

24th January 2021 10 am Sanctified by Grace

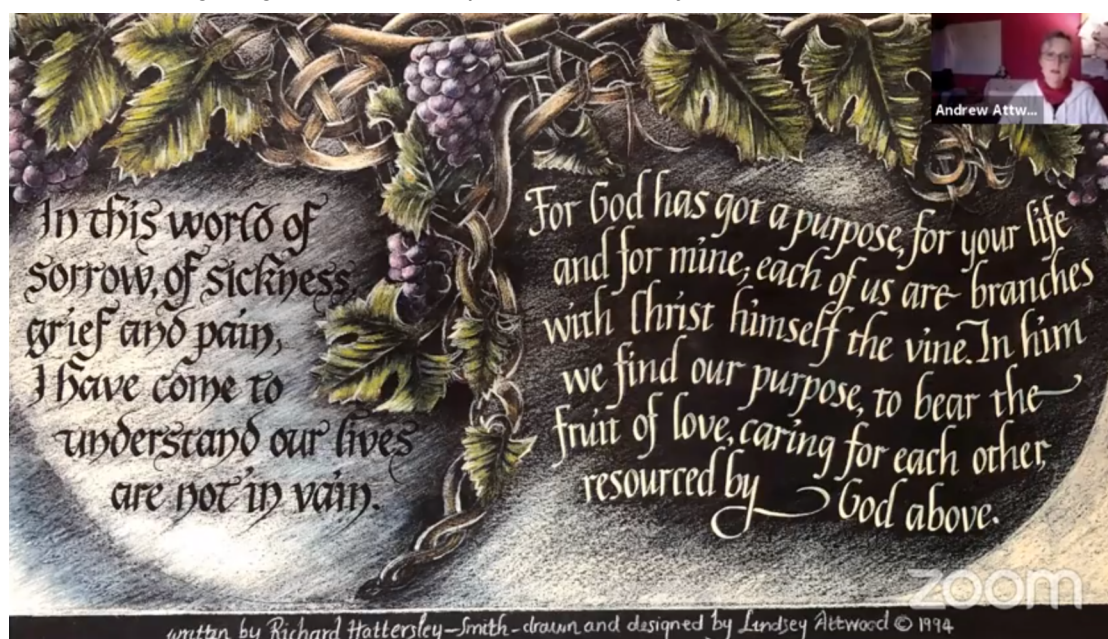
Service led by Lindsey Attwood, Talk by Andrew Attwood, who also interviews Andy Collins about God at Work, Intercessions by Mary and Kal Rai

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Meditation: Abiding in the Vine

[Lindsey Attwood:]

The Bible reading today will be all about being in the vine, which will be attached to whole theme of grace. So it's all about not trying so hard on our own, but abide in Christ, that He gives us the grace to love each other as He loves us. So I'm going to share a picture with you:



It's a picture I did many, many years ago as a sort of commission for somebody called Richard Hattersley-Smith. And this is a picture I did in 1994, which is pre-children, many, many years ago, and it was by a guy called Richard Hattersley-Smith, hopefully you can see this at the bottom, and he was a guy who worked at the Hayes Conference Centre in Derbyshire, so I don't know if any of you've ever been there. We used to go there for weekends away with our old church. And he wanted me to do this image of Jesus being the vine, but in the shape of a cross. And I don't know if you can read the words on there. It says,

In this world of sorrow, sickness, grief and pain,
I have come to understand our lives are not in vain.
But God has got a purpose for your life, and for mine;
each of us are branches, with Christ Himself the vine.
In Him we find our purpose, to bear the fruit of love,
caring for each other, resourced by God above.

So what I wanted to do with this, I want to use this as a sort of meditation for you, just to be still, before we go further into our service. I want you to be still for a little bit, to be quiet. And I want you to imagine yourself, sort of being attached to the vine, so imagine that vine, and I want you to imagine

being attached to that vine, with the vine being Jesus. So I'm going to just give you a couple of moments just to be still. I'm going to pray and allow yourself to be still and imagine yourself in the vine.

So Father God, I pray that this morning with the snow and everything like that, I just thought we would be still and allow ourselves to come close to You.

I just remember when the angels saw the shepherds, they said to them, "Don't be afraid. But this is Good News. It's nothing to be fearful of, to be drawn to Christ, to be drawn to Him, it's not about being afraid. This is Good News."

And in Jeremiah 29 verse 11 it says,

'For I know the plans I have for you,' declares the LORD, 'plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.'

