

TOOL #2: BECOMING

LUKE 7:1-10; HEBREWS 11:6

Did you know there's only one time when the Bible says Jesus was amazed in a positive way by someone else's actions or words? Jesus was amazing and He Himself amazed a lot of people, but only once does the Bible say He was amazed in a positive sense by someone else. Let's read about when it happened. What amazed Jesus about this centurion? He had great faith. The centurion knew what it was like to tell a soldier to go over there and do this or go over there and do that and it would happen. He personally didn't have to be present to be sure his wishes were carried out. The centurion sized Jesus up accurately. He knew Jesus had the power to heal physical illness. It wasn't necessary for Jesus to come to his house for his servant to be healed. All Jesus had to do was say the word and it would happen. That's faith. Jesus was very impressed – "amazed" is the word. There's several times in the Gospels where Jesus is amazed in a negative sense because the people involved showed such little faith in God. The centurion is the only person who ever amazed Jesus in a positive way. And it had to do with faith.

As I've lived out my own relationship with God and as I've served as a pastor, I've realized that God wants to develop something in us above anything else: faith and trust in Him. That's where a relationship with God begins – not with going to church, doing good deeds or obeying a set of rules. A relationship with God only ever begins with trusting in Jesus. But you continue to learn new lessons in what it means to trust God throughout your life. The Bible says, "And it is impossible to please God without faith. Anyone who wants to come to him must believe that God exists and that he rewards those who sincerely seek him." (Heb 11:6 NLT) In other words, Bible knowledge is important, but the growth of your faith is more important. Serving the poor is important, but the growth of your faith is more important. At the end of the day, spiritual maturity is maturity of your faith. Spiritual growth is growth in your faith.

Now we're in the midst of a four Sunday consideration of our new mission and vision statements. We're calling this message series "Mission Possible." Let's recite our mission statement together as a way of reminding us of it and reinforcing its message. "We seek to glorify God by building a family of believers passionate about Him where people are loved the way they are, urged to become more like Christ and equipped to share Christ in word and deed." A couple of weeks ago we looked at the first phrase of that statement: "We seek to glorify God by building a family of believers passionate about Him...." That's our target: the glory of God. God's glory is the goal and the bottom line of everything we want to be and do as a church. Last Sunday we considered the next phrase: "...where people are loved the way they are...." That's the first tool of three that will help us achieve the goal of bringing glory to God. We call it "belonging." The next phrase in the mission statement is what I want to consider with you today: "...urged to become more like Christ...." That's the second tool that will help us achieve the goal of bringing glory to God. We call it "becoming."

Glenn Myres sent me some audio files a few weeks ago because he thought it might help me with today's message. Was he ever right! I want to give full credit to Pastor Andy Stanley down in Georgia for the main ideas of today's message. Sometimes you hear something that you already know, but it's shared in such an insightful way you just want to pass it along. Andy Stanley and his church have asked the questions, "What causes people to grow in their faith? What factors help people develop greater trust in God?" He describes five faith catalysts that are almost universally true of all Jesus followers. His insights fall right in line with this whole idea of "becoming"—the second tool to help us glorify God.

Faith looks different at different times in your life. There's six year old faith. You believe "Jesus loves me; this I know for the Bible tells me so." There's sixteen year old faith. Maybe it's choosing not to cheat on a test although you're strongly tempted to do so or saying no to drug use. There's "single, just out of college" faith when you realize very few people your age share your worldview or practice biblical morality. There's newly married faith - finding God's help to deal with this important new relationship. There's "having your first child" faith - trusting God for the welfare of your child and how to raise him or her wisely. There's "parenting a teenager" faith. I don't have to elaborate on that one, do I? There's faith when you enter into retirement. "What do I do with my life now?" There's "facing a tragedy" faith – the death of a loved one, the death of a marriage or dealing with a life threatening illness. Faith looks different at different times in your life.

