

2014 January 12 "We wants It, we needs It, must have the precious.": What Entangles You? And Why? Ephesians 4:17-24 (series: *Hope for Change*) Jeff Rickett

*(Pastor Randy Lovelace is speaking)*

So this month of January we are doing a shorter series, a miniseries, if you will, on how do we change. Is there hope for change? By change we mean what does it look like when the gospel is at work in our character, and our relationships, and our lives. Is there hope for change? And so in this series it is beginning to prepare us for one of the classes that will be offered this spring called, "How People Change." And it is written and designed by Christian Counseling Educational Foundation, particularly Paul Tripp and Timothy Lane. So we wanted to do a short series preparing for that, with it being the new year, and looking at the nature of change, biblically.

And so one of the blessings that we have this morning is to have Pastor Jeff Rickett with us, and he is going to be joining us in just a second. But I wanted to say just a brief word, a couple of things. First, we've been very blessed in this community that we have a number of resources for Christian biblical counseling. One of those is Christian Counseling Associates, which was begun by Ken and Mae Beth Williams, [two] of our members and long-time faithful folks here. And another is Heart Song Christian Counseling, and Jeff Rickett was one of the founding partners for that ministry. And so he will be team-teaching this class with me this spring. And so we thought it appropriate that we ask him to come and take part in this sermon series.

Jeff and I were seminary mates together, and we got to know each other really well as we prepared for the fiery trial of ordination exams. And so we met weekly for six months to prepare and to memorize the Shorter Catechism of the Westminster Confession of Faith. It was a growing time, a growing time in our friendship. We wouldn't have thought it possible that indeed he would be back here in Maryland, of which he is a native, and God would lead us here. So it is my great pleasure to invite him to come and lead us in the preaching of God's Word this morning. (If you don't mind, could you turn down those spots just a little bit, because he needs a little less light facing him. So just give us a little less light. Thank you.) Bring us God's Word.

*(Pastor Jeff Rickett speaking)*

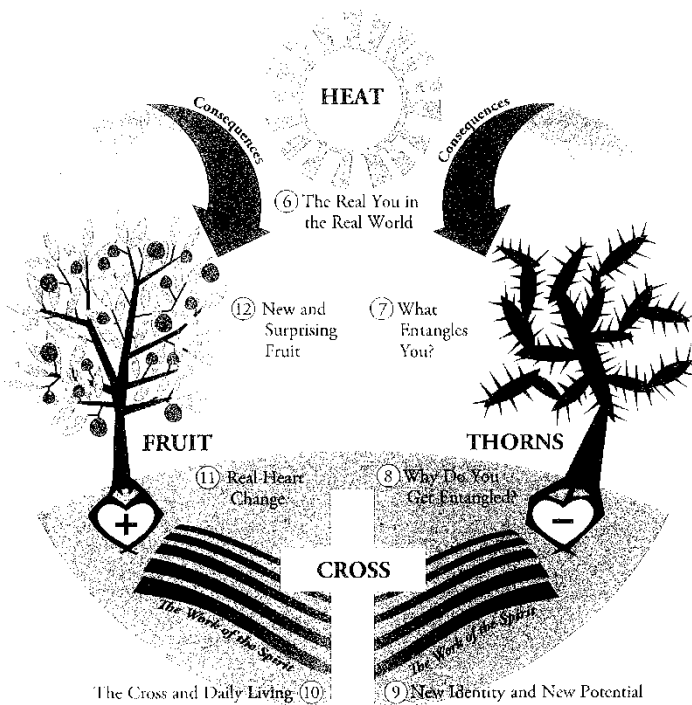
Good morning. Last year you were recently married, as well, correct? *What?* Didn't you get married that last year in seminary? *I did. That's exactly right. I was like, recently married? Like now?... I've been married—she's right over there!* No, Kate's been very longsuffering. Right, Kate?

Well, good morning. How's everyone? I have to confess I'm a little discouraged. My Indianapolis Colts lost. I know that's dangerous to say in a room filled of Baltimore Ravens fans, I am sure. But yes, I like the Colts. I'm a Marylander, but I love the Colts. I've always loved their program. And so I am sad. And if I'm a little edgy, it's because of that. No, just kidding.

