

“How Can We Become Better People?” II Cor. 5:17      10/1/17

In a Calvin and Hobbes comic strip, 6 year-old Calvin says, “I feel bad that I called Susie names and hurt her feelings. I’m sorry that I did that.” His stuffed tiger friend, Hobbes, replies, “Maybe you should apologize to her.” To which Calvin responds, “I keep hoping there’s a less obvious solution!” The last couple weeks, we’ve focused on a verse from II Cor. 5:17. Say it with me. *“<sup>17</sup>So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!”*

But, as Calvin reminds us, becoming new people isn’t easy, even when we understand what we need to do! Anyone who has tried to change their diet, implement an exercise program, stop smoking, or cut back on their screen time, knows how difficult changing habits can be. Today, we’re going to focus on how we become new. Let’s look at the two verses that follow verse 17. *<sup>18</sup>All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; <sup>19</sup>that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us.*

Notice two things. First, “making all things new” is God’s work. We can cooperate with it or resist, but “making all things new” is God’s work. And one of the ways that we’re made new, made into better people, is that we have a different relationship with God. Because of the life, death, and

resurrection of Jesus, we have been reconciled to God; God no longer holds our sins against us! That is wonderful news and it transforms our relationship with God. From the beginning, sin has had the effect of putting us at odds with God. Remember what Adam and Eve did after they sinned? They hid from God! Many of us, feeling guilt, or shame, or fear, spend a lot of time hiding from God, or trying to appease him with all our good deeds. But since we have been reconciled to God, there is no need for hiding or appeasing or feeling guilty. Your sins are forgiven! So, let them God, like God has! God is now your friend; You are reconciled with him.

And, it is through our new relationship with God that the changes in our human relationships that we talked about last week are possible. It is through a growing relationship with God that we become aware of the ways we need to change, and are empowered by God's Spirit to make those changes. So let's talk a bit about how that relationship with God can grow and be nurtured.

We'll begin with the influence of other people. For some people, it is through their families. In his second letter to a young pastor named Timothy, Paul said this: “<sup>5</sup>*I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that lived first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, lives in you.*” (II Tim. 1:5) Timothy's grandmother and mother passed

the faith along to Timothy. That's how many of us come to faith, through the words and example of family members- parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles, or older siblings. I'm going to preach about how families can do a better job of this in a couple weeks.

God also uses other people to help us in our relationship with God. Peter wrote these words. *Now as an elder myself and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as one who shares in the glory to be revealed, I exhort the elders among you<sup>2</sup> to tend the flock of God that is in your charge, exercising the oversight, not under compulsion but willingly, as God would have you do it—not for sordid gain but eagerly.* (1 Peter 5:1,2)

Church leaders- pastors, elders, deacons, Sunday School teachers, youth group leaders, VBS workers, choir and music directors- church leaders can help influence our relationship with God. I remember how much I admired my high school church youth director! I wanted to be like him, and since he was a serious follower of Jesus, I found myself wanting to be one, too.

God uses church leaders to help us grow in our relationship with God. Are there church leaders who have or are helping you grow closer to God? Or, if you are a leader are you passing the faith along to others? Is that a priority for you?

But it's not just leaders. God uses everyone who follows him to assist others in their faith journey. <sup>16</sup>*Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly;*

*teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God.* (Col. 3:16) “Teach and admonish one another...,” he writes. Christian friends can help each other learn to know God and encourage each other in faith. This may take place in classes, small groups, choirs, fellowship groups, or over coffee at the Ragged Edge.

Bonnie and I enjoy watching shows like those found on PBS and “The Discovery Channel,” which feature wildlife from remote and exotic places. One of the things we’ve learned from years of watching animals trying to survive other animals, is this: Don’t get separated from the herd! When an animal gets separated from the herd, look out! He or she may not be long for this world! It’s the same way in our relationship with God (except for all the blood and gore!). We’re not designed to grow in the relationship alone. We need the help of others. So, God provides people- families, leaders, and fellow believers- to help us grow.

