

As I begin this morning, I want you to imagine with me that we've all been hired by Ipsos Reid, the market research company, in order to assist them with their latest survey. We've been hired to conduct exit interviews with every student, young adult, and adult on the North Shore who has decided to leave their local church, including those who have decided to abandon their faith in Jesus altogether. Each of us will be supplied with a digital recorder to capture people's response to the following question: *why are you leaving the church and/or Jesus?*

We could expect to receive all sorts of answers. Some drift away because of other priorities—sports teams, family commitments, work, or a vacation property. Some leave the way of Jesus because following Him—truly following Him—restricts their choices: they want to be Master of their own lives, choosing whatever pleases them most.

Some leave because of hurts they experienced from people within the church. Others leave the faith because God didn't come through for them in the way they expected—they didn't get the job they wanted, their marriage fell apart, their best friend got sick and died. Others leave citing the incongruity between faith and science.

But research tells us that there is another reason that people are leaving the church and the faith—they're leaving because they aren't experiencing life change. These are sincere followers of Jesus but they struggle just as much with their singleness, their

marriage, with divorce, parenting, work, with the desire for approval, with their sexuality, with addiction, and failure as any of their friends who don't follow Jesus. These Christians are asking themselves the question: *does following Jesus make any difference in my life?*

It's a good question. If a proud, angry, judgmental, compulsive, jealous, addictive, controlling, fearful, person began to follow Jesus, couldn't they expect to experience significant life change?<sup>1</sup> The problem is, many of us aren't changing—we remain as we are, stuck in old patterns of thinking, feeling, and behaving.

**illus:** In 1997, I graduated from what is now called Ambrose University College, with a Bachelor's Degree in Bible and Theology. I was hired by a church in Calgary, and upon arrival, I was given an office, an email address, and the title of "pastor"—I was on my way.

I was young, eager, idealistic, and naive. I was going to serve God, I was going to love people, they were going to grow, and together we were going to see the city of Calgary transformed. But along the way, I began to meet people who didn't share my enthusiasm—for one reason or another they'd gotten stuck, stopped growing, stopped maturing, and didn't seem concerned about getting "unstuck." One day this truth became immediately clear—it was a phone call from one of our congregants that drove it home.

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Scazzero, *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality*, 10, 11.

Paul was nearly 40 years my senior, but I had never made his acquaintance until our conversation by phone. Paul wasn't well-known to our congregation. Apart from his regular Sunday attendance, he wasn't involved in any meaningful way, but I learned a lot about him in that first interaction. I learned rather quickly—and painfully—that Paul was a difficult, opinionated, angry person. I learned that somewhere along the way Paul had gotten stuck, he'd stopped growing, stopped maturing, and didn't seem concerned about changing his status. Paul called me that day to give me an earful; here's the back story.

At that time, in our church, the Sunday attire was more formal than it is here on the North Shore; whoever was on to preach always wore a tie. You could emcee the service without a tie, lead worship without a tie, and even offer a pastoral prayer without a tie, but preaching and wearing ties went hand in hand—that is, until the Summer came around. In July and August, our ties earned a well-deserved Summer break and our necks were given a new-found, albeit temporary, freedom—as soon as the Fall arrived the ties were back out to adorn the neck of every preacher.

But then something happened—one Summer turned to Fall but my Sr. Pastor's ties remained in hibernation. One Sunday went by, then another, and another, and still his lily-white neck was on display for the world to see. So when I got up to preach the next weekend, I followed his lead and left my tie at home. I didn't think anything of it until Paul tore a strip off of me.

He began our conversation with angry warning—he told me that God was displeased with me, that I was arrogant and

proud, that my sins had placed me on a pathway to hell and that if I wasn't careful, my sins would be visited upon my son. When I asked Paul what I had done that was so offensive to God, he replied saying, "*You were wearing the wrong clothes on Sunday.*" That's when it hit me—this was about my absent tie.

