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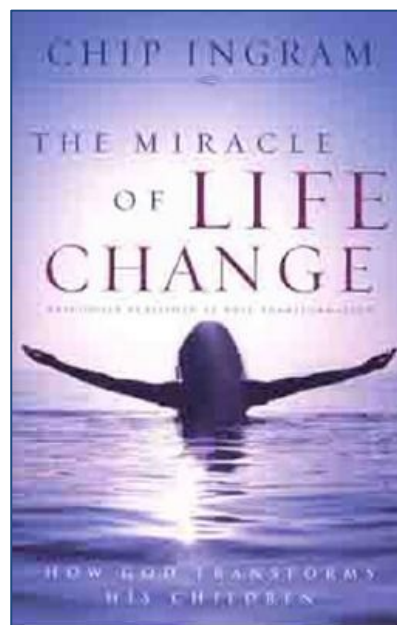


[WHERE WE GET THE POWER TO MORPH – EPHESIANS 4]

WEEKLY SUNDAY SCHOOL LESSON

DECEMBER 21, 2008

LESSON #3 FROM THE *MASTERWORK* SERIES STUDY OF:



WHY CHRISTMAS TREES AREN'T PERFECT?

[WHERE WE GET THE POWER TO MORPH – EPHESIANS 4]

Most of us want to be changed, but is it really happening? As we prepare to celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ—Emanuel, God with us—in just a few days, are you being transformed? Do you ever wonder what it would take to transform **you** into something you are not?

I recently heard a story about a family from a remote area that was making their first visit to a big city. They checked into a grand hotel and stood in amazement at the impressive sight. Upon leaving the reception desk they came to the elevator entrance. There they saw something that they had never seen before. It was an elevator, and they just stared at it unable to figure out what it was for. Suddenly an elderly lady hobbled towards the elevator, the door opened and she went inside. The door closed, and soon, the door reopened and out came a good-looking young woman. The father just couldn't stop staring—first at the woman, next at the elevator. Then without turning his head, he nudged his son's arm and said, "Go get your mother, son!"

We might find humor in this man thinking that an elevator can transform an elderly lady into a gorgeous woman and want a little of the same, but haven't we been studying about something more miraculous than that over these past three weeks? Transformation from the inside out relying not on our power but that of Someone else? As we begin today, would anyone like to say our Memory Verse from **ROMANS 12:2 (NIV)**? *Do not conform any longer 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.*

As we wrap up the third week of our Bible study from Chip Ingram's book, *THE MIRACLE OF LIFE CHANGE*, when we think of transformation, what are we thinking of transforming from and to? [A LITTLE MORE LIKE THE "FRUIT OF THE SPIRIT"] What must happen for something or someone to be transformed? There must

be a **CHANGE** and today we want to know, bottom line, how we can be transformed. Where do we get the power?

Turn to **2 CORINTHINIANS 3:18 (NIV)** and listen to what Paul tells us about this change: *And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, **are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.*** We are being transformed into the likeness of Christ. I like the way the New Living Translation puts it: *"... as the Spirit of the Lord works within us, we become more and more like him and reflect his glory more and more."*

That's the goal. Not that we will lose our unique personalities, or become little *cookie-cutter* Christians. That's not what God wants. But he does want to change us, for the better. That process began on the day when we first trusted in Christ, and it will continue throughout our lives. We are to be more *Christlike*, but how? Is it something we can do if we just try harder, maybe pray more, read the Bible more, or maybe go to the right church?

Years ago in Germany, there was a young Jewish boy who had a profound sense of admiration for his father. His family's life centered on the acts of piety and devotion prescribed by their religion. The father was zealous in attending worship and religious instruction, and he demanded the same from his children. While the boy was a teenager, the family was forced to move to another town in Germany. There was no synagogue in the new town, and the pillars of the community all belonged to the Lutheran church. Suddenly the father announced to the family that they were going to abandon their Jewish traditions and join the Lutheran church. When the stunned family asked why, the father explained that changing religions was necessary to help his business. The youngster was bewildered and confused. His deep disappointment soon gave way to anger and a kind of intense bitterness that plagued him throughout his life. That disappointed son, disillusioned by his father's lack of integrity, eventually left Germany and went to England to study. He sat daily at the British Museum, formulating various ideas and writing a book. In that

work, he introduced an entirely new world-view, envisioning a movement that would change the social and political systems of the world. Drawing from past experiences with his father, he described religion as an "opiate for the masses" that could be explained totally in terms of economics and personal gain. Today, millions of people still live under the system invented by this embittered man, and millions more suffered under previous regimes that incorporated its values. His name, of course, was **Karl Marx**, and his idea was communism. And it all began with his father's misuse of the name of God for the sake of profit.