But even though the issues are different, you end up asking the same question: "How do I trust God when...?" Real faith will look different at different times in your life. But, here's something very interesting. If you're growing in your faith, these five faith catalysts will be true of your life at all times and in all stages of your life although they will look and feel different. It's not as if you experience the first catalyst and then leave it behind so you can move on to the second one. No, you can and should experience all of them but they will look and feel different as you move from one stage in your life to the next. If that sounds a little murky to you, let's get into it and you'll see what I mean. Faith catalyst number one:

BECOMING DEPENDS ON PRACTICAL TEACHING.

People who are growing in their faith consistently point to the importance of having received practical teaching from the Bible throughout their lives. But this is more than just cramming your brain full of Bible facts. I love doing Hebrew and Greek word studies. I love to research the historical and literary background of a biblical passage. But as important as is knowledge about the Bible, putting it into practice in your everyday life is the bottom line. Jesus Himself spoke about this at the end of what we call his Sermon on the Mount. He says, "Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because

it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash.” (Mt. 7:24-27 NIV) Hearing... learning... studying the Bible is great, but doing what it says is what matters.

James writes, “Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like.” (Jm 1:22-24 NIV) You know about that first glimpse in the mirror when you get up, right? Your hair is standing up on end, there’s debris in the corner of your eyes and your face is puffy. What if you looked in the mirror, saw the wreckage from what happened during the night and then just walked out the door and went off to work, or school or your daily activities without fixing anything? That’s what a person is like who hears or reads God’s Word but never applies its truths to his or her life.

Someone has said that unapplied truth is like unapplied paint. Imagine that my house was desperately in need of a coat of paint. You say, “Rick, you have a nice home, but it’s looking kind of shabby.” I say, “You’re right. And two years ago I went to Home Depot and bought the paint. I have the paint right here.” You’d have every right to say, “Rick, you’re such a dope. If you have the paint, use it! Put the paint on!” When you apply God’s Word to your life, your faith grows. Let’s say someone close to you betrayed you. When you start to put into practice what the Bible says about forgiveness, your faith will grow. When your faith intersects with God’s instruction, God shows up, your faith grows and your faith gets bigger. Practical teaching is needed in every phase of life: when you’re a kid, a teenager, middle aged or a senior citizen. The issues and the lessons will be different, but the need remains the same. Whether its Sunday School classes, small groups, special studies, Wednesday night clubs, may I encourage every teacher here today to make sure your students know the practical impact of what’s being taught. You can’t apply it to a student’s life for him or for her, but you can certainly make sure that they understand the practical application of God’s Word to his or her life. Faith catalyst number two:

BECOMING DEPENDS ON PROVIDENTIAL RELATIONSHIPS.

People who have experienced spiritual growth in their lives point to key people who they believe God brought into their lives at key moments. It might have been the person who led you to Christ. It may have been godly parents. That’s true for me. My parents – especially my mother – have had more effect on me spiritually than anyone else. It may have been someone who rebuked you when you were drifting away from Jesus. It may have been someone who walked with you through illness, divorce or the death of a loved one by providing godly encouragement. God just put that person in your pathway at the right time and because of the relationship, your faith got bigger.

The Bible says, “A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for adversity.... A man of many companions may come to ruin, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother.” (Pr 17:17 NIV, 18:24 NLT) It’s describing providential relationships. You see some of those relationships in the Bible. Do you remember the providential relationship of Ruth and her mother-in-law, Naomi? How about David’s relationship with Jonathan, King Saul’s son? Elisha was mentored by a providential relationship with an older prophet, Elijah. Where would Timothy have been without his relationship with the apostle Paul?

A local church can never create providential relationships. But it can create environments where God can create them: club programs, our tutoring ministry, our mentoring ministry, Sunday School classes, small groups and serving with others on ministry teams and projects. Again, there will be different people in different phases of your life: a wonderful Sunday School teacher when you’re a child, a fellow student in college who models love for Jesus, an older Christian who takes an interest in you and cares enough to discuss matters of faith and life with you or someone who speaks God’s grace, love and strength into your life when you go through one of life’s disasters. Faith catalyst number three:

BECOMING DEPENDS ON PRIVATE DISCIPLINES.

