorry or guilty about my behavior.

Change begins with a vision. So if you want to lose weight, you get a vision. Maybe you have a dear friend who has recently lost a bunch of weight and he or she looks so much better. Their clothes fit better. For the first time in years they're bicycling or going to the gym. You lose weight by capturing a vision. What would it be like for me to be thinner? What would it be like if my pants were 8 inches smaller around the waist? Or your dress size went down six sizes? What would it be like if I enjoyed seeing myself in the mirror, or if I had more energy, or lowered my blood pressure, or was able to keep up with my kids or grandchildren? You catch a vision for change.

But vision is not enough. We need to be intentional. No one loses weight by just drifting into it. You can't just sit on your sofa watching videos and eating buttered popcorn. We need to apply ourselves. We need to invest energy, a deliberateness, in the change. We have to actively employ ourselves. We have to be intentional.

But vision and intention are not enough. We also need some practical means. You say, "I've tried diets before and I go on and off. My will power is not enough. I need some practical means." Perhaps you will recognize that you can't lose weight alone. So you enlist two or three friends, all of whom agree that we all need to lose weight and together we join Weight Watchers. Or together we will join one of the weight loss groups here at Vineyard. Or we have two or three friends and we commit together to join a gym. And perhaps we put in our schedule that we're going to begin to go to the gym three times a week. We hire a personal trainer. One of the means may be that we throw out the high-calorie food in our house.

Vision, intention, and means. And you will see this methodology in every thing from learning how to play the guitar, to quitting smoking, to becoming a less agitated, angry, gentler person. Jesus taught us this change principle in John 15. At least the vision and the means part. He tells us how we can change our lives, or at least some behavior in our lives. Here's the methodology. Change isn't going to happen automatically.

Well, what's the vision?

*John 15:1-5 I am the true vine and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he trims clean so that it will be even more fruitful. You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. Remain in me, and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.*

The vision Jesus offers us is a fruitful life. Verse 2, *He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he trims clean so that it will be even more fruitful.*

Verse 5, *I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.*

The fruitful life. Fruit is not defined here, but it almost certainly would include a changed Christian character. I'd like you to flip over to Galatians 5.

*Galatians 5:22-23, But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.*

Instead of out-of-control lives, or lives characterized by outbursts of anger, continuing greed or sexual immorality, or addictive behavior, or irritableness, grouchiness, hopelessness, imagine if the basic characteristic of your life and heart was that you were a loving person, joyful, or peaceful. That you weren't up at night fretting or stressed out to the max, but that you were peaceful. Imagine, whatever your temperament, if people said about you that you were really a very kind person.

The fruitful life. And certainly fruit would also involve reproducing your faith in other people. The fruitful life is the productive life, instead of being ineffective, just wasting your time. Your character is becoming more like the character of Jesus Christ, and you are impacting other people for Christ in this world. Do you have a vision of yourself as being fruitful? Can you imagine yourself looking like Galatians 5:22-23? Are you being productive in terms of helping other people to find Christ and to grow in Christ?

Jesus gives us the vision of power and success in prayer.

Verse 7, *If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you.*

And verse 16: *You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit—fruit that will last. Then the Father will give you whatever you ask in my name.*

These verses are consistent with the promise of Jesus that we read back in chapter 14 where Jesus said,

John 14:13-14, *And I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Son may bring glory to the Father. You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it.*

Success in prayer. Imagine if your prayers really worked. That you didn't constantly feel that you were praying in vain. That it was entirely hit or miss. Imagine that you had assurance that in asking you would receive and that in seeking you would find. Jesus says that those who are living in close communion with him, who pray in his name, in other words, those who pray in his name, not just with a tag line at the end, "in Jesus' name, Amen," but those who pray in accordance with all that Jesus is and stands for is going to see his or her prayers answered.

We see people in the Bible get their prayers answered. What if you had confidence that your prayers would effectively make a difference in people's lives and in the different situations you find yourself in?