So just keep being still, and I want you to imagine yourself, allowing Jesus to graft you into the vine. Imagine that your gardener has been grafting in a new plant and you're an extra bit, and just imagine when you're there, just imagine, it's almost like His blood, His life-blood flowing into your whole body, flowing, sort of going right the way through you.

And I just want to, as you do that, if you allow God to get close to you, if you feel nervous, maybe, or are you thinking, "Oh, that's a bit scary." Or maybe you think of things you've done this week, that you've said things that you wish you hadn't or done things you wish you hadn't, and you don't feel so good about that, I just want you to ask Him, just say, "Jesus, just please forgive me for those things, so that I can be free to meet with You, that that doesn't hold me back." So don't let anything stop you from drawing close to Him. I just want you to imagine, just the quietness of Him just being the vine and Him grafting you in. Just come as you are, let yourself be unfolded by Him, and just let Him feed you, and nourish you, just imagine His life-force, His blood going through you. Let Him fill every part of you, from your hands to your toes, into your fingers. So just be still, just for a few moments.

Just let Jesus enfold and love you. And as we go on through the service, that you continue in that sense that He's close to you, and His desire is for you to abide in Him.

Amen.

Interview with Andy: God at Work

[Andrew:] So hi, Andy. Hi. Good to see you.

[Andy:] Good to see you too. How are you doing?

[Andrew:] I'm fine. I just wanted to ask you a handful of questions, Andy. Where will you be tomorrow around 10am, what will you be doing?

[Andy:] Well, I would normally at 10. o'clock on a Monday be moving between one of the many buildings on the school site that I work at, going from teaching sixth formers to year 10. However, with the changing circumstances. I will probably be finishing my second round of coffee of the day, because I'll have just finished teaching my sixth formers. And will be just about to join the call with my year tens and I think in the interest of everyone's health and sanity, the lessons have been shortened from 50 minutes down to 30. So we all get a break in-between each session which can be rather intensive, technology issues and unexpected things, so I'm very lucky: my employers have made a really good

decision there to kind of keep us all, you know, from burning out. So, I should just be coming out of a nice rest, and enjoying a cup of coffee.

[Andrew:] Okay. and, I mean, this is normal teaching or with particular needs? So what kind of stuff you do?

[Andy:] It's called a specialist provision, so it's like a mainstream secondary school, however the children that you find there tend to have a variety of needs, ranging from specific learning difficulties like dyslexia to conditions like autism, to visual impairment, to like generalised anxiety disorders, to issues with relating to trauma and neglect, or it can be a combination as well. So, probably the most diverse range of needs that I've ever worked with, but I'm lucky that the behaviour is actually much better than I've dealt with in the past. Previously I was dealing with a lot of behavioural issues and whilst I still deal with that because (and I apologise to any teenagers who might be listening) they are teenagers. But the level of conflict that I deal with every day is significantly down on what I've done in the past, so it's a whole new area for me: I've never worked with children who have visual impairments.

[Andrew:] Okay,

[Andy:] Never worked with children who have cerebral palsy or, in some cases, life-limiting conditions. So, it's very, quite a comfortable role for me but also challenging enough to be really interesting and variable, rewarding as well.

[Andrew:] Okay, great. Given that you are a Christian, and that you feel God's leading in your workplace, in what sense do you sense His presence and His purpose at work?

[Andy:] I find that it's like a two-way street, in that, I think, perhaps the more, 'obvious' is perhaps the wrong word, but the one that I would naturally think more about, is the fact that I'm there to serve the children and the students, and to meet their needs and to be as Christ-like as I possibly can be, in providing the greatest level of support I possibly can, with the right degree of challenge as well, I think that's the whole discipling model as well, you know, nurture versus challenge, to be someone who's a very good listener, and to provide as many opportunities, I think, for the students to grow in a variety of areas, not just academically but emotionally and socially as well, on that kind-of whole growth spectrum.

