

Way of Discipleship Small Groups

Christian character 3: How does God change my character?



Touching base (5 minutes)

Open in prayer as is helpful for your group.

If this is your first session take time to introduce yourselves and set any ground rules you want to for your time together.

If you met previously take the opportunity either as a group or in pairs to check in with each other about how your response from last time has gone.



Introduction: This is the third of three sessions on what Christian character is, how it affects our relationships, and how God can change our characters to be more like Christ's.



Opening question(s) (5 minutes)

How have you changed over your life?

Understanding the information (30 minutes)

Share these thoughts in your own words or read them together:

Can I really become the kind of Christlike person who can show agape love to others - loving enemies and forgiving those who hurt me?



Genuine change happens from the inside out. While human beings “look at the outside, God looks at the heart”. (1 Samuel 16:7) In the Sermon on the Mount it is not the actions we do that matter to God, but the inner attitudes we have. Jesus taught that it is the inner person that generates our outward responses and actions. “A good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and an evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of.” (Luke 6: 45) So over time Paul said he did the things Christ does because they became things he wanted to do. The natural choices he made were to do what Christ would do if He were in Paul's situation, in the strength that He gives. Paul's habitual thoughts, feelings and actions became more like Christ's.

How does this happen? It is through the habits we live by that we are transformed like this in two ways:

Our minds are renewed so we see the world and people more and more as God sees them.

Our innermost selves (hearts) are changed by allowing God's Holy Spirit to change us from the inside out.

The first step to change is always the renewal of our minds – seeing things as much as we can as God sees them. When Jesus called people to turn back to God the first step was to “repent” – literally to change their way of thinking. Paul encourages us to “have the same mindset as Christ Jesus”. (Philippians 2:5)

The more we think about something, the more it becomes a natural part of the way we understand reality. Our thought patterns are like the development of a footpath in a field. When people first start walking through an overgrown field it is hard work, and the path is barely visible. But over time, the more we walk that way, the easier and more visible the path becomes.

Genuine change occurs as we grow into wanting what God wants. In the Bible, the word used to describe where the deepest desires that shape us come from is the heart. Another word we could use is the “will”. The part of us that wills things. Our will is what controls us.

There is an ‘automatic’ and immediate aspect of our will, driven by appetites. It’s the part of us, for example, which sees someone’s shiny new car and reacts by wanting it. (The New Testament calls this the “flesh”). But our “heart” is the deeper “reflective” will, from which the true, long-term choices, longings and visions for our life come – the place where we sometimes “want to want” things. It’s where we want to do the right thing. While our “flesh” might want to eat that éclair, our deeper will wants to diet in order to be healthy. It’s where our character is born.

To be a disciple is to let the character of Jesus’ will become our will. Thankfully, becoming like Christ in our will and character is much less about what we do, and much more about what God does in us. In fact, becoming like Christ always takes more than our own will power. Jesus said, "Without me you can do nothing." (John 15:5) The deepest desires we have can become more like what God wants by allowing Him to flow in our hearts.

It is our habits which shape our desires, and which make us want the things we know in our minds are true and good. For example, the habit of shopping shapes us. Most people know that the more we get the more you want. But whenever we buy something, we think that will satisfy us. Yet the habit of shopping ends up making us want more. The more we shop, or the more we eat...the more we want. It is things we do which set the direction of what we love. If someone is addicted to pornography and is tempted to watch it at night, simple will power won’t be enough. What will count is whether, long before the moment of temptation, they have been shaped by in their mind and heart by habits through which they are allowing God to change them into someone who wants to turn away from it. Only then will they have the ‘soul reflex’ to be able to say no to what they want in the moment, and yes to what they really want in their heart.

One picture from the Pacific islands puts it this way. A man keeps two dogs in a cave. These two dogs are in continual conflict with one another. They are like the Holy Spirit living in us, and the desires in us which pull us away from God. The man has a choice about which dog he feeds. The dog that is fed and nourished will grow stronger and will gain the upper hand over the animal that is starved. It is through habits that engage our mind and heart with God that we access the power of God’s Spirit, enabling Him to deal with the parts of us that need to change.

While it is possible for God to change our character in ‘Damascus’ moments, most of us only grow in becoming Christlike over time through the process of day-to-day life. By “waxing on and off” the Karate Kid can perform fantastic karate moves when needed. By reading the Scriptures over time we might more easily see our difficult neighbour as God sees them. By worshipping regularly with others our openness to God’s presence may grow.