He gives us a vision of assurance. Verse 8: *This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.*

Jesus says the kind of life he intends is not only a fruitful life, a life in which your prayers prevail upon the Lord and we see success in prayer, but he says the normal Christian life brings glory to God and evidence to your own heart that you really belong to Jesus Christ. Imagine if you felt as you looked back at your day that I really did please the Lord today by my life and that I'm proving to others, even better to myself, to my own heart that I belong to Christ. I wonder how many of you could say, "I know that I know that I'm one of God's children because as I look at my life I see such clear evidence, such clear proof that I belong to him. In fact, I have experienced other people coming up to me and saying, 'There's something different about you, different in a wonderful way. What's your secret?'"

That's the normal Christian life. You prove to yourself and to others that you are one of God's children.

And joy. Instead of a Christian life of simply doing your duty, instead of a life in which you are running on the treadmill all the time barely surviving, Jesus says in verse 11, "Let me give you a different vision for your life."

Verse 11 – *I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.*

The Bible commentator, William Barclay, once said, “A gloomy Christian is a contradiction in terms.” Nothing in all religious history has done Christianity more harm than its connection with black clothes and long faces.

If Jesus promised his followers one thing, it was that if his life is in us, we would be joyful. The word “joy” appears about 100 times in the New Testament as a characteristic of the Christian life. In fact, the Greek word for “joy” is “chara.” It is related to “charis,” which means grace. The sure sign that you have been a receiver of grace is that you are a joy-filled person. The overflow of grace, what grace feels like, is joy. Joy: a warm, exalting, triumphant sense of God’s presence, whatever the ups and downs of life are like.

Regardless of circumstances, Jesus says to his followers, “I am envisioning for you a life in which you are not just going through the motions. You are not just surviving. You’re not white-knuckled, hanging on for dear life.” Don’t you want to be joyful?

And finally, he envisions for us friendship with himself.

Verse 12-15 – *My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his 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 have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you.*

You know, it would be sufficient for us to know that we’ve been saved by Christ. It would be sufficient for us to have a purpose in life of serving Christ, seeing God’s kingdom advance in the world. It would be sufficient for us to have our prayers heard by Christ. But to be called friends of Christ? To be honored in this way? To have Jesus look at you and say, “I consider you to be my friend,” can there be anything more wonderful than that? The Lord of the universe, our Creator, our Savior, the one before whom the angels bow down and cry, “Holy, Holy, Holy,” not only pities us, he not only saves us, but he calls us friends.

Do you have a close friend? Not just someone who you have common interests with or you work together with, but someone in whose presence you just come alive? Do you have a friend that you share easy conversation with? Do you have a friend that you are loyal to, that you would never think of speaking a negative word about? Jesus gives us the heart of friendship when he says, “I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master’s business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything I’ve learned from the Father, I’ve made known to you.”

Friends are people that we tell our secrets to. They are the few folks who have earned our trust, to whom we give the gift of the real us – what we really think, what we really

fear, what's really on our hearts. Jesus says, "I call you friends because I am going to tell you my secrets. Just as I did with my friend, Abraham, in Genesis 18, I told him my secrets. Just as I did with my friend, Moses. I let him in on my secrets. So for you my vision for your life is that you would be my friend."

Do you think of yourself as a friend of Christ? Is that beyond your capacity to grasp? Does the notion of being one of Jesus' intimates blow your mind? It should. And yet that's his vision for you. Christ wants more for you than you always feeling like you are on the outside looking in. That you know him, but at a distance. Christ wants more for you than you just feeling like part of the crowd. He wants you to know yourself as his friend. That you can unburden your heart to him, share with him your deepest secrets, and hear him tell his deepest secrets to you.

How does all of this happen, that you live a fruitful, confident, joyful life knowing that your prayers are going to be heard, and that your fundamental identity is "I'm a friend of Jesus Christ?" It doesn't happen automatically. Remember the formula VIM. It doesn't happen because you raised your hand at a meeting or that you welcomed Christ into your life. That's a start. But Jesus gives us the means by which we really can live changed lives.

What are the means?