But I think there's also another element to it which I never saw coming, really, and it took me a few years to really appreciate it and to engage with it as meaningfully as I do now, which is to view the students that I teach as models for me as well. There are some students who I work with who I think have to be braver than I will ever have to be in my entire life. If you're a young person with a very serious condition such as cerebral palsy, I can't imagine having to deal with that every day. I think, very often these children have gone from, in my eyes, 'being kind of victims as it were, and it's my job to go in and save them every day and to help them every day'. It is my job of course to help, but I've increasingly viewed these students through the lenses as being heroes, I think, in much the same way that's. (Sorry, what am I trying to say here?) I guess, yeah, in the beginning of my career in this type of provision I was quite preoccupied with myself and me-giving whereas actually now I think I view these students as being models for me to follow as well. I think some kids when they come in, it takes a lot of their strength just to get in the door. You know they're incredibly brave and are a model to me as well because it's so easy to catch yourself moaning, especially now with COVID-19. And I think it's, I think, as much as I tried to be an example for these kids. I think these children don't realise how much of an example they are to me as well, and I'm trying to, in that sense, receive from them too, and I think that really helps manage the burnout risk in terms of balancing that of me viewing myself as giving myself constantly, if you actually sit back and just watch, these students are amazing.

They're amazingly brave, amazingly gracious, in the midst of a lot of pain, a lot of suffering, that I may never experience in my life. So that's where I sense God at work, you know, it's really hard, it's incredible.

[Andrew:] Really really helpful. I just wanted to finish with, given that we would hope for development or progress in terms of the living out of faith or even the sharing of faith, what would you hope for longer-term in your work context as a Christian where you are?

[Andy:] You can have really amazing conversations. I remember Roger Turner being with me in a classroom in a previous job, and I had a conversation with a student that he met on that day about a week before Roger came in, and I dropped it in, just chucking it out there, and the student who could be incredibly difficult, he was severely traumatised, and it was a real challenge to meet his needs, and then he turned to me and almost knocked me out of my seat when he said, "Yeah, I go to church." And I said, you know, and it turned into this conversation about prayer, and what do we pray for. And although he used slightly saltier language that I think maybe we would, he said, "I ask for forgiveness. I pray and I say sorry for the things that I've done, and that I hope that I'm going to get better," and I'm like, well, that might not be in the Church of England liturgy but it's there, it's a form of confession, you know, this kid's confessing, and he's expressing hope. So, it is possible to do but you've got to be really wise and very careful the way you go about doing it. There are some times, I think, as people, as fallen people, we put pressure on ourselves to be like, "I have to create the opportunities, I have to..." Whereas actually if you sit back and relax and just enjoy peace and trust, the opportunities literally just fall into your lap. Sometimes I have to take a bit of initiative. But mostly, they just park themselves right there and you know, you may think, "Oh Lord, You know, am I gonna miss the chance?" No. Usually they're right square in front of you, you can't miss it.

[Andrew:] That's great,

[Andy:] Though, yeah, they're there, and I hope and pray and trust that they'll continue to come.

[Andrew:] That's great. Well thank you very much, Andy, that's really, really helpful. We'll finish there.

[Andy:] Thanks Andrew.

[Lindsey:] Gosh. Thank you, Andy. That sounds amazing and very challenging but great.

Reading: John 15:1-17 [NIVUK 1984]

1 'I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. **2** He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. **3** You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. **4** Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.

5 'I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. **6** If anyone does not remain in me, he's like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. **7** If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you. **8** This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.

9 'As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. **10** If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commands and remain in his love. **11** I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. **12** My command is this: love each other as I have loved you. **13** Greater love has no one than this:

that he lay down his life for his friends. **14** You are my friends if you do what I command. **15** I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you. **16** You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit – fruit that will last. Then the Father will give you whatever you ask in my name. **17** This is my command: Love each other.

Talk

So I'm now just going to just pray for Andrew. We're going to swap seats and just pray for him.

So Father God, I thank You for Andrew and I thank You that his desire is to share You. He's so devoted to You and I pray that You give him the words and wisdom and anoint him with Your Holy Spirit to speak this morning. In Jesus' name, Amen.

[Andrew Attwood:]

Morning all, good to see you. This morning's talk, as Lindsey mentioned earlier, is built around the theme of being sanctified by grace, it's a great long Bible word. And I'll just be teasing out the meaning of that and how to apply that to life. So we have that wonderful familiar passage from John 15 about the vine and the branches. We have heard in previous talks in this mini-series on grace that we don't deserve grace, it's undeserved grace that God gives us, and that grace not only saves us, because God forgives us, He also adopts us. Well, today we're going to talk about grace changing us. Grace doesn't simply save and adopt us, it actually changes us, which is what sanctification is all about.

1 Thessalonians 4:3-7 says in so many words, it says, "It is God's will that you should be sanctified, that each of you should learn to control your own body in a way that is holy and honourable." What that means in practice is to be set apart for God. To be sanctified, in Old Testament terms, was to be sacred and that's what they used to do with the vessels for the Temple, they were set apart exclusively, and especially for God. In a New Testament context that means being with Christ and gradually becoming like Christ.

