

Part 1 (Spiritual Health) - How to Get Closer to God

Welcome to our Fall Spiritual Growth Campaign - Transformed!. This week we begin part one as we start looking at seven key areas of your life. Seven key areas to make changes in your life.

Our theme for the next seven weeks is Romans 12:2. We mentioned it last week in the introduction. Let's read it together. Romans 12:2 *"Do not conform to the pattern of this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind."*

The way you think determines the way you feel and the way you feel determines the way you act. The key to transformation starts not in your actions or your behavior or with your will. It starts with your thoughts. And if you change the way you think that'll change the way you feel. And if you change the way you feel that changes the way you act.

We're going to apply that principle, to seven key areas of your life – relational, physical, mental, spiritual, emotional, financial, vocational. We're going to look at major areas of life and how you change the way you think about them so that you feel differently and then act and respond differently.

Transformation moves us from emptiness to fullness; defeat to victory; failure to faith; insecurity to boldness. It helps us become more of what God wants us to be. The closer I get to God, the more my life will be transformed.

We can see this all through the Bible. When Paul met Jesus face to face on the road to Damascus, he was radically transformed. He went from being a religious terrorist into the person who wrote the definitive chapter on love.

Isaiah was transformed from a person who wasn't right with God in many ways into a courageous person who could accurately communicate what God had to say.

Moses got so close to God that he was even transformed in his appearance. He got so close to God that he got God's light in him.

You probably wouldn't be here if you didn't want to be close to God in some sense. But the Bible says "All we like sheep have gone astray. We each have turned into our own way." You don't have to teach sheep to wander off. They do it naturally. Sheep will walk into all kinds of difficult and dangerous situations. We're like them. We tend to wander off. We don't tend to stay close to God. So as we start this time of transformation, we need to talk about how to get close to God, how to stay close, and if you've drifted, how to get back in that close relationship.

Fortunately we have a story in the Bible that gives us pointers on this. Jesus told it. It's the well-known story of the Prodigal Son in Luke 15. Let's read the story and then pull some principles out of it on transforming your life spiritually.

"A man had two sons. The younger son told his father, 'I want my share of your estate now before you die.' So his father agreed to divide his wealth between his sons. A few days later this younger son packed all his belongings and moved to a distant land, and there he wasted all his money in wild living. About the time his money ran out, a great famine swept over the land, and he began to starve. He persuaded a local farmer to hire him, and the man sent him into his fields to feed the pigs. The young man became so hungry that even the pods he was feeding the pigs looked good to him. But no one gave him anything. When he finally came to his senses, he said to himself, 'At home even the hired servants have food enough to spare, and here I am dying of hunger! I will go home to my father and say, "Father, I have sinned against both heaven and you, and I am no longer worthy of being called your son. Please take me on as a hired servant."' So he returned home to his father. And while he was still a long way off, his father saw him coming. Filled with love and compassion, he ran to his son, embraced him, and kissed him. His son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against both heaven and you, and I am no longer worthy of being called your son.' But his father said to the servants, 'Quick! Bring the finest robe in the house and put it on him. Get a ring for his finger and sandals for his feet. And kill the calf we have been fattening. We must celebrate with a feast, for this son of mine was dead and has now returned to life. He was lost, but now he is found.' So the party began."

Don't you love that story! It tells how we tend to wander away from our Creator, wander away from the Father who loves us. The kid says, I want you to give me what's mine. It's all about me. That's where we usually start in life - it's what we say to God all the time. Give me this, God. Give me that. And by the way I'm in a hurry.

So he goes where he wants to go - packs up and heads out. He wastes his money, time and energy on entertainment; on what he wants to do. After all, it's his money, he can spend it the way he likes. And he really messes up. Then on top of that there's a national recession because there's a famine and nobody has enough, so no one's giving this guy anything because they don't have much to give. He can't even find a job. Things go from

bad to worse. Finally he finds a farm where he's hired to do the worst job on the farm – slopping pigs. For a Jew that's not good because you're not supposed to have anything at all to do with pigs.

He gets so hungry and desperate he says, "Man! This pig slop looks good!" You've got to be seriously desperate to think pig slop looks good. But nobody gave him even that.