So how does one respond? I could have followed the advice of Proverbs 23:9. It says, "*Don't waste your breath on a [fool]. He will despise the wisest advice.*" I could have said, "Paul, they don't pay me nearly enough to put up with people like you," and then hung up the phone. That's not what I did. Remember, I was an eager, idealistic, naive, young pastor.

The more I tried to reason with Paul, the louder, angrier, and more spiteful he became. By the time the conversation had finished, I had been liberally doused by Paul's hatred. And rattled though I was, even in my youthful naiveté, I knew that Paul's "issue" wasn't really the issue—a thin piece of cloth adorning a neck cannot be the cause of such malice.

Somewhere along the way Paul had gotten stuck—maybe someone had hurt or rejected him, maybe he'd lost something or someone of great value, perhaps the dreams he had for his life had been dashed, the result being a deep well of bitterness and anger.

Here's what makes the whole thing so sad—Paul had been a follower of Jesus for many years. During our conversation, Paul made a point of telling me that he regularly attended church, that he knew the Bible inside and out, and that prayer was one

of his regular practices. In other words, he was making a case for his own spiritual maturity, and therefore, his qualification to set me straight.

Here's the irony: Paul's words and actions were completely out of step with the Scriptures he claimed to know so well. What was it that Jesus told His first followers? *"Everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."*<sup>2</sup>

Paul's definition of spiritual maturity was incomplete at best. And more, if what Paul told me was true—that he had in fact spent a life time attending church, reading the Bible, and praying—then engaging in more of these same activities were unlikely to make the difference in Paul becoming mature. Somehow, Paul had missed something really important.

And Paul isn't alone; many of us are missing something really important. As a young pastor, I saw something in Paul that he couldn't see in himself. It would take me years to discover that I was blind to things in my own life that were plain to the people all around me—things that were keeping me from the path to spiritual maturity.

I want to continue to define this idea of spiritual maturity, and I want to turn now to 2 Corinthians 3:18, to flesh out the scope that God has in mind. *"And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit."* What Paul is saying is, *"Look...we used live*

*with a blindfold over our eyes, but now that it's been removed, we can see Jesus the way He really is: glorious! And get this—the Holy Spirit plans to transform us into His image, His glory becoming ours, bit by bit."*

So here's the question: which parts of our lives does the Holy Spirit intend to transform? It may sound like a trick question but I can assure you it's not. God is interested in every part of our lives; we need His transforming presence to affect change in every part of our lives.

Let's get practical and name a few of those areas. The Holy Spirit plans to transform our praying, our Bible reading, and our serving. Don't you want to pray like Jesus did? With the same dependence, trust, and intimacy that Jesus had? I do. Don't you want God's word to give you same nourishment, the same confidence, and direction that it gave Jesus? I do. Don't you want to serve with the same purpose, the same courage, and power that Jesus did? I do.

But the Holy Spirit's transformation can extend much wider—wide enough to encompass every part of our lives. Let me be frank, what good is it to have our praying transformed if it doesn't affect our every day realities? Doesn't God want to redeem and heal our sexuality, our character, our thoughts, our desires, our relationships, and our emotions too? Spiritual maturity includes all of these components.

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<sup>2</sup> John 13:35.

Let me ask you, what would your life be like if the Holy Spirit transformed your desires? What would it be like if we wanted the same things Jesus wanted, and rejected the same things He rejected? Our lives would be different wouldn't they?

What would your life be like if all of your relationships were touched and transformed by God? Can we agree together that Jesus knew how to cultivate healthy relationships? Jesus knew how to relate to those He led: He loved them generously, He gave them wise direction and feedback, He encouraged them, modelled leadership, gave them challenges, and celebrated when they did well.

Jesus also related well to broken people in His life. He loved people who engaged in destructive behaviour, but He didn't get trapped in their behaviour, He didn't enable their behaviour, nor did He take responsibility for their behaviour—He offered them a way out, and let them choose.