It just so happens, last Sunday I was doing a talk in a different context for Knights Meadow, I was doing a talk on an aspect of the Sermon on the Mount. And one of the themes there was to explain that the Good News of the Gospel actually affects every area of life, not simply the forgiveness of our sins, but the transformation of who we are. So how do we change? How does a person actually change inside, in a way that changes behaviour? This idea we get from John 15 is to do with abiding in Christ, remaining in Christ. And that's where we work with grace, and we rest under grace as well.

Let me give you some more to think about, because one of the problems that can sometimes happen for Christians, is that we begin in the right place when we become Christians or when we choose to believe consciously for the first time, we recognise it as gracious forgiveness for ourselves, and we start there with grace, but then we sometimes end up trying to live out in our own strength. There's a famous line in Paul's letter to the Galatians, Galatians 3 verse 3, that says this:

Are you so foolish? After beginning by means of the Spirit, are you now trying to finish by means of the flesh?

Let me read that again. "Are you so foolish, after beginning by means of the Spirit, (which is the grace), are you now trying to finish by means of the flesh (which is our own efforts)." Grace is to be worked through on a daily basis, not simply for our future salvation. We trust God for our future salvation, but sometimes do trust God for our ongoing transformation.

I checked in my calendar just recently, and it reminded me that early February is the right time for pruning the roses. I've double-checked that on a few websites, and most people say early February through March is the best time for pruning. I don't know how you are as gardeners out there, I don't know if that's something that you know probably far better than me. But pruning is the metaphor Jesus uses for personal change. Pruning is sanctification. Pruning is where God does something to us and through us and in us, that teaches us, and changes us *if* we're listening, and *if* we're cooperating.

Let me give you just a small handful of examples I can think of, off the top of my head, through my own life as being a Christian.

- I can remember probably within about two or three years of being a Christian, sat in a church service. This was back in Derby, and just having this very strong sense of God doing something inside of me. And it was to do with me and my career. At that point I was heading towards being a teacher, primary school teacher, and even though I was going to be committed to the job and doing it, I felt as though God was almost doing a kind of a surgery on my heart, as though I need not commit myself in a kind of top priority way to 'career'. It was almost like He was removing career pursuit from me and setting me free simply to just trust God, and do what's in front of me. So that was something way back, that God took out of me. And since then, I've never really felt the inclination to chase 'career' as a goal.
- At a more personal level, inner life, I can remember in my teens and in my 20s, and these things continue even into kind-of married life. You know when you're hit with the ongoing classic problem of how as a man you might look at other women. When I was doing the talk last last weekend, referring back to the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus addresses the question of adultery, and says anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery in their hearts with her¹. Well, I would have to admit as a young guy, that was kind of normal as a teenager, and even into my 20s. But since that time I can remember choosing to cooperate with God, I can remember bringing that issue to Jesus and saying, "I don't really want to do this, I want to have the right attitude," and gradually over time, choosing to give proper honour to my wife Lindsey, and to change in what I look at, and changing the inclinations of the heart, because I wanted to focus on Jesus instead. And at first that was really hard work. But these days, I would say in general terms, even though naturally temptations come and go, it's not something that is a dominating feature of my life at all now. There's a wonderful line in Job, when Job says², "I have made a covenant with my eyes not to look on a maid," and Job was basically saying, "that's kind of how I live now: I don't need to go with those kinds of desires."
- There's another area that I just wanted to mention that's probably more recently, that God has been working on, and that's to do with fear of people or the desire to please people. I don't know what you're like in this area. So many people I know seem driven by the opinions of others, or concern of what other people might think. That's something I think God is also setting me free from, where, instead of twitching and wondering and jumping from one position to another to make sure everybody's happy, I generally feel a little bit clearer on what does God want, even if someone else doesn't like hearing that, and being set free from pleasing people.