As Randy said, I am the founder and director and biblical counselor for Heart Song. I'm also married...Val...twenty-two years, and I have two kids, sixteen now and an almost fifteen-year-old daughter. And we worship here on Sundays if I'm not preaching at other churches, or they come when I'm preaching at other churches. They're in the back, so if you want to say 'Hi' to them, they are the better part of my family.

As you know you are considering this series on *Hope for Change*, and I get the privilege of giving you some of the hard news of this four-part series. I get to disrupt your soul, and we talk about the thorn part. Right? Randy talked about the heat last week. And if we could have that diagram? If we could see that diagram. You see the two different.... You have the heat shining down. Randy talked about the heat, how things come bearing down on us: you're stuck in traffic, you're late for work, or you

have a bad hair day, whatever. You know the heat of life comes shining down on you. And there's often two different responses. Either the responses of thorns, which we'll talk of in detail today, or the responses of fruit. And it all depends, kind of, of what you're believing in that center, what you're believing about Jesus and his work and what he's done. Pastor Tim will be fleshing that out more next week, about the cross. But this week I'm going to be talking about the thorns, because we know that all of us respond to the heat of life either in positive ways or often in negative ways, sinful ways.



So let's look at Ephesians 4:17-24. Because the apostle Paul understood that that was going on in this church in Ephesus. This is a church that Paul is talking about. He's not talking about unbelievers, he's actually talking about the church. This is the church's issue. So listen along as I read from Ephesians 4:17-24. This is God's

Word.

Now this I say and testify in the Lord, that you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds. They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart. They have become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity. But that is not the way you learned Christ!---assuming that you have heard about him and were taught in him, as the truth is in Jesus, to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.

Pray with me. Father, this is your very Word, and we know that your Word does not come back void. So we ask that your Holy Spirit, right now, through this message, would encourage, convict, change, mold us into the image of Christ. That as we do the hard work of looking at this passage that you would help us fight harder in our walk with you. And we ask this in Christ's name. Amen.

I love sports. And I love watching my kids play sports. I love watching college basketball, and I love watching college and professional football. And I also coach Upwards. My daughter and I and son coach third and fourth grade girls Upwards. Great program. If you're not in it, something to consider. But I love basketball. But what I notice, that as I watch sports and I am involved in sports---referees can affect the way I respond to that heat. Right?

The other day---I'll give you an illustration---a couple of weeks ago---my daughter plays varsity basketball for Chapelgate Christian Academy, and they were playing a private school in Baltimore city. During that game there were twenty calls against Chapelgate, versus only three calls against the

other team. I was beside myself! My daughter could testify, because she could see it from a distance. I was, like, sitting on the bench. I'd be moving back on the other bench. My facial expression was, like, going crazy. In that moment I was thinking so many unkind and disrespectful thoughts about these refs. In fact, I had to go to the parents and say---everybody was noticing I was kind of disturbed, right?---I even went to parents who were waiting for the next game. I said to them, I'm a counselor and I'm a mess! Like what the deal, right?

But this true, but silly life experience illustrates an important truth about our struggle with sin. It is true that Christ's death and his presence within us changes who we are. We are new creations in Christ, in a world full of blazing heat, as Pastor Randy talked about last week. But we also know that it is easy to forget that we are greatly loved children of God and that the Lord has provided all for us, and his presence is with us...right? We forget that often. It's easy to give way to the thoughts and emotions and desires that should no longer rule us. And it's easy to be defined more by our problems in our relationships than by the grace of Jesus Christ.

Friends, there is a war going on within our lives when we face the blazing heat of life. Can you relate? Maybe not in my situation with the ref, but are there times in your life when you do or think or say things that are sinful, hurtful, destructive? See, the good news for us today, and a good way to celebrate---properly celebrate the reality is to humbly ask these two questions: God, where are you calling me to further heart change? God, where are you calling me to further heart change? God, you promised to transform me into the likeness of Christ. What Christ-like qualities are still not active in my life? Think of those questions as we pursue this passage this morning. Because I think the apostle Paul wants us to pursue that. He's helping this church in Ephesus to pursue that. So we will explore that today---that there is a war within our life.

And so we're going to have a healthy look at the thorny side of our life. We're also going to look that there is a reason for our thorny-filled life. We're going to have an honest look at our hearts not satisfied. And then we're going to see that there's something more powerful going on in our life, a hopeful look at our fruit-bearing new life.

