



# THE KINGDOM

## KINGDOM TRANSFORMATION: HOW WE REALLY CHANGE AND GROW

**Sunday 23 May 2021**

*EXTENDED SERMON TRANSCRIPT*

On Tuesday, some of our team went on an excursion to Goulburn to meet a couple named Maggie and Daryl. We went down there to hear their story (which Malcolm assured us we all needed to hear). We entered this big old building and sat by a crackling log fire on a freezing Goulburn morning (you know it's cold when you are breathing out smoke inside a house). We were in the old dining hall of St Joseph's Orphanage - a massive property that Daryl and Maggie are lovingly transforming with a kingdom-shaped vision. To be honest, I was expecting to hear some kind of over-spiritualised version of a Grand Designs episode; but was blindsided by what followed. Daryl and Maggie's story was a story of hitting the wall spiritually; the tragedy of the sudden death of a young daughter on a family holiday overseas, and when they returned home the trauma of almost losing a second child to the same rare hereditary heart disease. A story of stripping back and deconstruction everything they thought life would be. A story of searching for God afresh and learning abandonment to God, rediscovery of intimacy and the rhythm of intentional spiritual practices, faithful action and pursuing a vision of kingdom life. It left us all stunned, speechless and blinking back tears from the story of this seemingly average, un-weird, practical, hardworking Christian couple.

Daryl and Maggie reminded me that ordinary people, living ordinary lives, are never ordinary when they abandon themselves to the will and way of God. They reminded me that an inspiring, radiant life is available; that real change inside of us is probable if we want, and will radically shape the life we end up living - regardless of our circumstances. I think all came away thinking, "I want to change and be more like Daryl and Maggie," because this word 'kingdom' seemed to make a whole lot more sense after a few hours with them.

But how? How do we change and grow as disciples of Jesus? Because I suspect for many people (maybe all of us) there is a frustrating disconnect between the vision of life in the kingdom and the reality you experience - I know there is for me, and I realise some change and growth is extremely slow if it's happening. Can you relate? So, are there any common principles that we can identify? I clearly don't have all the answers, but I think I can observe 5 ways of partnering with God to foster change and growth. I offer just a few incomplete thoughts to consider.

This is my A-E of change and growth:

### **A is for Abandonment**

Jesus is recorded in Matthew, Mark and Luke saying, *"Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will save it."* (Matthew 16:24-25, Mark 8:34-35, Luke 9:23-24)

Something fundamental has to happen in relation to our will - we have to humble ourselves, stop saving our life, and really surrender ourselves to God. How we get there may vary, but the Spirit is always playing a part in it. For Maggie and Daryl, it was a combination of growing dissatisfaction with a superficial, prosperous, consumeristic version of their life and their spirituality; and the loss of the most precious parts of their life. I know that is different for everyone, but usually it takes the catalyst of suffering a crisis or something similar that upends life or brings you to your knees, to a place of desperation, letting go and falling into God. Dying to self, daily.

We use the word 'wholehearted' in our church's mission statement - but that's going to be true to the extent we are abandoned *from* self, *into* God. I think we are highly resistant to abandoning ourselves to God because we fear the implications: of what God might ask of us, because we want to stay in charge, because we like comfort. But self-denial is the call on anyone who wants to be a disciple, and the way to change. I don't want suffering or crisis - but I also don't want to live unchanged or bereft of growth.

So pray: *Holy Spirit, what do I need to lay down today? (e.g. pride, control, comfort, bitterness or unforgiveness) And teach me how.*

### **B is for Belief Systems**

*"Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will."* (Romans 12:2)

In Corinthians Paul speaks about having the mind of Christ and that, *"The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel that*

*displays the glory of Christ."* (2 Corinthians 4:4)

*"We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ."*

(2 Corinthians 10:5)

Paul understands that change happens as our minds are renewed, such that we are not conforming to the pattern of the world - that the Spirit of Truth leads us to see and think and feel differently and know what He wants for you (remembering that the god of this age makes people spiritually blind and there are cultural norms, ideologies and mind sets that unsuspecting disciples can become more evangelised by than the Bible). And Paul says we have to capture our thoughts and make sure they are aligned to the King and His kingdom.

