

**Renovation of the Heart Sermon Series
Week 1 - Introduction**

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Reading: Matthew 12: 33-35 "Make a tree good and its fruit will be good, or make a tree bad and its fruit will be bad, for a tree is recognized by its fruit. You brood of vipers, how can you who are evil say anything good? For out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks. The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in him, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in him.

Proverbs 4:23: "Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life." (NIV)
"Keep and guard your heart with all vigilance and above all that you guard, for out of it flow the springs of life." (Amplified)

BANANA EXAMPLE: We take it for granted what's inside a banana. What's inside is exactly what is advertised on the outside. You don't even have to think about it. What about your life as a follower of Jesus? Most of us here look like a Jesus person on the outside, what about on the inside? What's truly inside? If I say I'm a follower of Jesus on the face of things..... What is my heart like on the inside?

Jesus knew about the human heart – better than anyone. He knew it starts out far from perfect, he knew that we don't often like to admit that and that we like to gloss over the cracks by the way we behave (that's why he called the religious fundamentalist Pharisees 'white-washed tombs). **But because Jesus knows the human heart better than any – he also has the most radical, deepest, most trustworthy plan to renovate our hearts.** So that what's really going-on on the inside starts to match what it says on the 'tin' or 'skin'.

What's your goal in the Christian life?

Not just a 'good person' or even 'right with God' - More than that, its becoming who you are meant to be. It about meeting your purpose, vision, life to the full, significance in life – the Godly way.

Our goal be simply summarised as us being in a process of 'cultivating on the character of Christ'.

Pop Idol, X Factor etc – contestants are desperate to be a hero, have a life of significance. They think that's how it will happen for them (sadly, a rather cringy direction!) If we're honest, all of us want to live significant lives, to live-out all that we are supposed to be in life.

So what's your goal in the Christian life? Of course, you and I both know that our characters aren't perfect, we aren't crystal-clear representations of Jesus shining through into everyday life! But when we come into relationship with the Trinity – God our creator, Jesus the author of life (Acts 3:15), the Spirit who brings us back to life... **We enter into an apprenticeship programme – one that lasts a lifetime.** We learn what it means to follow Jesus, day in, day out. We allow ourselves to be shaped, changed, improved by the Holy Spirit. Salvation isn't often an event (tho it can be) its more organic development, experiencing the Incarnational God in everyday life. So we sow/invest now, to the eternal nature (which starts now!)

Christians have God's spirit inside them – they are re-connected to the one in who's image they were first created. **Our aim is to be as much like our creator as possible. In what we do, and in who we are.** Essentially, we've entered into a personal improvement programme, but one perhaps radically different to those advocated in high-street books on self-improvement, or those make-over TV programmes. This is improvement by God's standards, and in His way. And as we know 'my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,' (Isaiah 55:8) but they are good ways! Likewise, Jesus said 'my kingdom is not of this world' (John 18:36) and 'Whoever tries to keep his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life will preserve it.' (Luke 17:33)

I'm a follower of Jesus – and so I want my very nature, my character, my heart to be like Jesus too.

Let me encourage you at the very start – this is not pie-in-the-sky. **God the Trinity is in the business of transformation, of turning situations around, of rebuilding what you might think is rubble into strong towers on firm foundations.** The life, death and resurrection of Jesus makes this possible. They are evidence of just how far God will reach to make it happen – sending, sacrificing, raising His own son.

Jesus promised his mission was to vastly improve the lot of even the most lowly. To “provide for those who grieve in Zion— to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair.” (Is 61:3) The Spirit of our God has already begun the work in you that **means you really can improve your character, your heart** to be more like Jesus!

Nick’s own journey

God’s been on my case about character and inner-heart life, thought life all year. As our 2nd child was born – it puts you in a crucible of new pressures (time, sleep deprivation, extra family responsibilities) – and its when you are under pressure that your true character starts to come out more. Where you might be able to paper-over the cracks in normal life – now the fault-lines start to appear again!

I found myself quite ashamed, quite surprised by the ‘real me’ that I was encountering - Snappy, not putting Marjorie first (greedy), Rude, unsympathetic

God’s taking me on another stage of my journey. Saying ‘yes Nick, you may be leading a church now, but I’m less interested in that than in your heart, your character.’ He’s going to work on my character – highlighting flaws! Not because he wants to beat me over the head, but because he wants me to learn how to open my heart up to HIM more, and how to be ACTIVE in that process – to become more like Jesus. To cultivate the character of Christ.

So as I teach about these things – don’t assume I’m sorted for 1 minute! I’m on the same journey as I hope we all are. **Perfect I am not, but in a relationship** with a loving dynamic God who only wants the best for me and my heart – **I definitely am!** SO I am committed to making the most of it.

Our character is set by age 5 or 6

Here’s a scary fact: Psychologists say that our character, which is the content of our hearts, is formed by the time we are 5 or 6 years old. Whatever your age now, its fairly set! That’s not to say change can’t happen, but it means that deep & lasting change will take genuine effort, one step at a time.

- Effort on our part – being focussed and disciplined.
- Effort on God’s part – his holy spirit transforming and equipping us from within

How then can we have hope of positive change in our hearts, our characters over time?

- **How can we balance** the Psalmist’s advice to “Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life.” (NIV)
- While we read in Jeremiah 17:9 that “The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?”