So turn with me again to 17-19 and verse 22, a healthy look at the thorny side of our life. There's a great comic strip character named Pogo. Anybody heard of Pogo, the comic strip? Okay, a little bit. Well there is a great strip that he's in a picture. So Pogo's looking in the mirror, and the caption as he is looking in the mirror, it says that we have met the enemy and he is us. We have met the enemy and he is us. Now often in our Christian circles we want to think that the enemy, the war, is out there, right? But no. Paul's word here for us, the theological Pogo cartoon is telling us, no, the war is within us.

The thorn bush you saw in the diagram represents the reality that as broken sinners we tend to respond sinfully to the circumstances of life. Listen to these real-life struggles. We bend and twist the truth. We harbor anger and bitterness: I can't believe that he did that to me! What he said really hurt me. We shift blame: The devil made me do it! We communicate with harsh and in harsh, judgmental ways: I would never do that. I remember before I had kids, walking into Target and I would see how parents would discipline their kids and I'd say, I would never do that! Well, guess what? I did that. Right? We manipulate others to get our way. Parents, you never do that. Huh. We numb ourselves with busyness, substances, or material possessions. We attempt to get our respect from other people or our performance. Look at how much I have done---they need to know that. We give in to lust. We want to take revenge on people. He hurt me, so I'm going to hurt her, I'm going to hurt him. We get defensive, self-protective. We talk unkindly about others and envy what they have. We seek to control and rule over people. We curse one another with silence or rejection.

The list can go on and on. Do you recognize patterns of tendencies in your life that need to be changed? Where are the thorn bush responses part of your life? Friends, none of us are fully restored into the likeness of Christ. There are still remnants of these thorns in our lives. What is interesting is that God calls us to have discontent with these thorns, this thorny part of our lives. It is healthy to be discontent with our spiritual progress. Part of what God is doing in the heat of life, when the heat blazes on you, is to help you examine your sinful responses, which is very, very, very good.

I remember I was leading a men's group many years ago at another church that I served, and a guy came up to me and said, I'm really discouraged because I sin again. I keep sinning in this pattern. I said that's great! That's good because God's at work. He's showing you that something's gone on and that you need to be changed. At least you recognize it, right?

And see, that's what Paul is doing in this passage. He's talking to believers, and he's reminding them that you need to examine your responses. Listen to what he says again: "Now this I say and think testify in the Lord, that you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds. They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart. They have become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity." Then verse 22: "...to put off your old self, which belongs to the former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires."

Paul wants the church---God wants us---to examine our responses. Paul shows us in these verses, and as well, if you were to follow along to the end of that chapter, that the old way, the thorn bush way of living is rooted---in verse 17---where? In wrong thinking. And in verse 18---in wrong desires. And we see in 19 that it plays out in wrong responses to life, indulging in every kind of impurity. Then in verse 25 we see that involves lying. Then in verse 26, destructive anger. Then in verse 28, stealing. In verse 29, unwholesome communication. Then at the end of the chapter we see fighting, slander, and an unforgiving spirit.

Paul is challenging these believers, God is challenging us, that you are in Christ, we are in Christ---these sinful responses need to change. You need to fight hard to figure out why you respond so negatively or sinfully to the various relationships and circumstances that come your way. Our gracious Father is challenging us to examine our responses.

Take my example with my struggle with the refs a couple weeks ago at my daughter's game. It was good for me to acknowledge that my responses were sinful. It was good for me to acknowledge that they were unkind and disrespectful. They were wrong. It was good, in fact, that I was aware they were wrong. It was even good that I confessed it to others. See, this awareness means that I know that I need help. We sang that song "I Need You Every Hour" because we need God's help in order to respond differently.

We know, men, when we are walking down the mall, and we know that Victoria's Secret is going to be coming---the store is coming---that we are faced with a decision, because we know that we are plagued with impure thoughts. All of us, when we're under pressure, we tend to avoid the truth, sometimes---do we not? We might even fudge on our taxes. We may "borrow" office supplies. We allow ourselves to become angry at our friends, our parents, our spouses, our children, our coworkers, our neighbors. We tolerate too much unbiblical conflict in our lives. We slander other people's reputation with gossip. We withhold forgiveness, that same forgiveness that we often need ourselves.