Jesus came along side to heal people who were broken in body, mind, and spirit, but people's needs didn't drive Jesus. He felt the pressure to do what people demanded of Him, and yet, He wasn't a slave to the crowd's expectations or applause—He was "boundaried" enough to take His cues from God.

Jesus developed healthy friendships with His 12 disciples, with Lazarus, Mary, Martha, and others. Jesus relied on other people, He asked for help when He felt weak; He wasn't afraid to share His heart with others.

He even related to His enemies in a healthy way. In the face of jealousy, manipulation, accusation, and betrayal, Jesus didn't scheme, didn't retaliate, and maintained His integrity. Jesus' maturity was never more apparent than in His relationships. I want my relationships to be like His, don't you?

So when we say that Jesus is the model of spiritual maturity, we are talking about more than His prayer life—so much more. What about the way Jesus dealt with His own emotions? Can we all agree that Jesus, being fully human, experienced the same range of emotions that we do? Let's put Jesus to the test.

Did Jesus ever feel misunderstood? John 1:10 reminds us that though the world was made through Jesus, no one recognized who He was. Did Jesus ever feel betrayed? Of course—the list is long: His family, His inner circle, and those in power framed Him with trumped up charges.

Did Jesus ever feel anger? Did Jesus ever suffer loss? Loss of friendships, loss of control, loss of His dreams? Yes, yes, and yes. Jesus felt all of these things—all the things that we feel—and yet these feelings of betrayal, anger, and loss never led Him into destructive behaviour, foolish words, or abandoning God's path.

What about temptation? Was Jesus ever tempted to give in to selfishness? Was He ever tempted to give in to pride—knowing all that He knew? Or how about lust? Was Jesus ever tempted to look at a woman with a devouring stare? Hebrews 4:15 tells us that Jesus understands our weaknesses since he was tempted in every way—just as we are—yet He did not fail God at any

point. Jesus' spiritual maturity is on full display when we look at His emotional healthiness. I want to handle my emotions like He did, don't you?

Let's consider my friend, Paul, one more time. His definition of spiritual maturity was incomplete at best—going to church, reading the Bible, and praying regularly do not guarantee maturity. There is so much more involved.

I trust you have been tracking with me the last 15-20 minutes; I've been trying to set the table for the sermon series we will be preaching over the next 11 weeks. The series is entitled, *Becoming Whole*—the basic premise of the entire series is that God created us to be whole, to experience health in every facet of our lives. The challenge is, of course, that we live in broken world, with broken desires, broken relationships, and broken emotions—if we are going to find wholeness, we're never going to find it in ourselves; we need God to be our wholeness.

Life is a gift from God--we don't earn it, we don't generate it, we simply receive it as a gift. **However, once we receive this gift, we become active partners with the Holy Spirit in cultivating this life.**

Consider a vineyard. A gardener cannot create a vine, she needs a seed, soil, water and sun--without these God-given materials, there is nothing for her to do. The Holy Spirit is the ultimate Gardener, but our work is to cooperate with Him—to actively respond to what He is watering, fertilizing, and pruning in our lives; our cooperation is critical to fruitfulness.

This life of response is not something that just “happens” spontaneously--it's not like a Windows update that automatically downloads as we sleep. We cultivate this life of response through careful *training*.

Throughout the history of the church, followers of Jesus have recognized this truth and have committed themselves to a way of living, or, a kind of training, that kept them alive and alert to the Holy Spirit's work. These training exercises came to be known as the spiritual disciplines or practices—things like prayer, reading the Bible, the practice of solitude, service, and so on. Last year, we focused on this aspect of growth and maturity.

This Fall we want to focus on a different aspect, one that highlights the importance of emotional and relational health. I cannot overstate their importance: *we cannot be spiritually mature while remaining emotionally and relationally unhealthy; emotional/relational health and spiritual maturity are inseparable.*<sup>3</sup>

Let repeat that one more time: *we cannot be spiritually mature while remaining emotionally and relationally unhealthy; emotional/relational health and spiritual maturity are inseparable*—one conversation with Paul and you would be equally convinced.