Then it says he wised up and said, "The poorest paid guys who work for my dad eat better than this. What in the world am I doing?" He knows he doesn't deserve his father's love. He's just wasted half of what his dad worked his entire life to earn. He says, I know what I'll do. I can't go home and ask him to just accept me back in the family. I'll just say, Hire me. I'd rather be a servant than here starving to death.

And we saw the father's response.

From this story we see four things you need to do to get back to God. Before we go into them, I want to say that when Jesus told this story, he didn't mean for it to be taken as literally as some do. They think it's just for people who go off and get drunk or carouse. But Jesus clearly meant for it to be for ALL people who choose to take what God provides and use it in selfish ways; for everyone who allows themselves to drift from God; for all of us since we already established, we all do that. I don't know where you are today. You may be far away or closer. Maybe you've just been distant this week or month. You've had one of those times where you thought, I'm not really feeling God's presence right now. How do you get back? You do these four things.

1. I Get Fed Up with My Life - I get fed up with how I've been living. I'm too stressed or lonely or depressed or busy. Let me tell you, nothing transformative is going to happen for you in the next seven weeks unless you first get dissatisfied with the way you are now. If you think, "I'm fine. I don't need any change in my life," then you're going to waste the next seven weeks because nothing's going to happen until you decide you need something to happen. And if you think you're fine as you are, you don't know God or the Bible as well as you think you do. You've got to get hungry. In the story he got hungry and then he finally came to his senses. That's where transformation starts.

Are you hungry yet? If not God will do things and allow things encourage you to be hungry.

If you're too satisfied with how you are already, God may allow bad weather in your life to stimulate some movement. If that doesn't work God will allow a little bit more to get your attention. If that doesn't work expect a real storm. God loves you just the way you are but God loves you too much to let you stay that way. When God wants to get our attention God comes and knocks on the door. If we ignore it he knocks harder and harder.

God does this out of love. God does not want you to miss out and God does not want you to waste your life. The first step in transformation is for you to get disgruntled, be discontent, fed up with the way you're living now.

The prophet Jeremiah recorded God's words for people who were distant from God, who had let themselves stray. In Jeremiah 29:13 God says, "You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart." The Message paraphrase of that is, "You'll find me when you get serious about finding me and want it more than anything else."

God generally doesn't reveal himself if we just kind of want it; if it's just casual, a part-time sort of thing for us. I've got to get fed up with things the way they are, hungry for more in life, and wanting a better way to live.

2. I Own Up to My Sin - That's the second thing that this young man did. In verses 17-18 it says "When he finally came to his senses, [He realized that the life he was leading didn't make sense...] he said... 'Father, I have sinned against both heaven and you...'"

Nothing much is going to happen until you come to the point of facing up to the fact that you haven't been living God's way; you've been living your own way; doing it the way you think is best; doing it in a way that tries to control everything around you even though you can't really control it. So what do you own up to? What did he own up to when he came to his senses? He said, "I have sinned." You own up to your sin.

Isaiah 59:2 says, "*It's your sins that have cut you off from God.*" Have you ever prayed and you felt like God was a long way away? Have you felt like there was something between you and God; like you're just talking to yourself. Where does that feeling come from? Sins separate you from God.

If you feel far from God, well, God didn't go on vacation. God didn't go to a foreign country. God has never not been there. God loves you unconditionally. When you feel far from God, you've moved away - generally by giving love to something else. The word for that in the Bible is an idol.

We think idols are stone things that people bow down to and worship. They can be, but for us, an idol can look like your car; look like your job; it can be things you like doing or the way you look. Anything that you love more

than God becomes an idol. The first and second commandments say *"You must not have any other god but me. You must not make for yourself an idol of any kind."* Money can be an idol. Success can be an idol. They aren't bad things, they're just don't deserve first place in your life.

The fact is this: You're as close to God as you choose to be. You can't really blame anybody else. You can't blame your spouse or your parents or church leaders or the government. You can't blame other people.

If you were being held under water, you would struggle and the more you needed air, the more you would struggle, because you would be desperate for air. When you're that desperate for God you will strive to be close to God. You'll be willing to do what it takes and own up to the things that keep you separated. You're as close to God as you choose to be.