See, what Paul is saying to us, we all need to ask---as Paul was saying the church in Ephesus needed to ask---Where is the old Gentile way still evident in my life? So to do that I want to ask some questions that are found in part of the *How People Change* curriculum. Because I believe that these

questions help us examine our thorny responses. Listen to these questions, write them down, think of them.

First, what are your thorns? What are your thorns? Complaining, laziness, anger, envy, avoidance, pride, indifference, blame, judgmental spirit, lack of self-control. Where do your actions and responses fail to demonstrate Christ-likeness? In your current situations and relationships, how are you responding sinfully? Where are you experiencing consequences of your sinful responses? Where have you slacked off in your spiritual life? Where have you given in to anger or to envy? Where have you quit doing what God says is good? To whom have you spoken unkindly? Where have you accused God? As you think, are you dealing with your feelings by doing unhealthy things---eating too much or eating too little, not sleeping well, spending too much, working too much, escaping too much with TV or video games or the latest app, novels. Do you put too much emphasis on things like clothing, appearance, and houses or cars?

You see God calls us to humbly take a close look at ourselves. It is healthy to do. But the look does not stop at just looking at our sinful, thorny responses; it doesn't stop just at looking at our sinful behavior. We also need to determine the reason for our thorny-filled life. We need to take on an honest look at our hearts that drive our responses. Look at verses 18 and 22. The apostle Paul says it this way about the reason for our thorny-filled life: ...due to the hardness of their heart. And then in verse 22 he says "to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires."

Why do we do the things we do? Why do I keep on getting angry? Why do I lust? Why this? Why that? It has something to do with what we believe in our hearts. Paul Tripp and Tim Lane say this in the book *How People Change*: Look task is like a medical doctor's. Your diagnosis of what is wrong will determine what you think the cure is. If a doctor diagnoses an infection, she will prescribe an antibiotic. If she diagnoses cancer, she will prescribe radiation or chemo. The cure only works if the diagnosis is correct. If the diagnosis is wrong, the cure may lead to painful, even deadly consequences. When it comes to soul care, (they say), misdiagnosing a personal problem can also have deadly consequences. In the early stages things may go well, but over time the situation worsens."

Now I will not focus on the details of the many bad diagnoses that we may come up with, but [I'll] say at times they may include blaming others for our responses, or having a bad day, or physical weakness caused me to sin, or it's the other person's fault. I'm not saying that any of these things can't play in a redemptive story of what God is doing in our lives, but this is not our biggest problem. Hear me. The biggest problem, the main reason you sinfully respond is you. You hear me? The biggest problem, the main reason that you sin is you. It is inside of you. It's deep in the recesses of your own heart. The real problem is not psychological. It's not because you have a low self-esteem or unmet needs. It's not social---because you had bad relationships or bad influences. It's not even maybe what's going on with your body.

Now hear me, clearly hear me. They are significant influences and they are not to be dismissed. But they are not my real problem. My real problem is spiritual. I have replaced Christ with something else and consequently my heart is darkened, my heart is broken, my heart is hopeless, my heart is powerless. Its responses reflect its bondage to whatever I'm serving instead of Christ. Ultimately my real problem and your problem is a worship disorder. Our hearts are not satisfied with Jesus Christ and who he is and what he's done for us.

I'm reminded of the great trilogy, *Lord of the Rings*, and the particular interplay between Gollum and Smeagol, right? They're one person. It's like a new nature and an old nature going on and fighting, right? As they were on that journey, Smeagol, or Gollum---whatever you want to call him---was on this

journey with Mister Frodo and with Sam, you see that Gollum was struggling with the ring, because the ring he once had, it had a powerful influence in his life. And so in this interaction between Gollum and Smeagol he says this: "We wants it, we needs it, we must have the precious." (Did I do OK on that? Did I get your attention? How did I do, Amanda? I said I was going to do that. That's my daughter. Now she's going to be mad at me because I pointed her out. She loves me.) But do you get it? Gollum's ultimate satisfaction was the ring. And he would do anything to have that ring, even to kill someone for it.

