

Title: How to Get Closer to God (Spiritual Health)

Transformed Sermon Series—Part 2

Welcome back to the Transformed Sermon Series. Last Sunday, we learned the four reasons for setting faith-filled goals in the seven major areas of our lives. These seven areas where God wants us experience transformation are our spiritual, physical, mental, emotional, relational, financial, and vocational health.

Before we dive into the very first area—our spiritual health—I want us to read our theme Scripture for the next seven Sundays: Romans chapter 12, verse 2. “Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.” As this Scripture indicates, renewing our minds is the foundation of transformation.

You see, transforming or changing something in our lives doesn’t start with our actions or our behaviours. We have to start with our thoughts, our wills, and our desires. If we can change the way we think, we will change the way we act. That is why the Bible says in Proverbs 16:32: “Better a patient person than a warrior, one with self-control than one who takes a city.” A person who can control their thoughts and guard their heart is stronger than a warrior who loses his mind and becomes unstable.

There is a common English idiom I really like is “It’s not the end of the world.” As you know, it’s a way of telling someone that a current crisis or mistake isn’t catastrophic as it feels in the moment. I believe this modern idiom can provide a profound biblical perspective on our journey of faith. When we, as children of God, guard our hearts and rely on His mighty, merciful presence, we can overcome any difficulty. We become more mature followers of Christ because God uses every single trial for our ultimate growth. Transformation shifts us from defeat, discouragement, and failure into courage, confidence, and victory. This is why changing the way is so crucial.

The truth is this: The closer we get to God, the more our lives are going to be transformed. That is exactly why we are all gathered here today. Because of our sinful human nature, we have a natural tendency to drift away from God. As the prophet Isaiah reminds us: “We all, like sheep, have gone astray. Each of us has turned to our own way” (Isaiah 53:6). If we have fallen away from God, we need to restore our relationship with Him. Fortunately, Scripture is filled with stories that shows us the way back. When Isaiah got close to God, he was transformed from a state of deep discouragement to standing courageously as a prophet. When Paul finally met Jesus Christ face-to-face on the road to Damascus, he was radically transformed from a persecutor of Christians into the man who spread Christianity throughout the Roman world. And as Moses grew closer to God, he was transformed from a privileged prince of Egypt into a humble leader guiding God’s people to freedom.

In today’s Scripture, Jesus tells a beautiful story about this exact of transformation—the story of the Prodigal Son and his loving father. From this powerful parable, we are going to learn four distinct steps on how to get closer to God after we have wandered away.

The first step to getting closer to God is to get completely fed up—to get tired of the way we have been living. In our text for today, we find a father and his two sons. The younger son comes to his father and says, "Father, give me my share of the estate" (Luke 15:12). In those days, it wasn't unusual for a father to distribute his property to his children before he passed away. There was also nothing wrong with a child leaving home. It is natural for young people to grow up, leave the nest, and seek independence. Many parents, including my wife and I, hope and pray that our children become independent both spiritually and financially when they become adults. The real issue in this story is not the inheritance. It is the younger son's attitude toward his father. The son wanted to get as far away from his father as he possibly could, the moment he got his hands on the money. He didn't care about his father's feelings.

And not long after he left, he wasted everything—his money, his time, and his energy. He ended up living an immoral life. One Bible commentators put it beautifully: "The far country is not measured by distance...Wherever you are out of fellowship with God, your life is a far country." We don't know every detail of the reckless lifestyle he lived, but we do know he hit rock bottom. A severe famine struck the land, and he found himself in a miserable, desperate situation. He was starving so badly that he longed to fill his stomach with the pods he was feeding to the pigs. Right there in the mud, he finally realized how terrible his life had become since he walked away from his father. He didn't want to live that way for one more day. By the grace of God, he began to realize how hopeless and powerless he had become. He got fed up with his life.

We often say, or hear others say, "I just can't take it anymore." We all face difficult seasons where we struggle to move forward or even look toward the future. But I want you to know something vital today: Nothing is going to change in our lives until we decide that we are completely tired of the way we are living. Whether we realize it or not, we live in a broken world... Even our own bodies don't work perfectly. I know I've felt that truth on many occasions. Everything around us is fractured.

Friends, if we are honest, we all have things inside of us that we don't like. I'm not just talking about the things God doesn't like; I'm talking about the habits, the patterns, and the flaws that we don't even like about ourselves. The first starting point of spiritual transformation is confessing that we are at the end of our rope. God is ready to transform our spiritual health, but He waits for us to be desperate enough to ask for His help. The first step is to get discontent, to get disgusted, to get utterly fed up with our current condition.