Now those are just some examples that God's been working on in me. But I would have to say this, this does not happen quickly. Sanctification is a life-long process. The way in which it happens, is through abiding in Christ or remaining in Christ. That passage from John 15 again, where you work with Jesus and rest with Jesus, all the time. Just hold in your head there's that picture of the

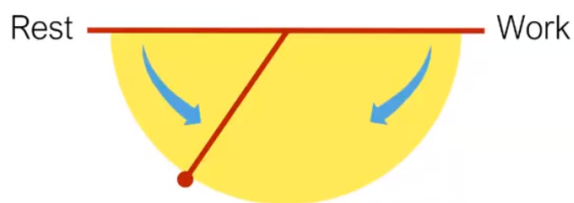
1 Matthew 5:28

2 Job 31:1

twelve disciples travelling around with Jesus full-time: they were with Him when He was doing ministry and mission; they were with Him at the end of the day when no-one else was around; and being in the company of Jesus, gradually, gradually was changing them, was challenging them, encouraging them, and perhaps imperceptibly to themselves, they were beginning to become more like Him.

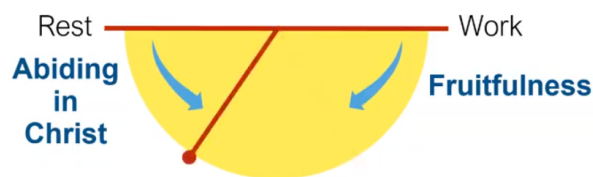
I wonder how self-aware you are of what you need to be? Most of us probably need to realise that we need more grace than we can possibly imagine. We need more forgiving and changing than we could ever dream about. That's what happens when you start to hang around with Jesus more: you become aware of things that He wants to address, but you also become aware of the grace He's offering, so that we can actually change. But is that what you lean into when life challenges you? It is inevitable that life brings pressures and struggles, and character issues come to bear. And I don't know about you, but sometimes I've tried to ease those things by entertaining myself or distracting myself, maybe even with food or drink to make you feel better. The problem with those kinds of 'solutions' is they don't actually transform: they simply dampen down a feeling inside that you have, that something needs to change. What I want to encourage you with this morning is this: sanctifying grace is available all the time.

And we're just going to look at some slides. And I just want to talk to you about the process by which we tend to change. This particular first diagram is a picture of a kind of an oscillation between resting and working: it's a semicircle, that's just describing the flow of life from when we are at rest, from when we have to be busy with work, not just employed work but any kind of activity, and this is the normal rhythm of life where we swing between resting and working and resting and working. We sleep, we're awake, we relax, we put effort in, that's just how things normally are.



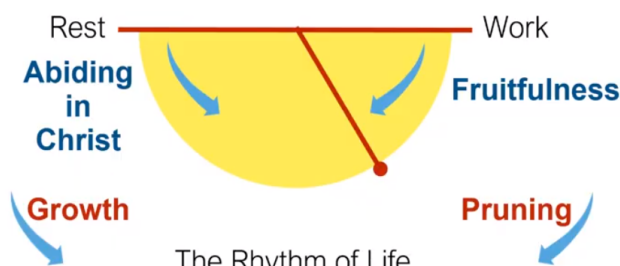
The Rhythm of Life

Let's move to the next slide. The process that God works in us through our resting and working is this mixture of abiding in Christ, where we rest consciously in Him, and in what He has done and what He's doing, and then swing back into the work of fruitfulness. Jesus talks in that passage that He said, "Remain in Me because my Father's desire is that you are fruitful. Remain in Me, so that, if you like, the sap of the vine flows through your veins, and what you start to do becomes fruitful." You can't become fruitful unless you've been resting in, and remaining in, Christ. If you try to do work just in your own strength, it won't change you, and it probably won't change the world around you properly. That only comes through abiding and remaining in Jesus.



The Rhythm of Life

We'll have the next slide. Now, this requires some level of cooperation. It also requires some level of commitment on our part. If my desire is to grow and to change, then I've got to cooperate with what Jesus wants us to do in my life. And that's why, in this passage to do with the vine, Jesus talks about pruning. I mentioned pruning roses



The Rhythm of Life

earlier. Pruning is where Jesus takes His secateurs or the Father in fact takes the secateurs and trims off that which needs attention. In the story itself, in the parable itself, Jesus actually says, "it's a fruitful branch that needs pruning," so it may be an area where you're doing well in. It may be something that you love or it may be something that God has done good through. And yet, Jesus says, part of the process of developing in that area is for God to trim it back sometimes. How willing are you to let God prune or trim back even areas that are good or fruitful already? There's something about this, to do with a willingness to trust Jesus, where we say, "You know how to do this transformation, I put the process into Your hands, I say 'yes' to where You cut, to where You reduce, so that I can swing back into resting and trusting in You, instead of (which is perfectly natural) trusting in ourselves."

