Believe: Think, Act, Be  
Proverbs 23:7

This morning we are kicking off a new series and a new season at Colonial. Our series is called, BELIEVE… but if you are visiting with us for the first time, I want you to know that this is more than a sermon series. BELIEVE is a scripture engagement tool that was created by my friend and colleague, Pastor Randy Frazee. Pastor Randy spoke at our church this summer as a guest pastor, and he has recently taken on the role as Lead Pastor at Westside Family Church in Lenexa.

BELIEVE is first of all a book (show book) that was assembled by Pastor Randy in 2015. I say “assembled” because when you open the BELIEVE book, you’ll notice that it is all scripture. However, this particular scripture is skillfully assembled to address 30 key questions that all people at one time or another ask… or at least should ask… in the course of their lives. Questions like: “Who is God?” “Does God Care About Me?” “How Can I Have a Relationship with God?” “What is My Purpose?” “How Do I Develop Healthy Relationships with Others?” “How Do I Best Use My Time?” “What Does It Mean to Do the Right Thing and How Will I Know?” and so on. These are real questions that matter in regards to how we live our lives, and the BELIEVE book provides scripture that addresses those questions. As we move from week to week throughout the series, my sermons will all begin with a question that we are addressing for that week… a question that hopefully you have already been thinking about and reading about in the scripture supplied in each chapter of the BELIEVE book. We have BELIEVE books for adults; a special edition of the BELIEVE book for youth; and a special edition of the BELIEVE book for children. As we work our way through this series, it is our hope that your whole family will be reading these scriptures and discussing these questions together, both at home and on your way home from church, since the children and youth Sunday School curriculum is also going to be tracking with the BELIEVE series. A companion to the BELIEVE book is this STUDY GUIDE that is designed to help you process the scriptures you have read, and it also serves as your participant book for those who are participating in a BELIEVE small group.

We are hopeful that MOST of you will be participating in a BELIEVE group throughout this series. If you would like to be in a BELIEVE group, there is still time to sign up either on line or in the fellowship hall following the service.

Our elders and I agreed on this series because we are convinced that BELIEVE is a catalyst for spiritual discovery and spiritual growth, regardless of where you are currently in your faith or your lack of faith. We are 100% convicted that this series will help you grow as a person in all the ways that YOU want to grow as a person. Here’s what I mean by that…

I would like to be a more loving person. I would like to be a more loving father, a more sensitive husband, and a fair and honorable leader of my team at work. I would like to become a more
faithful and intentional friend, a more generous person to those in need, and one who suffers well. I suspect that most of you have a list like mine...a list of ways you wish you could improve in areas that you simply do not seem to be making much progress.

Now, that nagging sense of “I wish could change...I wish I could be different...I feel like I need to be getting better” is a universal reality for human beings. We all have to deal with it, and there are different ways to deal with it.

Some of us simply choose to take the “Popeye” approach. We flex our muscles and say, “I Yam what I Yam!” We are resigned to the fact that we will never change, and so with each passing year we are increasingly “calcified” in regards to our character and our behavior, and we expect everyone around us to deal with it. By the way, this is the prevailing message of our culture: BE YOU, DO WHAT YOU WANT, CHANGE FOR NO ONE. If people don’t like the way you are, change the people you hang out with...but by no means should you try to change yourself. This cultural assumption is the logical extension of a materialist, Darwinian worldview that essentially says, “Our identity is fixed based on our genetic code and cultural context, so there is no point in trying to change who you are or how you are. Just be true to the way you are, and don’t hurt anybody in the process.” Does that sound familiar? It should, because that is the prevailing message of Hollywood, the press, and our common core curriculum. Now...I’m not trying to start a fight...I’m simply observing that we all have a nagging thought in our heads that we should be better than we are, that we should be more loving, more generous, etc...and we all deal with that nagging thought in different ways.

Here’s another way we deal with the nagging sense that we should be better...we try as hard as we can to change. We start diets, we take classes, we go to church, we join the gym, we go to counseling, we read tons of books, we tell ourselves that “this is the day that I’m going to have more joy...this is the day that I’m going to become a great parent...this is the day I’m going to stop drinking...this is the day that I’m going to turn the corner and live the way I somehow know that I should live.” But as we all know, that “pull yourself up by the bootstraps” narrative doesn’t work. The Rocky movies sold a lot of tickets, but it’s simply not real, at least for most people. Most of us who have tried really hard to change our behavior and our personalities and our attitudes find ourselves exhausted, frustrated, and to some degree, worse off than we were before because we now struggle with “hopelessness.”