Clearly, we need a revolution! **Jesus has a strategy to make this happen. He, above anyone, really does understand the human heart.**

Other in this world have strategies too, to make things better - like educationalists, politicians, business...

The **fundamental difference** between the **way the world approaches** changing things for the better, and **the way our mentor Jesus does** is this: **Jesus works from the inside-out.** Governments, councils, etc try to **tamper with outward behaviour** (Eg. more police to tackle anti-social behaviour, more ASBOs, or rewarding certain behaviour like tax-breaks on marriage).

Jesus knows the human heart better than this! His strategy is for us to take on his ways, in our inner lives, and so affect our outward behaviour. When my daughter is naughty, I can punish her, threaten being ‘very cross’ – ultimately, this will affect her short-term behaviour, but really if I want to see her change long-term, I’ve got to influence her heart. Outwardly she may obey, but inwardly she may still be very defiant. In the same way, Jesus works from the outside in.

What about self-help and popular schemes to improve us from the inside?

They have the right approach. It is very common these days, an understanding of ‘spirituality’ and the understanding that one’s spiritual nature can be moulded and reformed to some extent (eg. flowing from the work of psychoanalysts like Freud, Yung, Nietzsche etc)

But they may work from wrong fundamental assumption – which is that YOU CAN DO IT ON YOUR OWN, or perhaps with the help of a therapist. That within just yourself, you have the capacity to do something radically differently, that you’ve never managed to do up to this point. The apostle Paul knew better

“So I find this law at work: When I want to do good, evil is right there with me. For in my inner being I delight in God's law; but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members. **What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God—through Jesus Christ our Lord!** (Rom 7:21-25)

I’m not by any means saying that therapists and therapy is a waste of time. What I’m saying is that it is possible to be hugely mis-guided in where you assume your help will come from. Therapy aids people to know themselves better, sometimes it tries to empower you to be different. But the big picture which Christians hold to is that there is a God out there who loves you totally, and knows you better. And however hard we can try in our own strength to become ‘good people’ – ultimately, **if we don’t connect** with our loving **heavenly father** in life, then we continue to **head in the wrong direction**, and we’ll be **taking the wrong advice**.

Jesus knows that we live from the heart and make choices in life from what is deep within our hearts.

We read earlier - Matthew 12: 33-35 " **For out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks.**"

- Our motivations, the choices we make on the surface, almost without knowing *why* – come from our heart, our character, what we are like on the inside.
- Therefore, if our motivations are to be changed for the better – Jesus knows that the target of the renovation needs to be our hearts, values, beliefs, mindset.
- And out of them being more like Christ – so we can *then* act outwardly more like Christ.

His strategy is for us to take on his ways, in our inner lives, and so affect our outward behaviour.

So far, that doesn’t sound so different from self-help therapy. Here is the fundamental difference: His strategy for bringing the world back into line with its God-given destiny is to renovate people’s hearts – through relationship with Him and with other Christians. **And that happens through the Holy Spirit.** As his spirit begins to reform our heart’s beliefs, ideas, feelings, habits...so we step-by-step begin to make choices, actions, relationships in the OUTER world which better reflect the character of Christ.

The simple truth of the matter is this:

- **I can’t do it in own strength** (Matt 23:8-12)
 - Whatever those high-street self-help books tell you, they are wrong.
- **I am not fundamentally OK** (Rom 3:23)
 - Whatever those high-street adverts like L’Oreal may tell me, actually we are fragile and flawed people, and we would be wisest to acknowledge this up-front
- **God the Trinity CAN do it in you. God has a plan**
 - **The Father** said “Be Holy because I am holy” (Leviticus 19:2)
 - and **Jesus** said “if you remain in me, you will bear much fruit” (John 15:5)
 - Because if we learn to “live by the **Spirit**, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature.” (Gal 5:16)

Here is the main thing I want you to take away from this morning.....

The process of spiritual formation to become more like Christ, to put on the character of Christ **absolutely does involve us doing something too.**

- Its not magic. **You can't just pray harder and then sit back** and you'll overnight have a renovated heart.
- We have to partner with the work of the Holy Spirit. We have to put our wills into action.
 - **Its grace and effort.**

I think Christians are in danger of getting out of balance here. The charismatics sit back (or lie down) and say "Oh Holy Spirit: Change me!" The other end of the spectrum is all about 'do, do, do' - Always full of action, trying to make it happen by my own effort.

Infact, it's a matter of balance. Its not one or the other, its both!

Being in good shape spiritually doesn't just come naturally. In the physical world you find those annoying people who never exercise or watch their diet – still cycle 20 miles in a weekend! **But there are no shortcuts in spiritual development.** The 2 basic pieces of advice I'd give about this:

1. Engaging in the spiritual disciplines
2. and letting God's spirit engage with you

Don't focus on outward behaviour until you have chosen to allow Christ serious access to work on your inner self. It is possible for Christians to go through their life for a long time and *look like Christians* on the outside – their behaviour. But their hearts do not have the connection with Christ which really matters.

This process of engagement and change is simply called discipleship. Jesus' strategy begins with who we are, not with what we do or how we act

Final encouragement – Jesus' offer:

"Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly." (Matt 11:28 The Message Version)

Response

- Where is your heart at? What's on the inside? (banana)
- Balance the 2 – Holy Spirit infilling & empowering, and a life of discipline and focussed action.