As we've learned in this study, God has commanded us to be transformed—Romans 12:2—but something we seem to forget is that He has also provided us with the power for that change, or morphing! However, there are still some individual responsibilities that each of us has along the way.

True or false, "life change begins with your own personal experience with Christ?" False! Life change begins with what? [TRUTH] Turn to **JOHN 8: 31-32 (NIV)** and follow along as Scripture confirms this for us: ³¹*To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my **disciples**.* ³²*Then you will know the **truth**, and the truth will set you free."* Who was passage this addressed to and what's the point? [TO JEWS WHO HAD BELIEVED IN HIM. THE POINT IS THAT THERE IS A **DISTINCTION** BETWEEN BELIEVERS AND DISCIPLES.] So, can you be a believer and not be a disciple? [YES] How? [HOLD TO MY TEACHING] Could we assume from Jesus' teaching in this passage that many church-goers are not disciples?

Transformation is fascinating to many of us, isn't it? How many of you have ever watched "Extreme Makeover?" How many of you would like to be the beneficiary of an *extreme makeover* or have wished that the show would visit you? Why do people like watching makeover shows so much?

The First Principle for the kind of *makeover* or *transformed* life that is expected of each one of us as a disciple of Christ is **truth**. The last night Jesus was on this earth He prayed. Listen to His words from **JOHN 17:17 (NLT)**: *"[Father], make them pure and holy."* And as He continues, He says **how**: *"By teaching them your words of truth."* Please don't miss the fact that He basically said, *"God, I want them to reflect who We are and what We're like."* And then He stated how that happens—by **truth!** Where do we get the truth? *We get the truth from God's Word. So, how can we get a hold of God's Word? And how does the truth set us free?*

For many, "knowing the truth" means personal autonomy, creativity, and freedom from oppression and ignorance, which they define as mental slavery. But Jesus didn't die to guarantee personal freedom of expression. So Jesus must have had some other kind of truth and freedom in mind. The error comes when we think of truth as a concept rather than God himself, which was the way Jesus used the term. Jesus clarified his meaning when he said, **"So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed" (8:36 NIV). By interchanging truth and Son, Jesus implied that granting freedom is God's work.** So Jesus promised freedom from slavery to sin. That freedom begins when we acknowledge our bondage to sin. Only God can free us through his forgiveness, which he made possible by Christ's death in our place on the cross. **Jesus' sacrifice did not free us "to do our own thing;" rather he freed us from doing our own thing so that we could serve him!** - Life Application Bible Commentary - John.

OK, so we begin with the truth, but is knowing the truth enough to be transformed? Or do we have to do something with the truth? The Second Principle of transformation is that we must **ACT** on the truth. And that kind of action goes by what name? [**FAITH**] Let me draw your attention to **HEBREWS 11:6 (NIV)**. Follow along as I read this great verse: *And without **faith** it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he **rewards** those who earnestly seek him.* *Why must we believe that God is a rewarder in order to draw near to Him?*

Recall our in-depth look last week at **Ephesians 4:7-10** about what happened to Christ between the cross and His resurrection, and how He descended into Hades or Sheol—invading the stronghold of evil—and conquered sin, death and Satan. That means you are free, you are forgiven, and you are secure. Sin has been utterly defeated, including your own sin. Now, Paul's picture of Christ's action in the grave implies that we become co-partakers

of Christ's victory over sin, death and Satan. We join the winning side the moment we receive Christ as our personal savior by faith. But we have to **ACT!** See, Christianity is not a religion of information or rules. God never intended it to be a religion. It's not about morality, oughts and should—though many think so. You can't really be **FREE**, as Christ says, if it's about something you do to change your lifestyle. Change is not about the clothes you wear or your hairstyle—it's about the heart. God intended it to be a breakthrough into a personal relationship with the Savior—Jesus Christ—that results in transformation. A breakthrough to remove the barrier of sin between Him and us forever.

Principle #3 for a transformed life is that "life change is both a gift and a responsibility." We all know of people who know **about** Christ and even intellectually believe in Him but have experienced very little genuine life-change. *Holy transformation* is something only God can accomplish in us! But, there are some specific responsibilities for each of us along this road of change. Since life change is both a gift and a responsibility, in what sense is it a **gift**? Can you think of some scripture passages to support this concept?