Let me give you just one example of this:

Daryl and Maggie shared how, many years ago, they were sitting on the veranda of their "very nice" home in Kiama, funded by their "very good" jobs, sipping their green tea and watching the whales go by... Then they both had the same thought: "Is this it? Is this the vision for 'the good life' now fulfilled?" As Maggie so poignantly put it: "Is the great Australian dream the great Christian dream?" Is green tea and an ocean front as good as it gets? I think we can live like it is. What if our vision of the good life has set itself up in opposition to the King and His kingdom?! What if it is keeping us from the life that is truly good? How much of our lives do we burn in the attaining of stuff that is ultimately meaningless or disposable? And we wonder why the kingdom seems more like theory than reality?

So pray: *What beliefs secretly dominate my thought life today? What is my vision of the good life?*

### **C is for Community**

Community is also God's mechanism for change and growth. It is the place to learn, to relate, to serve and struggle and love. We were made for a village and I think we long to be a part of a village. And churches have the capacity to create a kind of village, but often fail at replicating them in the suburbs because we don't live in a village setting geographically speaking. And our attitudes and lifestyles and homes actively resist the village. But the problem is, we change and grow in the context of the village. I can be a saint alone because I don't have to worry about anyone else. But learning to sacrificially love others - a core attribute of God - only happens in the struggle of community, with people hard to love. So, when people step out of the vision of a village, 9 times out of 10 they don't grow, they go backwards. Individualistic thinking not only kills community but it kills transformation. Left to my own devices and personality type, I'd be big on vision and

leading (which is what you need from leaders), but low on empathy (which is what you won't naturally get from me). But the truth is: I'm a more sensitive, empathic person today because of people in this church. I've had to learn how to listen, receive feedback, be slower with words, about the use of power, about learning to forgive betrayal and being misrepresented... I don't do it perfectly, but that work is both a work of the Spirit and the community of God.

The past 3 months have been a sad patch for me, watching people I've known for many years depart our church and, in some cases, THE church; or at least redefine it as 'you with your best friends or family'. Now, you have a ministry to your friends and family - our society disparately needs strong families - but it also needs a strong church (which, by the way, is much more than a Sunday service). And the church is not just hanging with your best friends, it's not just you with your kids. It's a diverse community of people, sharing a common love for God and vision for the kingdom. Young and old, rich and poor, male and female, educated and less educated, all nationalities, united in Christ for the sake of the world. That's who we are - yet we live in a time where it feels like it's really low in value, that being the church is what you 'do' when you haven't had a better offer. It's like we are members of the footy club, but we don't care if our team wins or loses. We forget we are in a spiritual war - the enemy loves to see a church scattered - and we have to fight for unity, bearing with one another, for that's not only how a church grows but where we change and grow.

So pray: *How is your heart in relation to being in a church?*

### **D is for Discipline**

Paul would say in Galatians 5:25, "*Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.*" Jesus says in John 14:4-5, "*Remain in me, as I also 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 you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.*"

Disciples and Disciplines naturally go together, and I think about 2 kinds - disciplines of priority and disciplines of practice. *Disciplines of priority* are about priorities: ordering our time, our focus, our energies with Christ first. A few months ago, I realised I was giving too much time to particular apps on my phone, like Facebook. So, I set a one hour maximum on all social media, because there are more important things. It really helped!

*Disciplines of practice* are rhythms of reading scripture, prayer, worship, fasting, Sabbath and journaling. Disciplines are not obligations; they are invitations to keep in step with the Spirit. Daryl and Maggie live by a daily practice and rhythm of prayer - an urban monastic life - which is totally transferrable. I use an app called the '1-minute pause' by John Eldridge to do something similar.

Disciplines are like the trellis that a grapevine hangs on: it's the framework on which the growth and fruit can happen. Holy Spirit led disciplines produce change and fruit. Holy Spirit works with our will and preparedness to prioritise life and live with a rhythm of practices that bring relational connection with God. If you've ever wanted to improve at sport or an instrument, you'll know it takes discipline - and that's precisely why I don't play guitar any better today than I did 10 years ago; I've never been disciplined to practice. Discipline facilitates change and growth.