The apostle Paul recognizes the same potential in believers in Ephesus. God recognizes the same problem that we have, as well---that we, as Paul describes it, can have hardened hearts or deceitful desires. You see, we, too, struggle with hearts that are not satisfied in Christ. You see, with hearts that are restless and unsatisfied we will try to get it in something or someone.

That is what the apostle James was saying to the church that he was writing to. James 4, the first four verses says this: "What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? You want something, but don't get it. You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want. You quarrel and fight. You do not have, because you do not ask God. When you ask, you do not receive because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures." Listen, listen to what James says next in verse 4. This is the church he's talking to. "You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world is hatred toward God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God."

When two people have conflict, is it not easy to see the war on the outside, right? When my kids see Val and I have a disagreement, they can see maybe anger and impatience going on. They see the outside. But James here points out that the war is an outgrowth of a war inside each person's heart. Heart desires are not being met so people lash out in an attempt to satisfy these desires. In fact James 4:4 goes further. He says the people engaging in this ungodly conflict have already begun to worship someone or something other than God. He, in fact, is saying they are guilty of spiritual adultery, which is another way to describe idolatry. It's another way to say that we are getting life in another, false lover.

So when we see our thorns, when we see our behavior playing out, they do help us detect those things that are ruling in our hearts. But we will not change, we will not become less angry until we deal with what's going on in my heart and what's going on in your heart. We need to figure out what are those God-replacements. We need to figure out what are those ruling desires.

Now, take my issues with the refs. I want things to go fairly. I have a value that things work out fairly, things work out justly. Nothing wrong with that desire. But when it crosses over and I think unkind things about a ref or think disrespectful things in my head about a ref, I have sinned. So yeah, I can confess that behavior, but there's something else going on. I want to be treated fairly. I want people to be treated fairly. And if that is ruling me more than Christ is ruling me then I will respond sinfully. But if Christ is ruling me there I have the potential to respond in different ways.

Or take my example with kids. Val and I, when we began to have kids, I never thought I was an angry person, right? Then my kids start to disobey me. I become angry. I respond angrily---sinfully angrily. Now your kids are to obey---right, kids? You are to honor your parents, obey your parents---that's a good thing. But it's not right for a parent to sinfully be angry at their kids because they don't obey. But what I saw was, I value respect. My kids were not respecting me. I was worshipping respect. I was worshipping myself. And since I didn't get that respect, then someone had to pay for it. Thus, my kids getting yelled at, right? Do you see how the anger is there, but what is deeper inside? So I dealt with it. Ok, Jesus, you need to be enough for me, even when my kids disrespect me---you need to be enough for me so that I can respond in a Christ-like way. It doesn't mean I don't discipline them, but I

discipline with grace and with love and with mercy and with compassion.

So as you think about the heart issues, ok, we have these thorny things, you say so what's going on in my heart. Here are some questions to consider. Again these are questions given from the *Hope for Change* series. Where do we say, as Gollum says, "We wants it, we needs it, must have the precious"? What are those things in your life? What do you love most? Is there something you love more than God? Your spouse, your job, your children, your money, your reputation? What do you truly want? What do you truly desire? What do you crave, long for, wish? Whose desires do you obey? What do you think you need most? Respect, fame, success, glory, comfort, peace? What makes you tick? What lights up your world? What really matters to you? Where do you go to find refuge, safety, comfort, escape? When you are fearful, discouraged, upset, where do you run? To God?...or to food, or to shopping, or to work, or to solitude? What do you trust? Do you functionally rest in the Lord, as the songs reminded us to do today? Or do you find you find a sense of well-being in the presence and promises of God? Or do you rest and trust something else or someone else? Whose performance matters to you? Whom must you please? Whose opinion counts the most? From whom do you desire approval---your boss? From whom do you fear rejection---your spouse, your parents?

I could ask a lot more and other kind of questions. But the purpose of these questions is to help you think more clearly and deeply about why you do the things that you do. They give us a better idea of what things really morph from good to 'god' in your life. Again, don't be afraid to honestly pursue these questions. Yes, they will stir up a lot of junk. You may be surprised to find out how much those things rule your life. But hear this: you are not alone.