When you come to a point where you're ready to own up, here's a prayer you can pray. Psalm 51:1-4. David prayed this prayer when he was desperate for forgiveness: *"Have mercy on me, O God, because of your unfailing love. Because of your great compassion, blot out the stain of my sins. Wash me clean from my guilt. Purify me from my sin. For I recognize my rebellion; it haunts me day and night. Against you, and you alone, have I sinned; I have done what is evil in your sight. You will be proved right in what you say, and your judgment against me is just."*

"I recognize my rebellion." That means I face up to my sins. What's God's response when I own up? Isaiah 1:18 says, *"...no matter how deep the stain of your sins, I can take it out and make you as clean as freshly fallen snow. Even if you are stained as red as crimson, I can make you white as wool!"* He says, You know that stain? I can take it out.

This next week in small groups you're going to study seven habits for spiritual growth. But I want to give you two in addition to those today. The first one goes with this point: The habit of a Regular Spiritual Checkup.

Doctors tell you that you regularly need to go and get a checkup. And you need to have things like your good and bad cholesterol, your heart, your colon checked every so often. Why? Because if something's growing wrong in your body you want to know sooner rather than later, right?

The same is true with your spiritual life. If sin starts growing in you it can become a cancer. It's better to deal with it before it gets big. You need regular spiritual checkups. The thing is, you can test yourself. There are five areas to test yourself in: worship, fellowship, discipleship, ministry and evangelism. How strong are you in each of these?

There's another check you need to do at least once a month: 1 Corinthians 11:28 says, *"...you should examine yourself before eating the bread and drinking the cup."* The Bible says that before you take the Lord's Supper - communion - that you should do a spiritual checkup every time, and before you come to church that morning. It's a time to pause and say what Psalm 139:23-24 says: *"Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. Point out anything in me that offends you, and lead me along the path of everlasting life."*

Here's a goal for you this week: Do a check up by Tuesday. Then do a general one at least every six months and a regular one every month before coming to church for communion. You should write down your plan and note what you need to do to meet that goal. Who are you going to get to partner with to help you? This makes a habit of owning up.

This week you're going to do group session one. On Monday - tomorrow morning - you're going to start the fifty daily devotions. You'll read one on Monday, another one on Tuesday, another one on Wednesday. And we'll go through all fifty days together. Take time every day to read and then to think and pray about what you've read.

Here's the memory verse for this week. 2 Corinthians 5:17. Let's read it aloud together. *"Anyone who belongs to Christ has become a new person. The old life is gone. A new life has begun."* What's that mean? It means you don't have to stay the same any more. You don't have to listen to old impulses. You have a power in your life, the Holy Spirit in you. You have a new community, the church. You have a new identity and a new destiny.

Here's the third thing: **3. I Offer Myself Up** - I offer up my life. I offer up my entire being. Notice in Luke 15:12 the son says, "I want my share..." Then Luke 15:19 he comes back and says, "Please take me..." Do you notice the change in attitude there? He leaves saying, Give me. He comes back saying, Take me! I'll be a servant. When your heart moves from self-centered to service-focused. That's transformation.

Which point are you at? Are you saying take me - giving God a blank check - or are you still give me, give me, give me, what can God do for me. It's a heart transformation - from self-centeredness to God-centeredness.

Romans 12:1 says, *"...my friends, because of God's great mercy to us I appeal to you: Offer yourselves as a living sacrifice to God, dedicated to his service and pleasing to him. This is the true worship that you should offer."*

"Offer yourselves" - go from give me to take me.

But this transformation doesn't happen overnight. God is still working on me. For your entire life God's going to work on you. It's never instant. But there is a choice you have to make. 2 Corinthians 3:16-18 says, "...*whenever someone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away. For the Lord is the Spirit, and wherever the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. So all of us who have had that veil removed can see and reflect the glory of the Lord. And the Lord—who is the Spirit—makes us more and more like him* [So it's a process – we are being transformed. Not just once but on an ongoing basis.] *as we are changed into his glorious image.*"

In the Greek the New Testament was written in, the word "transformed" is metamorphoo. from which we get the English word Metamorphosis. What's that? One example is when a caterpillar becomes a pupa, and then the pupa becomes a butterfly. That's metamorphosis.

It doesn't happen overnight. In fact, there's that stage when it's sitting there in that cocoon and it's pretty ugly. Have you ever seen one? Nothing beautiful about it. But when it breaks out the butterfly is stunning!