Verse 1 – *I am the true vine and my Father is the gardener.*

Verses 4-5 – *Remain in me and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. I am the vine. You are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit. Apart from me, you can do nothing (John 15:1, 4 and 5)*

Jesus uses the picture here of a vine and branches. He says, "I am the vine; you are the branches." This is the last of the seven "I am" statements in the gospel of John, each communicating to us a different truth about who Jesus is for us.

- I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never hunger.
- I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness.
- I am the door. Whoever enters by me will be saved.
- I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep.
- I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me, though he dies, yet shall he live.
- I am the way, the truth and the light. No one comes to the Father except through me.

And now, "I am the vine; you are the branches." This was said on the night Jesus was betrayed. The disciples have left the Upper Room. They are making their way quietly across Jerusalem to the Garden of Gethsemane, where Jesus pours out his prayer to the Father and is arrested. But on the way across Jerusalem, it may have been that they stopped at the Temple. In the Temple, above the Holy place, above the curtain



was an enormous grapevine made out of pure hammered gold. It was perhaps the most impressive thing in Herod's temple. This huge grapevine of beaten, pure gold.

The Roman citizens used to bring gold to add to the grapevine and metal workers would beat it into tendrils, grapes and leaves. Josephus said that some of the grape clusters on this golden grapevine were the height of a man. When the Romans sacked the temple, the amount of gold that they took from the temple, and particularly this grapevine, was so great that it actually depressed the value of gold in that whole region by half.

Perhaps as they knelt before the Holy place to pray, they looked up at this enormous gold grapevine and Jesus says, "Here's the secret for realizing my vision in your life. Remain in me." The old King James Version is "Abide in me."

The old commentator James Ryle says, "Abide in me. Cling to me. Stick fast to me. Live the life of close and intimate communion with me. Get nearer and nearer to me. Roll every burden on me. Cast your whole weight on me. Never let go your hold on me for a moment. Be, as it were, rooted and planted in me."

In other words, stay connected to me.

Do you want to know how the vision that Jesus has for your life gets realized in your life? Get connected to Christ. Let his life's flowing sap, the sap of the Spirit, flow into you. Keep welcoming Christ into your thoughts. Keep inviting Christ into your plans. Keep opening the door to Christ in your relationships, your conversations, in the car in the morning, at your job, in your apartment.

See, people wonder what it really means to be a Christian. What is a real Christian all about? What's this business about being "born again?" Being a real Christian is more than believing certain things about Christ. It's not just do you believe that Jesus Christ is Almighty God come down from heaven, joining himself to our humanity as the God-man – two natures in one person. It's not just that you believe that Christ lived a sinless life, that he died on a cross to pay for your sins and my sins, that his death was a substitutionary one, that he died in your place and mine so that we would not have to die for our own sins. It's not just that you believe that Jesus rose from the dead after three days, and that he ascended into heaven where he is Lord and will come back again. All true Christians believe these things about Christ. That doesn't make you a Christian.

It's not just that you do certain Christian things. That you attend church. That you give money. That you help people. Becoming a Christian means that the life of Jesus flows into your life. That you have the closest possible connection with Christ, so that the life-giving sap that is in Jesus, namely the Holy Spirit, flows into your spirit and that you are committed to keep leaning into your relationship with Christ.

How do I do that? Is it just this mystical experience where I just wait for something to zap me? There is a mystical experience. True Christians have a spiritual experience of Jesus. True Christians feel Christ's presence. They feel an inner change inside. But this is not all mystical. Part of the way that we closely connect with Christ is that we closely connect with Christ's people. To be joined to the vine means that we're joined to other branches of the vine.

We read in verse 12 – *My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.*

Verse 17 – *This is my command: Love each other.*

You cannot be closely connected to Jesus Christ if you are not closely connected to Christ's people. It is an impossibility to be attached to the vine and not to be attached to the branches. No one has ever had their life changed apart from connection with Christ's people. You will not grow if you remain unattached to the church. If you are not in intimate, regular, deep connection with other followers of Jesus, in the fellowship of his church, you can't grow. That's why I regularly encourage you to get involved in a small group, to develop open, accountable, responsive relationships with other followers of Jesus. To have to work through the challenges of loving difficult people and forgiving and bearing each other and praying for one another and giving to each other. That's how we grow.