- JOHN 4:10 - Jesus answered her, "If you knew the **gift of God** and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water."
- ROMANS 5:16 - Again, the **gift of God** is not like the result of the one man's sin: The judgment followed one sin and brought condemnation, but the gift followed many trespasses and brought justification.
- ROMANS 6:23 - For the wages of sin is death, but the **gift of God** is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.
- EPHESIANS 2:8 - For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith--and this not from yourselves, it is the **gift of God**.

Now, let's talk about in what sense is it a **responsibility**?

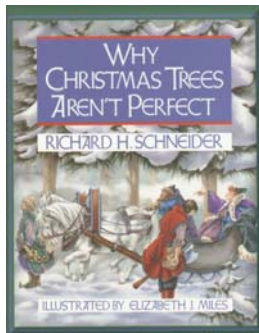
- ACTS 24:16 - So I strive always to keep my conscience clear before God and man.
- ROMANS 16:12 - Greet Tryphena and Tryphosa, those women who work hard in the Lord. Greet my dear friend Persis, another woman who has worked very hard in the Lord.
- 1COR 4:12 - We work hard with our own hands. When we are cursed, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure it;
- 1 THES 5:12 - Now we ask you, brothers, to respect those who work hard among you, who are over you in the Lord and who admonish you.
- 1 TIMOTHY 4:10 - (and for this we labor and strive), that we have put our hope in the living God, who is the Savior of all men, and especially of those who believe.

Let's look at what we receive in **EPHESIANS 4: 7 (NIV)**? *But to each one of us **grace** has been given as Christ apportioned it.* How does your translation have it?

- **GW:** God's favor has been given to each of us. It was measured out to us by Christ who gave it.
- **CEV:** Christ has generously divided out his gifts to us.
- **TEV:** Each one of us has received a special gift in proportion to what Christ has given.

Do we come to God to give or to get? It sounds very spiritual to suggest we come to give. However, we must realize He is the Provider, we are the need. He is the Wealth; we are the poverty. He has much; we have little. We need Him; not the other way around. Listen to these words by Paul from **PHILIPPIANS 1:6**: *"In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy . . . being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus."*

With Christmas just four days away, I want to relate a story about living a transformed life. It's a story I've read or told for 15 years to many of my classes called *"Why Christmas Trees Aren't Perfect,"* by Richard Schneider. I pray that your life will be transformed this Christmas season in much the same way. Now, here's the story:



They say that if you creep into an evergreen forest late at night you can hear the trees talking. If you listen very carefully to the whisper of the wind, you can hear the older pines telling the younger ones why they will never be perfect. they will always have a bent branch here, a gap there...

But long, long ago all evergreen trees were perfect. Each one took special pride in branches that sloped smoothly down from pointed top to evenly shaped skirt.

This was especially true in a small kingdom far beyond the Carpathian Mountains in Europe. Here the evergreen trees were the most beautiful of all. For here the sun shone just right, not too hot, not too dim. Here the rain fell just enough to keep the ground moist and soft so no tree went thirsty. And here the snow fell gently day after day to keep every branch fresh and green.

Each year as Christmas approached, the Queen's woodsmen would search the royal evergreen forest for the most perfect, most beautiful tree. The one fortunate enough to be chosen would be cut on the first Saturday of Advent. It would then be carefully carried to the castle and set up in the center of the great hall. There it reigned in honor for all the Christmas celebrations.

Out in the hushed forest every evergreen hoped for this honor. Each tree tried to grow its branches and needles to perfection. All of them strained to have the best form and appearance.

One tree, Small Pine, grew near the edge of the forest and promised to be the most beautiful of all. As a seedling it had listened carefully to the older trees who knew what was best for young saplings. And it had tried so very hard to grow just right. As a result, everything about Small Pine, from its deep sea-green color to the curling tip of its evenly spaced branches, was perfect.

It had, in fact, already overheard jealous whispers from the other trees. But it paid them no mind. Small Pine knew that if one did one's very best, what anyone else said didn't matter.

One cold night, when a bright full moon glittered on the crusty snow, a little gray rabbit came hopping as fast as he could into the grove of evergreens. The rabbit's furry sides heaved in panic. From beyond the hill came the howling of wild dogs in the thrill of the hunt. The bunny, his eyes wide with fright, frantically searched for cover. But the dark, cold trees lifted their branches artfully from the snow and frowned. They did not like this interruption of their quiet evening when growing was at its best. Faster and faster the rabbit circled as the excited howling of the dogs sounded louder and louder.