These are the things you do on your own to maintain your relationship with God and grow in your faith. It includes reading the Bible on your own, praying, fasting, tithing, memorizing scripture and journaling. In Matthew 6, Jesus called them “acts of righteousness” and He talks about three of them there: giving, prayer and fasting. He says, “Be careful not to do your 'acts of righteousness' before men, to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven.” (Mt 6:1 NIV). Notice Jesus’ emphasis on the privacy of these practices. This is just between you and God. You don’t broadcast or brag about this stuff. But notice that Jesus talks about a reward as well. Look at what He says about prayer, “But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.” (Mt. 6:6 NIV) So, what’s the reward? God doesn’t send your bank account \$100. If He did, chances are you’d pray a whole lot more! Me, too! The reward is spiritual growth... growth in your faith.

People who are growing in their faith point to the development of these private spiritual disciplines as very important. They started having a regular quiet time that including reading the Bible and prayer. In doing so, they learned to hear God speak to them personally at times. They stepped out in faith and started to tithe. They began memorizing scripture. They fasted through a crisis time in their lives and found it brought meaning to their struggle. Why do I call them “disciplines”? It’s a discipline because you have to decide to do it. They never just happen. You have to take the personal initiative to make them happen. They’re disciplines because many times they don’t bring an immediate reward. Instead, there’s a

long term spiritual benefit that emerges only after you do it for awhile. It's sort of like the discipline of working out physically. Not much immediate reward is there, but long term there are all kinds of benefits. Faith catalyst number four:

BECOMING DEPENDS ON PIVOTAL CIRCUMSTANCES.

People who grow in their faith point to one or more life-changing circumstances that God brought them through. As a direct result, their faith got bigger. Yes, it can be wonderful, positive circumstances. "My husband got this huge raise, and suddenly we were able to give so much more to God's work. I got this great job and now I have more opportunities to minister to people than ever before." That can happen. But more often than not, pivotal circumstances are deeply painful, very difficult circumstances that test your faith in God like nothing else. It can be many things and many different things at different stages in life: the divorce of your parents... suffering abuse of some kind... losing a job... taking care of aging parents... dealing with a life threatening illness... the death of a loved one... living with a prodigal child. Many of you know that I went through a divorce almost twenty years ago now. It was – up to this point in time – the single worst experience in my life. It was like someone scooped out all of my insides, put all of it into a big spiritual/emotional blender and pushed the start button. Anger. Fear. Guilt. Despair. Where was God? What about my kids? What happens now? Where do I go from here? But in that circumstance and through that circumstance I learned to trust in God like never before. I would never wish that circumstance on my worst enemy, but I must admit – my faith grew.

I think Paul was referring to just this kind of thing when he wrote, "We think you ought to know, dear brothers and sisters, about the trouble we went through in the province of Asia. We were crushed and overwhelmed beyond our ability to endure, and we thought we would never live through it. In fact, we expected to die. But as a result, we stopped relying on ourselves and learned to rely only on God, who raises the dead. And he did rescue us from mortal danger, and he will rescue us again. We have placed our confidence in him, and he will continue to rescue us." (2 Cor 1:8-10 NLT) What happened to Paul? His faith grew!

James writes, "Dear brothers and sisters, when troubles come your way, consider it an opportunity for great joy. For you know that when your faith is tested, your endurance has a chance to grow." (Jam 1:2-3 NLT) James is talking about those moments in your life when you ask, "God, can I really trust You in this?" And the Holy Spirit helps you say, "God, I hate this circumstance, but I'm going to trust You anyway." Again, a local church can't create pivotal circumstances in people's lives. God allows them. But we can create groups to help you through them – like Divorce Care, or groups to help those who are grieving, or substance abuse groups. We can rejoice with you when you share a testimony of how God has grown your faith through your own unique pivotal circumstance. I think of Doug Murray's testimony last Sunday about having a special needs child. We all get built up and encouraged when someone stands

up and suggests, "God is getting me through my pivotal circumstance. He'll do the same for you." Here's a final faith catalyst for your consideration:

BECOMING DEPENDS ON PERSONAL MINISTRY.