I want that for myself. And I want that for you. I want you to be transformed, in stages, into a beautiful butterfly. That's what Christian transformation is about. It's metamorphosis. When you're a caterpillar you're stuck on the ground. God made you to be a butterfly. God made you to soar and be beautiful! But you've got to go through this process: get fed up with what you are, get honest with God; then offer yourself.

It's important to notice the father's response. Luke 15:20, 22 says, "*So he returned home to his father. And while he was still a long way off, his father saw him coming. Filled with love and compassion, he ran to his son, embraced him, and kissed him... ..his father said to the servants, 'Quick! Bring the finest...'*" He wanted the best for the son. Notice he didn't wait for the son to come completely back. While he was still a long way off dad ran to his son.

The moment you head in the right direction, God will run out to meet you. God is not waiting for you to come knocking on the door. He's waiting for this moment. God takes the initiative. God doesn't hold a grudge against all the dumb stuff you've done. God's ready to bring out the best. God has a better plan for your life than you can imagine.

You may say, but I'm living a good life. And you are. There's only one problem with living a good life. It isn't good enough. You were made for more. You were made for a better life; for the best life; for a life you cannot even imagine, anymore than a caterpillar can imagine what it's like to be a butterfly. There may be people around you who've got the car and the cash and the clothes who are saying, I'm living the good life! But they're missing the better life.

So I get fed up, I own up. And I offer up. Then there's one more thing to do.... come back to God in celebration.

4. I Lift Up My Praise - I celebrate with God; I say thank you to God. In Luke 15:23-24 here's what the father says: "*We must celebrate with a feast, for this son of mine was dead and has now returned to life. He was lost, but now he is found.' So the party began!*" Life becomes a celebration when life is transformed. Psalms 68:4 says, "*Sing praises to God and to his name! ...His name is the Lord - rejoice in his presence!*"

For the sake of your own transformation you need to be singing at church. Some of you may say, I don't know a lot of the songs. When you were born you knew almost nothing - that hasn't stopped you from learning what you want to know. Some of you may say, "It's all nice but I couldn't carry tune in a baggie." Maybe you're a prison singer - always behind a few bars and never have the key. But the Bible doesn't say be pretty in your singing. It says make a joyful noise. You can do that. Anybody can make a joyful noise. For your own transformation you need to sing.

A global study came out done by Swedish researchers three years ago. They did a scientific study and concluded that group singing – not singing by yourself but in a group of people - is good for your health. They discovered that singing with other people lowers your blood pressure, releases endorphins, makes you feel good, improves your mood, builds you confidence, relieves loneliness, eases negative emotions and stress, and encourages positive emotions. It's great therapy to sing with other people. It's good for your mental, emotional, social and physical health. All the different areas.

Another study showed that people who sing in worship each week live longer. I want you to live longer.

So we're going to do something good for your health right now. You're going to live a little bit longer. We're going to sing. I told you I was going to give you two new habits. One of them is the habit of a regular check up. And here's the other habit. I want you to intentionally start singing all the songs, even the ones you don't know, even the ones you don't like, even the ones you think are too loud, even the ones that aren't your style. I want you to sing

them because it will lower your blood pressure, release endorphins, improve mood, build confidence, relieve loneliness, relieve negative emotions and stress.

The father had a celebration. And we're going to party and we're going to celebrate and we're going to sing.

Part of that celebration today will be a celebration of Communion - the Lord's Supper. You may remember that another word for Communion is the Eucharist. That word Eucharist comes from the Bible. When It says Jesus prayed before giving first the bread and then the wine to his followers, it says it was a prayer of thanksgiving. The word thanksgiving in Greek is the word eucharisto. Eucharist is simply an English version of the Greek word for thanksgiving. When we take the Lord's Supper, when we take the Eucharist, when we take communion, part of what we are doing is to say thank you God. Thank you for not condemning me when I come home but having a celebration when I come home. Thank you for your grace. Thank you for your mercy. Thank you for what you've done. Thank you for all you've done.

I'm so grateful, God, for your grace. I'm so grateful for your love. I'm so grateful that you don't condemn me; you save me. I'm so grateful as I take these elements that help me remember what you have done for me.

We take communion together to say, Lord, thank you. We receive this with thanksgiving. Let's pray