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<sup>3</sup> Peter Scazzero, *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality*, 17.

Over the next 11 weeks we are going to explore subjects such as:

- embracing troubled emotions like anger, bitterness, jealousy, and grief.
- we're going to talk about breaking the power of past hurt, loss, and rejection.
- we're going to talk about moving from conflict to restoration in relationships that have gotten stuck.
- we're going to talk about healthy friendship, healthy singleness, healthy sexuality, and healthy marriage.

Additionally, we are providing a few opportunities this Fall that will go a lot deeper than what we can provide in a 30 minute sermon. Our Celebrate Recovery ministry meets every Monday and is designed to walk you through of process of dealing with hurts, habits, and hang ups that keep you stuck and prevent you from experiencing freedom—anyone can join at any time.

Our Griefshare group begins again tomorrow night...it's led by a team of people who will walk along side you through one of life's most difficult experiences—the death of a loved one—you don't have to go through the grieving process alone.

At the end of October, we will be starting a six week program from Living Waters that is called Journey—with a focus towards healing and wholeness, Journey addresses the issues that affect our lives and relationships. Also at the end of October, we are bringing in a Clinical Counsellor to lead a seminar for married couples with a focus on how emotions can block communication and cause challenges in our marriages.

I trust this will be a year of tremendous growth and transformation for many of us.

**illus:** I think I have time for one more story, and then I will draw my message to a close. I said earlier that I saw something in Paul that he couldn't see in himself. And yet, I didn't realize how blind I was to emotional and relational issues in my own life—things that were plain to the people around me, things that were preventing me from becoming whole.

I have spiritual director that I speak with monthly; Morris and I go back close to 10 years. A spiritual director is someone who has been trained in the art of listening God and listening to another, all at the same time. When we talk, we talk my relationships—with God and others—we talk about what's going on within my heart, what's driving me, etc. I give Morris a window into my heart, he and helps me to pay attention to where God is at work, where I've become stuck, or where I'm resisting God—no two conversations are ever the same.

A number of years ago, I invited Naomi to come along with me to meet with Morris; having her there added depth to the conversation—Naomi knows me so well, and sees things in me that I cannot see. Morris asked her a number of questions concerning me, and a number of questions concerning our marriage—the three of us had a great conversation.

About a week after that conversation, Naomi and I were talking one night and she said something that got my attention. She said, *“Mark, if someone were to ask me to describe our marriage, I would tell them that we have a really good*

*marriage, but it's not particularly deep.*" I couldn't have been more surprised if she had punched me in the stomach. But gently, lovingly, she began to describe what she meant.

I had been keeping her at arms length when it came to my thoughts and emotions. Instead of processing my joys, my difficulties, and my pains with her, I had been living inside my own head, stuffing emotions in the hopes that that I wouldn't have to feel them or deal with them. As Naomi talked, emotional and relational patterns that I had practiced for years were exposed and I saw them for what they were—broken patterns that were keeping me stuck.

It's easy to spot someone who is visually impaired—a white walking stick or a seeing eye dog gives them away. It's much harder to spot a person who is emotionally or relationally unhealthy, but over time, the signs are evident for all to see.

You know what I realized? My inner tendencies that kept Naomi at arms length, were keeping others at arms length too. And I began to see that my emotional stuffing was keeping me from being honest with myself and God—I was rejecting the wholeness God had for me, because I refused to bring my whole self, my real self, to Him. I'm so glad Naomi had the courage to say something—*we cannot be spiritually mature while remaining emotionally and relationally unhealthy*

I trust, in the coming months, many more of these conversations will be going on around here, that many more of us will be exposed as I was. Do you want to become whole? Let's commit to walking this path to maturity together.

At this time I'd like to invite the worship team to come and join me on stage, and as they come, please allow me to pray for you and our church.

**Prayer**

**Worship**