People who are growing in their faith point to personal ministry as critical to their spiritual growth. But it's not just any kind of personal ministry – it's personal ministry that stretches them and gets them out of their comfort zone. "I went on that mission trip and I didn't know if I was going to be able to do it. I hate to travel. I'm a "germaphobe". But God used me to touch people's lives on that trip... Someone asked me to work with middle school aged boys and I was terrified. But I did it and now I look forward every week to being with those boys.... I went downtown and helped feed the homeless. I was scared spit less! But God gave me all kinds of compassion for those dear people."

Jesus would do this to His disciples on occasion. Do you remember the story of when He miraculously fed the 5,000 using just two fish and five little loaves of bread? Before He did that, however, the disciples came to Him and said, "... 'This is a remote place, and it's already getting late. Send the crowds away so they can go to the villages and buy food for themselves.' But Jesus said, 'That isn't necessary—you feed them.'" (Mt 14:15-16 NLT) You learn to trust God when you're put into situations that are bigger than you. When in your ministry to others you move from your own inadequacy into God's adequacy, your faith grows. It gets bigger. I like to think that our church should always be challenging you to move out of your current comfort zone when it comes to doing personal ministry. We should be asking you to go out and do something in our community or something here at church that gets you out of your little bubble of comfort. When you do that your faith will grow. You learn to do what you can do and then you trust God to do what only He can do. And when you experience that on a personal level, your faith gets bigger.

Vance is an African American living in a predominately Hispanic neighborhood. He stands out for that reason. But Vance cares not only for his own kids, but also for the many other kids who play in the streets by his building. One night there was a knock at Vance's door. The 16-year-old boy who lives a few doors down needed help tying his tie. He had a big presentation at school the next day, and he had no father to help him get ready. After Vance had finished tying the tie, the boy sheepishly asked, "Do you have a pair of black dress shoes I could borrow?" Immediately, the Holy Spirit brought to Vance's mind the \$60 pair of shoes in his closet that he hadn't even taken out of the box yet. He was certain God was telling him to give the boy those shoes. Vance cringed inside. He told the boy to wait at the door as he headed into the apartment to look for any pair of shoes *but* the expensive pair. Before he went to the closet, though, he told his wife what he sensed the Spirit was saying to him. She agreed that it sounded like God had given him a great idea. So Vance got out his new shoes and brought them to the boy. His last hope was that they wouldn't fit. After all, how many 16-year-olds

have size-12 feet? They fit perfectly. Just a few weeks after Vance gave away his new shoes, he and his wife sensed God telling them to start a Bible study for the kids in their building. They decided to invite the kids to their apartment for a Sunday evening study. They ordered four Bibles in case any kids came. That Sunday, seven kids showed up at Vance's apartment—led by the 16-year-old owner of a new pair of shoes. The following week they ordered more Bibles, and 14 kids showed up! Who would have thought the kingdom of God would come to the kids of that apartment complex just because one man chose to give away a new pair of shoes? That's what happens when you engage in personal ministry that stretches you! Your faith gets bigger and God is glorified.

The community around this church doesn't need just another church. It doesn't necessarily need a big, mega-church either. What it needs is a church full of people who have a big faith in God. Becoming like Jesus. How does that happen? Practical teaching... providential relationships... private disciplines... pivotal circumstances... personal ministry. Mission Possible. This mission is only possible if it comes from God and isn't just the figment of our own imagination or an expression of our own desires. This mission is only possible if it is owned and lived out by more people than just the staff or just the members of the Long Range Planning Ministry Team or just the Ministry Council. It will become mission possible only when the whole congregation owns it and live it out. Will you help us? Will you join us?