And then Small Pine's heart shuddered. When the terrified rabbit ran near, Small Pine dipped its lower branches down, down, down to the snow. And in that instant before the wild dogs broke into the grove, the rabbit slipped under Small Pine's evergreen screen. He huddled safely among the comforting branches while the dogs galloped by and disappeared into the forest.

In the morning the rabbit went home to his burrow, and Small Pine tried to lift its lower branches back up to their proper height. It strained and struggled, but the branches had been pressed down too long through the night. Oh well, Small Pine thought, no matter. Perhaps the woodsmen wouldn't notice a few uneven branches near the ground in a tree so beautiful.

Several days later a terrible blizzard lashed the land. No one remembered ever having so much wind and snow. Villagers slammed their shutters tight while birds and animals huddled in their nests and dens. A brown mother wren had become lost in the storm. With feathers so wet she could barely fly, she went from one large evergreen to another looking for a shelter. But each tree she approached feared the wren would ruin its perfect shape and clenched its branches tight, like a fist.

Finally, the exhausted wren fluttered toward Small Pine. Once more Small Pine's heart opened and so did its branches. The mother wren nestled on a branch near the top, secure at last. But when the storm ended and the bird had flown away, Small Pine could not move its top branches back into their perfect shape. In them would be a gap evermore.

Days passed and winter deepened. The packed snow had frozen so hard that the deer in the forest could not reach the tender ground moss, which they ate to survive. Only the older, stronger deer could dig through the icy snow with their hooves.

One little fawn had wandered away from his mother. Now he was starving. He inched into the pine grove and noticed the soft, tender evergreen tips. He tried to nibble on the, but every tree quickly withdrew its needles so the tiny deer teeth couldn't chew them.

Thin and weak, he staggered against Small Pine. Pity filled the tree's heart and it stretched out its soft needles for the starving fawn to eat. But alas, when the deer was strong enough to scamper away, Small Pine's branches looked very ragged. Small Pine wilted in sorrow. It could hear what the larger, still perfect trees were saying about how bad it looked. A tear of pine gum oozed from the tip of a branch. Small Pine knew it could never hope for the honor of being the Queen's Christmas tree.

Lost in despair, Small Pine did not see the good Queen come with the woodsmen into the forest. It was the first Saturday of Advent, and she had come to choose the finest tree herself because this was a special celebration year in the history of her kingdom. As the royal sleigh, drawn by two white horses, slowly passed through the forest, her careful eye scanned the evergreens. Each one was hoping to be the royal choice.

When the Queen saw Small Pine, a flush of anger filled her. How could such an ugly tree with so many drooping branches and gaps be allowed in the royal forest? She decided to have a woodsman cut it to throw away and nodded for the sleigh to drive on. But then...she raised her hand for the sleigh to stop and glanced back at the forlorn little pine. She noticed the tracks of small animals under its uneven needles. She saw a wren's feather caught in its branches. And, as she studied the gaping hole in its side and its ragged shape, understanding filled her heart. "This is the one," she said, and pointed to Small Pine. The woodsmen gasped, but they did as the queen directed.

To the astonishment of all the evergreens in the forest, Small Pine was carried away to the great hall in the castle. There it was decorated with shimmering, silver stars and golden angels, which sparkled and flashed in the light of thousands of glowing candles.

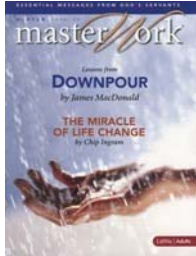
On Christmas Day a huge Yule log blazed in the fireplace at the end of the great hall. While orange flames chuckled and crackled, the Queen's family and all the villagers danced and sang together around Small Pine. And everyone who danced and sang around it said that Small Pine was the finest Christmas tree yet. For in looking at its drooping, nibbled branches, they saw the protecting arm of their father or the comforting lap of a mother. And some, like the wise Queen, say the love of Christ expressed on earth.

So if you walk among evergreens today, you will find, along with rabbits, birds, and other happy living things, many trees like Small Pine. You will see a drooping limb, which gives cover, a gap offering a warm resting place, or branches ragged from feeding hungry animals.

For, as have many of us, the trees have learned that living for the sake of others makes us most beautiful in the eyes of God.

EPHESIANS 4 (NIV) says, ***1As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received.*** How's your walk this Christmas season? Are you truly free and transformed?

Let's Pray.



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