And I say this with all affection, but there are Christians and then there are devoted followers. You are not going to change just hanging out with very lukewarm, utterly blasé Christians. You need to get around Christ-centered, passionate, going for broke, white-hot believers.

We need mentors in our lives. People who are a step ahead of us. We need people to encourage us. People to serve as examples for us. People to assist us when we fall – to pick us up.

I talk to folks all the time who say, "Well, I'm not really connected to the church, but I have a few Christian friends. That's the same thing." It's not the same thing. The wonder of the church is that I don't pick the people who are part of the church. I simply receive the church as a gift. Some of the people in the church are quirky. We don't choose others in the church. Christ chooses them and he gives us the church as a gift.

And it's in all the quirkiness, in all the pain, in all the challenges of other relationship – that's where we grow. You will not grow adequately by having your little chosen Christian friendship circle. You grow by receiving gratefully the gift of the church with all the problematic, grace-required people.

How do we realize Christ's vision for our lives? We stay connected to the vine. We surrender to God's pruning.

*Verses 2-4 – 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. You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. Remain in me and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself, it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.*

*Verse 5 - Apart from me you can do nothing.*

Years ago Marlene and I had a house in an old Italian neighborhood. There was a huge grapevine in the backyard. I neglected the vine for a year or two and there were all of these long shoots, tendrils that went out from the vine. The grapes, both in quantity and quality, got fewer and fewer until someone taught me about pruning the vine. That I had to go in the early spring and ruthlessly cut back the vine because anyone who is in horticulture knows that a vine will spend lots of energy on unproductive growth. So we want to direct all of the energy of the plant towards producing fruit.

Here's the deal. You and I spend so much of our energy on things that don't produce any fruit. Consider how much wasted energy there is in churches in committee meetings, concerts, pageants, and revival meetings that get people excited but don't produce fruit. Religious activity.

There's a wonderful series of books, very sweet, by Philip Gulley. It's the Harmony Series, written by a Quaker minister. And he talks about life in this town of Harmony and in a church that's involved in tons of unproductive activity. I want to read to you from Philip Gulley's book. He says:

The first goal-setting Sunday was held in 1970, the year pastor Taylor came to Harmony fresh from seminary, chock full of grand ideas. Pastor Taylor stood at the chalkboard in the meeting house basement, encouraging the church to splendid heights. In 1970 their goals were, 1) to spread the gospel to every tribe and person in the world; 2) to end world hunger, and, 3) to carpet the Sunday School rooms. They carpeted the Sunday School rooms first, donated a box of canned goods to a food pantry, and then lost their enthusiasm to do anything more.

Goal-setting Sunday had gone downhill from there. Each year a stark testimony to the growing apathy of the church. At the last Goal-setting Sunday Dale Hinshaw had proposed painting "Jesus Saves" on the meeting house roof as a witness to people in airplanes.

"They are up there in the wild-blue yonder, bucking up and down in the turbulence. The pilots are telling them to fasten their seatbelts. They'll look out the window and see our roof, and it will fix their minds on the eternal. If they are not open to the Lord then, they never will be."

That was when Sam had proposed doing away with Goal-setting Sunday.

“Why do we even bother? We set these goals and make a big deal out of it for a month or two. Then we forget all about it. When we do remember it, we feel bad that we didn’t do anything. Why don’t we just skip Goal-setting Sunday this year?”

It had gone over like a pregnant pole-vaulter. Dale quoted from the book of Revelation about lukewarm churches and how God would spew them out of his mouth.

“Do you want the Lord to spit us out, Sam? Is that what you want? Cuz I tell you right now, that’s what he’ll do. You are leading us down a slippery slope. First, we’ll stop doing the Goal-setting Sunday, then the next thing you’ll know there’ll be fornication right here in the church. You watch and see.”