Look at what God says in Jeremiah 29:13: "You will find me when you get serious about finding me." God is not going to reveal Himself to us if we are just seeking Him casually. We have to want Him more than anything else. We have to come to the point where we say, "There has got to be a better way to live than this." Are we ready to say that today? Are we ready to say, "I am tired of repeating the same mistakes. I am tired of living with the same hurts, habits, and hang-ups that have weighed me down for years?" We have to get fed up. That is where true, humble confession begins.

The second step to getting closer to God is to own up to our sin. We must have the courage to face our mistakes, admit our failures, and tell the truth about the mess we are in. This is exactly what the younger son did. When he finally came to his senses, he didn't make excuses. He said, "I have sinned against heaven and against you..." (Luke 15:18).

Let me ask you: Have any of us here experienced that kind of attitude toward our earthly fathers, or toward our Heavenly Father? When we read this story, we often assume the Prodigal Son represents non-believers, or perhaps people who have walked completely away from the church. But we need to remember that this parable was also written for us—as God's children. Whether we like to admit it or not, we too can be this lost child. There is nothing wrong with having personal interests and enjoying our time. But we grieve our Heavenly Father when we withdraw from His presence, live entirely on our own terms, and follow only our own desires.

Friends, if our hearts are far from our Creator, we are acting just like that younger son. We need to repent of our attitudes that break God's heart, and we need to ask Him for His forgiveness. We need to face the fact that we have not been living God's way. Even though we've accepted Jesus as our Saviour, we still try to live our own way from time to time. Even though we ask Him to lead us, we constantly try to wrestle away His authority and control everything around us. Have we ever prayed and felt like God was a million miles away? Where does that distance come from? The Bible tells us plainly in Isaiah 59:2: "Your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden His face from you..." God didn't move. God has always been right here. The barrier is created by our own sins.

The Apostle Paul says, "Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you—unless, of course, you fail the test?" (2 Corinthians 13:5). Thomas Watson, a great Puritan theologian who helped shape the Westminster Catechism, said something like this: "We need the two great graces to fly to heaven: faith and repentance." That is why Jesus preached the message of repentance before He spoke about the kingdom of God.

We often think that because we are saved, our spiritual life is a finished product. But salvation is much more like a lifelong home renovation project. It has a definite, glorious beginning, but there is a massive amount of work that must happen before it is complete. The moment we first believed in Jesus, we became children of God—that is our secure position. But our inner being, our heart, must be sanctified day by day. Most of us go to the doctor for an annual physical check-up to monitor our physical health.

In the exact same way, we need regular check-ups for our spiritual health. We need to pray like the Psalmist: "Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting" (Psalm 139: 23-24). If we discover anything in our minds or hearts that is not right before God, we need to deal with it immediately, confessing it before it grows into a much bigger problem. What is God's response when we finally own up to our mess? Does He cast us away? No! The Lord says in Isaiah 1:18: "Though your sins are like scarlet,

they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool” (Isaiah 1:18). Isn’t that a beautiful promise? No matter what we’ve done, no matter how far we have drifted, He can wash it completely away. That is the unbreakable promise of our God.

The third step to getting back to God is this: We must offer up ourselves completely to Him. Have you ever noticed some of the differences between the state of the younger son when he left home and when he returned? One obvious difference is his appearance. He left home well-dressed, but he arrived home dirty. But there is a much deeper difference, and we see it in the petition he made to his father. Before he left home, he demanded what he wanted. He said, “Give me – Father, give me my share of the estate” (Luke 15:12). But look at what happens when he comes back home. He humbly asked, “Make me—Father, make me like one of Your hired servants” (Luke 15:19). He finally respected his father’s authority. That is the heart of transformation. Do we find ourselves constantly saying to God, “Give me, give me, give me”? Or do we have the humility to say, “Father, make me your servant”? When our heart moves from self-centeredness to God-centeredness, that is true spiritual transformation. It does not happen overnight. It is never instant. But it always starts with a definitive decision to surrender.

It is so vital for us to notice the father’s response in this story: “So he got up and went to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him” (Luke 15:20). The father did not sit on the porch waiting for the son to come home. While the boy was still distant, he ran. Someone once noted that this is “the only time in the entire Bible where God is pictured as being in a hurry.” What an amazing, beautiful scene of reunion! The exact moment we say, “God, I am tired of living the way I have been living. I am tired of running,” He runs out to meet us. God is not waiting for us to knock on the door while He decides whether or not to let us in. He takes the initiative. He throws His arms around us because He has a far better plan for our lives than we could ever imagine.