God also helps us grow in our faith through the Scriptures. Later this month we will celebrate the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Protestant Reformation. One of the insights of the Reformers was that every believer can read and understand the scriptures, God’s Word to us. Now sometimes we need some assistance- a study Bible, or a group or class-

but God speaks to us through his Word. And as we study it more, we become better able to understand more and more of it.

Prayer is another important part of growing in our relationship with God. It provides us with an opportunity to listen to God and to talk to God. You might use a written prayer, like the Lord's Prayer, to guide your praying. But keep in mind that prayer with God doesn't always require getting down on your knees for extended periods of time, although those times are valuable. Brad Kent wrote this about prayer, "What I've discovered is I can be with God in many different ways. I don't have to come to God's presence with head bowed and hands folded. I now know that prayer can be as simple as breathing, as active as dancing, as noisy as singing, as quiet as sitting in silence, as repetitious as reciting a verse of scripture over and over, or as creative as shaping a lump of clay..." Prayer is talking to God and listening to God. And, as with any human relationship, it is often in conversation that our relationship with God deepens.

Teresa of Avila was leading a group of nuns walking to a new convent. They got caught in a downpour. They needed to cross over a swelling stream on a rickety bridge. She prayed, "Lord, let this bridge hold up so we can pass." The bridge collapsed. Teresa continued her prayer, "God, if this is how you treat your friends, no wonder you have so many

enemies!” Some of you may think that this is a sacrilegious prayer, but it is very similar to some prayers in the Bible, especially in the Psalms! People like Moses and David in the Old Testament can be direct and honest with God, just like they would be with a close friend. Prayer helps develop that kind of a relationship with God.

Finally, we grow closer to God through service. On three different occasions, the Apostle Paul wrote about the gifts and abilities God gives each one of us, instructing us to use them for God’s service. And Jesus says that in serving those in need, we are serving him in disguise! I have been going on and leading mission trips for over 40 years. One of the things I’ve noticed is that when we debrief at the end of a trip, inevitably people will talk about how their relationship with God has deepened. I think part of the reason for that is the service aspect of the trip. Service invites us to get outside of ourselves a little bit and see what God is up to among people in other places. Another part of it is that fact that we spend time in prayer and the study of God’s Word each day. Part of it is the way we see and hear how others- people in our own group, as well as people in the community we are serving- are seeing and experiencing God in their lives. All the practices that help us grow in our relationship with God are available on a mission trip. Maybe you should go on one!

God is in the business of making us new. Of helping us break habits of speaking or acting that are harmful to us or others. And giving us compassion and love for others. This isn't something that God only did in faraway biblical times. God is doing it now. Given the events in Charlottesville, I thought this recent story from the Charlotte Observer Newspaper provides a timely example of this. "Nicholtown Presbyterian Church, a predominately black church in South Carolina, received an anonymous gift of \$2000 just when it was seeking grant money to help transport children to church and feed them breakfast. The gift included a typed letter in which the donor said he was a former racist who had been changed by Jesus and the Holy Spirit, working through the church." This is powerful stuff!

*"<sup>17</sup>So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!"* (II Cor. 5:17) That includes racists in South Carolina, and racists here in Pennsylvania. It includes those driven by greed, and those who are callous to the needs of others. It includes those who are sexually lost and those who withhold their love from those who need it. It includes those who gossip and slander others and those who refuse to forgive a wrong done to them. It includes those who confuse what is truly important from that which really doesn't matter. It includes you. And it includes me! Thank God!

I'd like to close with a poem written by the pastor of the Presbyterian Church in Newville. I'll read the lines marked "L." You'll read the lines marked "C" (for congregation!). And we'll both read the lines marked "A."

### New Creation

- L The old me is reckless in my speech
- C The new me brings healing with my words.
- A Out with the old, in with the new.
- L The old me deserves what I want
- C The new me is grateful for what I have
- A Out with the old, in with the new.
- L The old me is easily embittered
- C The new me wrestles with forgiveness
- A Out with the old, in with the new.
- L The old me asks, "What about me?"
- C The new me asks, "What can I do for you?"
- A Out with the old, in with the new.

L The old me is a creation of the world

C The new, who the Creator intends me to be

A Out with the old, in with the new.

Rev. Vern Gauthier

Let's pray.