Any deviation from tradition had Dale Henshaw prophesying an outbreak of fornication in the church pews.

How many churches spend so much energy on what doesn’t produce any fruit? And how much of our life is spent dissipating our energy on going after goals and dreams, pursuing things that don’t produce any fruit?

Jesus says, “Here’s the way of life change. Surrender to God’s pruning.” Do you understand, friends, that the Lord is constantly trying to prune out of your life things that will keep you from him, or from effectiveness for him. He doesn’t want you involved in the irrelevant or the distracting. So he allows difficult people to be brought into your life and difficult circumstances, and pain and trouble to prune you.

Let me make it more simple. He paints you into a corner so that you can do nothing other than cry out to him. Are any of you painted into a corner? When you grow independent of him, when there’s this wild growth independent of him, he starts cutting you back, painting you into a corner, so that you again realize that apart from you, Jesus, I can do nothing. Surrender to God’s pruning in your life. In fact, allow God’s pruning to be a source of joy for you. Have you come to the place or recognizing the truth that without Christ your life just doesn’t work well?

And here’s the third means Jesus gives us for life change: Submit to God’s Word.

*Verse 7 – If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you.*

*Verse 10 – If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I obeyed my Father’s command and remain in his love.*

You can’t have close connection with Jesus Christ apart from close connection with the scriptures. It’s his Word being put in you that helps you connect with Christ. We

connect with Christ by welcoming him into our lives. We connect with Christ by closely connecting with Christ's people. We connect with Christ by submitting to his pruning and allowing pain and difficulty, waiting and trials to have their full effect. And we connect with Christ by putting his Word in us and surrendering ourselves to Christ's Word.

As a pastor I've often been in situations where I'm talking with someone who is doing something that Christ's Word absolutely condemns. They are getting divorced wholly apart from biblical reasons. They are involved in a relationship that is utterly disobedient to God's Word. They are cutting corners in business. They are lying and deceiving someone else. And they will say to me, while they are involved in disobedience, "You know, I feel so close to Christ. I have such a peace with Christ. I'm in such intimate dialogue with Christ right now. I know this is right."

And in all affection, I have to say, "Your peace, your sense of connection with Christ is a delusion. If you want a close relationship with Christ, then you will let your life be controlled by his Word. It is impossible to remain in Christ, to live in Christ, to have his life flowing into your being if you don't submit yourself to Christ's Word.

Let me ask you some questions. Do you make it your aim to dig into the Word of God and surrender to its authority? Do you say to yourself, "I don't want to do anything that Jesus commands me not to do, and I want to do everything that he commands me to do?" Is it in your heart to be a soft, obedient, submissive person to the Word of God? Do you hide God's Word in your heart by memorizing it, by meditating upon it, by drinking it in? Is God's Word for you more precious to you than your meals? Do you feed upon it?

Do you want your life or some area of your life to change? Are you tired of running on the same treadmill and getting the same results?

Change is not mysterious, friends. It is not some unsolvable mystery. Catch a vision for what you could be – a peaceful person, a kinder person, a more loving person, a joyful person, an assured, confident person, freed up from guilt and shame, a true friend of Jesus, and employ the means. And your life will change. Let's pray.

## **How Change in Your Life Happens**

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Rich Nathan

August 16-17, 2003

John: The Jesus I Never Knew Series

John 15:1-17

### **I. Unchanged Lives**

### **II. Changed Lives**

#### **A. Vision, Intention, Means**

#### **B. Vision**

1. Fruitfulness (Jn. 15:2, 5)
2. Power and Success in Prayer (Jn. 15:7, 16)
3. Assurance and Glorifying God (Jn. 15:8)
4. Joy (Jn. 15:11)
5. Friendship with Christ

#### **C. Means**

1. Stay Connected to the Vine (Jn. 15:1, 4, 5)
  - a. The Closest Possible Connection With Christ
  - b. The Closest Possible Connection With Christ's People (Jn. 15:12, 13, 16)
2. Surrender to God's Pruning (Jn. 15:2-4)
3. Submit to God's Word (Jn. 15:7, 10)