You're not alone when you take an honest look at your unsatisfied heart, for something more powerful is going on in your life that will help you change. Look at verses 21 and 23. We need to look at Christ. It says this: "But this is not the way you learned Christ!---assuming that you have heard about him and were taught in him, as the truth is in Jesus...and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness."

Again, Paul Tripp, Tim Lane say this---this is important for us to hear as we hear the rustling of our own hearts and why we get [life?] so much. Listen to this. Listen to what they say. "All the hope and promise of the gospel belongs to you. In Christ you have been made new because he loves you. He works in every situation to finish the transformation he has begun in our new hearts. The gospel belongs to you. If you have put your faith in Jesus Christ, if you are a child of God, God has made you new. You have hope in the midst of this challenging life that we're in. Because God is at work, determined to finish this transformational work in you and in me.

Yeah, God wants us, the apostle Paul wants that church, I want this church to abandon the thorny life, but I also want us to remember that you belong to Jesus. Jesus has made you new, and now you have his Spirit who enables you to fight this war, to do the hard work of self-examination, to do that in an honest way, to do that in a healthy way---not that so you would be destroyed or discouraged, [but] because Christ is at work changing your heart's desire and thus, your responses.

See, God wants you to know that he alone, Jesus alone, truly satisfies all your longings and all your wants. You see, it is because of the person and work of Jesus Christ, his perfect obedience, his death on the cross, his resurrection, his ascension, and his active intercession---because of that work you now have a new and better way of thinking, and you have a new and better desire that leads us to Christ-like fruit-bearing responses.

Hopefully as you are examining your life, it's not all bad news, right? You're seeing that there are some good, fruitful responses. And if you are, that is a true sign of Christ's presence and power

working in you to transform you into his image. It is a sign that you're finding more satisfaction in Christ and his love for you, than you are in those other things that easily entangle us.

I really believe that as we are finding more and more satisfaction and contentment in our relationship with Christ and who he is and what he's done, you will have more of this kind stuff happening to you. Your conversation with your spouse will be filled with humility and forgiveness. Your training of your children will be motivated by the love of the Father in heaven instead of fear that leads to manipulation and control. Your interactions with the world will be filled with humble engagement and compassion and godly righteousness, and not a condemning, judgmental spirit. Our attitude at work also will be shaped by humility and a desire to work as unto the Lord, and not destroyed when we succeed or fail, because our identity is in Christ.

You see, as people in Christ we do---hear this---have a new status, we have a new power, we have a new hope. God, through the Spirit of Jesus Christ, actively---actively---is working and pursuing you so that you will more and more reflect the life of Christ in every heated situation you face. The Christian is at war. We are, within. We cannot live with a peacetime mentality, pursuing rest and retreat and spiritual relaxation. None of us have reached our final destination. So with all the resources God has given for you in Christ, we must follow, fight, search, watch, pray, resting in the reality that God delights to make us better tomorrow than we are today.

Also know that God is very patient in our transformational process. We will fall. I will blow it when I go tonight. I will sin. I will blow it. I will have a thorny response. God understands that. And God, because he loves us so much, invites us to run to him---to know that there's always forgiveness, there's always grace, there's always empowerment, he's always present, he does not give up on us. There's always renewal and strength in Christ.

So when you examine yourself in this war [and] you find yourself between the thorny nature and the new, fruitful nature, trust that God is at work through the gospel to help you fight in the midst of the heat. Friends, he will truly enable you to produce good fruits of love, mercy, patience, self-control, kindness, compassion, righteousness. As that song reminds us, don't run from Jesus who's your Redeemer and change agent, run towards him, for he deeply cares and understands what we're going through. He offers sustaining mercy and persistent grace as he changes us into the people we're meant to be.

Please pray with me. Father, help me to believe my own message this morning. Help me to know that you, through your Son Jesus Christ, truly meet all my longings and wants. Father, I'm sure that your Spirit has stirred up a lot in our hearts this morning. Help us not be discouraged, but help us to know that if we're thinking through these things that you're with us, you're pursuing us, you want us. And maybe part of this process is to get our attention, to know that God, you are better than all those other things. Oh, Jesus, help us to find more and more rest in what you have done for us and who you are. And as a result, help us more and more through that hard work of self-examination, knowing that you're with us and for us. And that Lord, you would transform us more and more into the likeness of Christ. Do that work, we pray. In Christ's name. Amen.