Discuss: How can I give God space to change me from the inside out?

Reading the Bible (15 minutes)

Read Galatians 5: 13-26 which describes the importance of God’s Spirit in shaping Christlike characters.

Discuss the Discovery Bible Study questions:
What does this passage teach me about God?
What does this passage teach me about people?
How does this passage call me to obey God?
What might I do in response to this this week?



Seeing how it looks in real lives (10 minutes)

Watch the video at:
<https://youtu.be/BhFhkMveSm4>
What struck you as important in the video?



Optional further material and questions

Share these thoughts or read them together:

How much is God’s work, and how much is mine?
Our relationship with God is a partnership in which God never forces His will on us. Because He is agape love, God always invites us to be in covenant with Him. This means that He will only change us to the extent that we are willing to allow Him. In any kind of relationship, both parties have a part to play. By adopting the practices of Christ, we are playing our part – creating the conditions for God’s Spirit to change us. “Without Him we can’t, but without us He won’t.” God’s cooperation with us is another example of His self-giving love. Richard Foster describes this as ‘the path of disciplined grace.’ “It is ‘grace’ because it is free; it is ‘disciplined’ because there is something for us to do.”

Can this happen on my own? The character of Christ grows in us as the beliefs in our minds are renewed and the desires of our hearts are shaped by God working in us. The ‘method’ of this is simply by giving God room as we centre our lives around the life-giving practices of Jesus. But there is one more essential way in which we can open ourselves up to God’s work in us, and that is through relationship with other disciples, in which we are intentional about growing together.

Community with others will change us if relationships are genuine and close enough to reveal the parts of us which need to change, but which we might be unconscious of when we are on our own. Particularly in the Christian community, where we do not choose our brothers and sisters, we can come face to face with the ways in which we need to be shaped by agape love.

Discuss: How can being part of a church show me my “blind spots”?

Responding to God’s leading (5 minutes)

Give people an opportunity to think about, “What might God be showing me and how might I respond?” They may like to write this down and/or share it with the group and/or share it with one other person. A friendly question is to ask each other, “Is there anything that would be helpful to ask you next time?”



Group prayer (5 minutes)

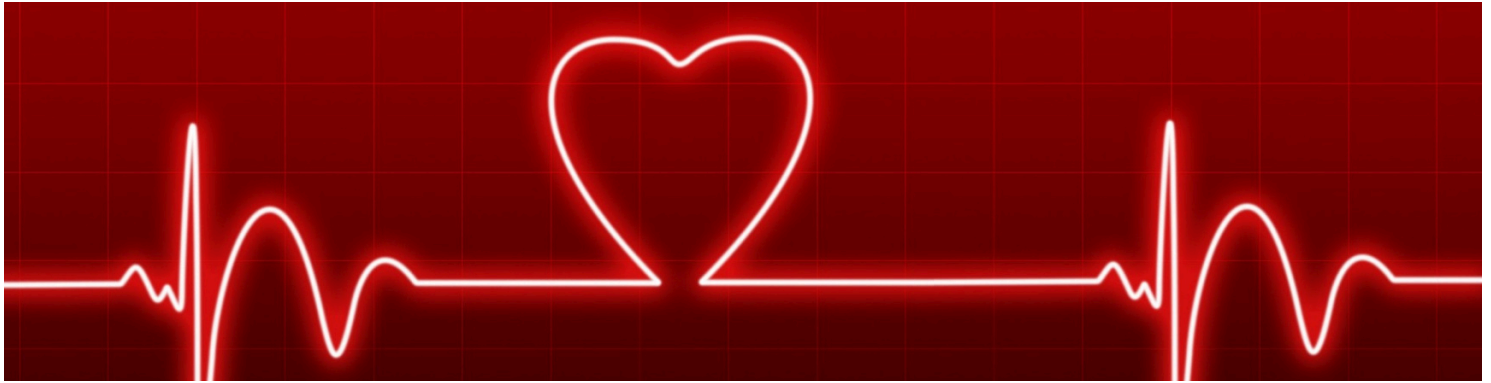
Jesus, you are changing me
By your spirit
you're making me like you
Jesus, you're transforming me
That your loveliness
may be seen in all I do

You are the potter
And I am the clay
Help me to be willing
To let you have your way
Jesus, you are changing me
As I let you reign supreme
Within my heart





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Additional notes:

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