There is a powerful illustration about a caterpillar crawling across a magnificent Persian carpet... We are all called to live with the expectation of resurrection—to set our minds on the things above, not on earthly matters. We were made for a better life, a life of spiritual height that we cannot even fathom when we are stuck on the ground. God did not design us to crawl through the dirt forever. God made us to fly. He made us to soar. He made us to be beautiful! So, the choice is ours today: Do we want to live out the beautiful, transformed life of a butterfly, or do we remain caterpillars, trapped in a single color? Today, Christ invites us to offer ourselves into His hands, so that He can take our fallen human nature and transform it into something sacred, beautiful, and new.

Finally, the fourth step to getting back to God is this: We must lift up our praise. Listen to what the father says when his boy returns: “Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him... Let’s have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found. So they began to celebrate” (Luke 15:22-24). Life becomes a true celebration when transformation takes place! Notice that the father didn’t welcome the son back with condemnation; he welcomed him back with a celebration.

In a discouraging world, the church is one of the very few places left where we can sing freely and joyfully alongside our brothers and sisters in Christ. We are given the incredible privilege to gather—whether right here in the sanctified sanctuary or joining us online via Zoom—to lift our spirits together. Think about it: If we didn't come to church on Sundays, how many of us would actually sit down and sing entire verses of hymns during the week? I truly believe that praising the Lord is a form of sacred medicine.

Some of us might be familiar with the book “Imperfect Harmony: Finding Happiness Singing with Others” by Stacy Horn... Studies show that when people sing together, their heartbeats actually synchronize, significantly lowering rates of anxiety, depression, and loneliness. Another study even shows that people who regularly attend worship services and sing every Sunday tend to live longer, healthier lives.

We have so much to be grateful for—God's constant provision and His protection over our loved ones and ourselves. The Lord, our Creator, blesses us in ways too numerous to count, and He desires for us to sing to Him, reflecting on all the wonderful things He has done. However, I know there are times when we struggle to find the motivation to praise God because of the heavy situations we face. We might stop praising Him when we feel like we have nothing left to thank Him for. We might stop singing when He feels a million miles away. But as I have often asked you before, let us take a moment right now to reflect on just how truly blessed we are. Think about the small, ordinary gifts we take for granted every single day—breathing, thinking, walking, eating. Recognizing these simple blessings draws us right back into God's presence. Every single one of us can thank God for the privilege of waking up this morning. We can thank Him for this opportunity to gather—in person or online—to lift our spirits to Him.

Now, some of us might be sitting out there thinking, “Caleb, I just can't carry a tune. I can't sing on pitch.” But listen to what the Psalmist says: “Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth! Serve the Lord with gladness! Come into his presence with singing!” (Psalm 100: 1-2, ESV). Notice it says a joyful noise! Anybody can make a noise. We can all do that! God is deeply pleased with us whether we hit the right notes or not. Our Heavenly Father delights in any sound His creation makes for Him, using the natural voice He gave them.

When we truly stop to think about God's grace, we should be absolutely overwhelmed. It should make our hearts burst with a desire to worship. You know, the word “worship” is related to the word “worth.” When we worship, we are declaring God's worth. True, spiritual worship is entirely about the attitude of our hearts. Jesus echoed this when He gave us the first and greatest commandment: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind” (Matthew 22:37). God wants us to be fully engaged in His praise—giving Him all of our passion, all of our intellect, and all of strength. He wants one hundred percent of who we are. Because when we honest with ourselves, we know there is no way we deserved this kind of welcoming party, this kind of loving celebration, when we finally stumbled back home.

Today, we have looked at what it takes to truly get closer to God and renew our spiritual health through the lens of this powerful Gospel story. Like the younger son, it is time for us to come to God and admit when we are fed up. Fed up with the way we've been living, and tired of trying to do everything in our own limited power. It is time to own up and realize that God has not moved—we have. The only reason we feel distant from Him is because we have allowed other things to take His rightful place in our hearts. But today, we can offer up ourselves. This morning, let us stop asking God, "Give me, give me, give me," and instead cry out, "Father, make me, make me, make me Your servant." Let us lift up our praise, making melody in our hearts and with our voices to the One who loves us unconditionally. My prayer for each of us today is that Lord will radically transform our minds, restore our spiritual health, and pour out His supernatural blessings upon our lives—both today and in all the days ahead.

**In this sermon, I have used some material from the sermon series "Transformed," which Pastor Rick Warren prepared based on Luke 15:11-24.*