So pray: *What disciplines have you established and maintain that specifically support change and spiritual growth in your life?* (If you don't have any, your spiritual life may be a lot like my guitar playing - stagnant and uninspiring.)

### **E is for Engagement or Participation**

"Continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill His good purpose." (Philippians 2:13)

The Holy Spirit sometimes works quickly, but the normal way God works in us is with us, in participation, working to bring our will and actions to be according to His purposes. That happens as you go, as you learn the daily practice of participating with God in whatever your life looks like now; and making it about His glory, not your own - that's where God works with you. And I think this is good news because, so often, we think that all this change has to happen first. It never does - just look at the Disciples. And no matter what stage of life you are in at the moment - changing nappies or caring for frail parents, imagining a career or retiring from it - it's all training. It's all the theatre for learning abandonment to His will and way; it's all learning to rethink and reframe your thoughts and beliefs; it's all an invitation into community and learning to serve and love; and it's all a canvas for priorities and practices that conform us to Jesus. It's as you go, not when you get there. Change and growth is participation with the Holy Spirit. Yes, it is His power at work - but not without intentionality and responsibility. There are no spiritual shortcuts to character change and growth. And if you really want a shortcut, don't be surprised if God takes you around the long way!

I've been told a few times we (at GRLC) are actually making too big a deal of discipleship; that discipleship is not central to the gospel message or the kingdom; that all that matters is knowing Jesus loves us and His yoke is supposed to be easy, and it feels like we are making it hard. We confuse the 'easy yoke' with an 'easy life'. Jesus never offered 'easy' or 'comfortable' or 'just believe and go back to your old life'. Jesus offered a narrow road, a basin and a towel to wash feet. He offered you a cross to take up; He offered you a life to lay down. Do you know what is a 'heavy yoke'? Disobedience and the burden of trying to build your own kingdom, saying "my will be done". The lightest people I've known are those, like Daryl and Maggie: fully abandoned to the narrow road of obeying Christ and dying to self. That's the easy yoke.

Can people preach a Christianity that ties up heavy loads on people and says you have to behave before you are beloved; that you need to earn your acceptance and repay the debt? Absolutely - and that's a false gospel. We come only by the goodness and grace of God and anything we do is a delight, not a duty.

In my opinion, we live in a culture where people are far less susceptible to the manipulation of legalism than they used to be. Our problem is less about earning and more about entitlement and cheap grace. People say, "beware a gospel that demands too much from you." But I say, "beware a gospel that demands too little of you." Read the gospels, look to what Jesus asked of His Disciples, look to the cross - Jesus lived abandoned to His Father's will: "not My will but Yours." Jesus lived with a single-minded vision of the kingdom, lived to serve, lived to create community, lived to reveal the Father's heart. He lived in the disciplines of intimacy and participation with the Father and the Spirit. And He says, "go live the same way so that you too may be transformed from glory to glory into the likeness of Christ your Master." That's discipleship in the kingdom: becoming like the one we've been apprenticed to. And when I hang out with burning ones - the Daryls and Maggies - the fire in me is kindled again and I want more of the heroic adventure of the kingdom.

I believe that, under the right conditions, change and growth in your life (and mine) is probable. Daryl and Maggie reminded me that I can't always chose my circumstances, but I can choose:

- to be abandoned to more of God's will,
- to be teachable and have my mind renewed,
- committed to community,
- disciplines of priority and daily practice and
- intentionally walking it out in the life you are living with a kingdom vision.

### **What are you choosing today?**

*Holy Spirit, what do I need to lay down today?*

*Holy Spirit, show me what beliefs secretly dominate my thought life today?*

*Holy Spirit, how is my heart in relation to the body of Christ?*

*Holy Spirit, show me how to prioritise and order life so I may abide in you today?*

*Holy Spirit, which part of my day am I always leaving you out of?*