So, how willing are you, how cooperative are you, and to what extent have you already tasted His grace? I would want to just say that because I've tasted His grace on repeated occasions over the years. I'm a little bit more confident that when He says I need to change this, or adapt that, I think I'm more willing to say 'yes'. And also, I think, because I am spending a bit more time with Jesus and wanting to be more like Him, I know that I just can't do that on my own. To that extent, I would say as the years have gone by, I've given up on myself and my own abilities more than I used to. Probably sounds counter-intuitive, but I would want to encourage you to give up on yourself more often, and to believe in the Good News of Jesus more often instead. Why? Because holiness, sanctification, is impossible without Christ's grace. Transformation is only going to be possible if we live with Jesus, like the Twelve did all the time, completely. And we know, since the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, the presence of Jesus, is available to us all the time, like it was for the Twelve.

But I didn't want to talk about this simply in terms of personal piety, personal holiness, your inner workings. This has to do with how we live generally. Sanctification is more than personal holiness. It's becoming like Christ, who shared life with others, and He also did mission with others. In other words, the whole of what Christ did, is what He calls us to become like. In that sense, life without mission is unholy. If what Jesus does and is, is what holiness looks like, then, reaching out to friends and sharing God's Good News, or being like Christ in our workplace, like we heard from Andy earlier, that would be unholy not to live it out in all those different spheres of life. So being with Christ includes all of this.

Now how many of you will be reacting to this talk thinking, "This is just too hard." Is that your first response? I would say this: this is not simply hard in our own strength, it's impossible in our own strength. If we're thinking we have to do something by gritted teeth and pulling our bootstraps up, then it's impossible, but the transformation of grace means that it actually becomes very possible indeed. Let me read to you a quote from Dallas Willard³ when he was talking about the challenge of personal change, and he said this:

It is very hard indeed if you have not been substantially transformed in the depths of your being, in the intricacies of your thoughts, feelings, assurances, and dispositions, in such a way that you are permeated with love.

And he goes on to say,

Once that happens it is not hard. What would be hard is to act the way you acted before.

3 Divine Conspiracy by Douglas Willard, https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/173454.The_Divine_Conspiracy
ISBN 978-0060693336

He says this⁴,

Think of this. When Jesus hung on the cross, and prayed, "Father, forgive them because they do not understand what they're doing," that was not hard for him. What would have been hard for him would have been to curse his enemies and spew forth vileness and evil upon everyone.

You see, Jesus was simply living out of the heart, that was in it. And the amazing thing is that He calls us to have his heart. Just a few days ago I was out walking, and sensed God just encouraging me not to chat in prayer, not to think about anything, but to be quiet, to be still. And I can sense Him, I can even remember it now, Him saying, "Let Me soften your heart again, Andrew." So I walked probably for about an hour and a half on my own, and just had that sense of God's hand on me, softening me, so that could receive again, receive His grace after quite a full-on few days, I needed a soft heart to receive His grace.

So just In conclusion I want to put this to you. I want to encourage you to be open to trust Jesus for your transformation. Sanctifying grace is where you say 'yes' to letting Jesus work on you. So can we just pray. Let's have a time of response to this now with some quiet, just a minute of quiet for you to think about, and then I'll pray. So let's be still.

Come Holy Spirit, meet us where we are.

Lord, for all of us who are thinking about this matter right now, Jesus, would You be very close to us, and would we be open to You.

Holy Spirit, I want to bring to You just personally my inclination, my natural attitude for the future, what I want for life, and I say, Lord, I trust myself to You. I trust my growth to You. I want to be open to change and grow in the way in which You want me to change and grow. I lay down my own agenda. And Lord Jesus, I give You permission again to put Your finger on the areas of life that need to change. And I open myself up to the grace You want to give, to help me change. Come Holy Spirit, in the quiet.

I want to pray Lord, that we would have our eyes on You, resurrected from the dead, alongside us, ready to walk alongside us. Jesus, You are our vine.

Sanctify us with Your Grace today and tomorrow and every day. Give us soft hearts. And Lord, we pray that we would be willing to become more and more like You. In Jesus' name we pray,

Amen.

[Transcribed by Hamish Blair with help from <https://otter.ai>]

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Please note: inclusive language was not introduced into the NIV until the 2011 edition.

Divine Conspiracy by Dallas Willard: Some of the text extracted from <http://www.oocities.org/wsgd2000/bookreviewdivineconspiracy.htm>

4 <http://old.dwillard.org/articles/artview.asp?artid=133>