Another way to deal with the nagging sense that we should be better is the practice of comparisons. We pacify ourselves that we are at least “better” than those people; we’re better parents than the people on our street; we’re better leaders than the guy who lost his company; we’re better spouses than our friends who are having affairs. As long as we can “one up” somebody we know, we can convince ourselves that things could be worse...and at least we’re not “that bad.” Once again, like the Popeye approach, the practice of comparisons will inevitably
leave us calcified in our character, or we will feel completely crushed when we compare ourselves to others who seem to have it all together.

So, have I got your attention yet? Is there anyone here who cannot relate with what I’ve been talking about? We all have ways that we want to grow and “get better,” but most of us struggle with what to do about that. So…given that we all have this inevitable nagging that we should be better, let’s see if we can understand where it comes from and what we can do about it.

First of all, where does this nagging sense come from that we should be better than we are? In the world of philosophy and even theology we would answer this question with the Greek word, Telos. Telos simply means, “the end…the target…where everything points to.” In the Westminster Confession of Faith we find the question, “What is the chief end of man?” That is a telos question. What is the end? What is the purpose of human life in the first place? The answer that we find in the Westminster Confession is this, “To know God and enjoy Him forever.”

If we read the Bible, that’s what we’ll discover. We find in the book of Genesis that God created us…human beings…to know Him…to be in an intimate, loving relationship with Him…and for us to enjoy that relationship forever. In Genesis 2-3 we read of how God enjoyed his creation…and how the first humans lived freely and joyfully with God.

Now…Christy and I have four kids. We chose to have four kids, we were blessed to have four kids, but there was an expectation that we shared when we produced children: we desired to be in a relationship with our kids, and we expected to enjoy our kids…most of the time. At least some of the time! Like all of you out there, we did not “create” our children to simply have them roam around our house, eat our food, sleep in the beds that we provide, wear the clothes that we provide, and then act as though we do not exist. We created out of love, with the telos that we would be in a loving relationship with our children…that we would enjoy them, and that they would enjoy us and each other.

Now, we learn in the scriptures that the “telos” of humanity was frustrated due to the influence of sin. As it turns out, not even God can make people love him. The first humans rebelled against God and ever since there has been a curse upon humanity…that is what we could refer to as our “sin nature.” Once again, as parents, this “sin nature” becomes quite apparent even when our children are very young. As parents, we can provide everything in the world that our child needs, but we cannot make a child love us. We cannot make a child obey our rules, even when those rules are there for the child’s protection and well-being.

Now, I know we’re getting deep here, and we’ll cover some of this same territory later in the series, but the point I want you to see here is that the telos…the chief end of our existence on earth…was frustrated by sin…and it still is.
This is why we all feel like we should be better than we are. We were made for more than this. We were made to live in perfect union and fellowship with our Father/Creator, we were made to live in perfect fellowship with our brothers and sisters, but the telos of our human existence on earth has been frustrated by sin…and when I say frustrated, that is the understatement of the ages. The corruption that exists within each of us is like a cancer, and it slowly destroys our best efforts in relationships, our best efforts at work, our best efforts in trying to connect with God…it’s a serious problem, and it’s a problem we simply cannot fix on our own. We literally have a “sin nature” that sabotages our best efforts and our best intentions. The Apostle Paul wrote about the “war” that he saw raging in his own body in Romans 7, “For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate…for I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. For I do not do the good that I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing.”

Does that sound familiar to anyone? Yes…that is a universal condition. And once again, this is our dilemma: We know that we were created to be different than we are…we have this nagging sense that we should do better…we know that some of our habits and tendencies are wrong if not flat out evil…but then we feel powerless to actually change ourselves.

So that’s where the problem comes from…now what can we do about it?

Well, the first question to ask is: What did God do about it? Those of you who are familiar with the Gospel know that God acted decisively in history to save humans from the cancer of sin. We read in John 3:16 that God so loved the world that He gave us his son, so that whoever would believe in Him would not perish but inherit eternal life. The Son that is referred to here is none other than Jesus of Nazareth, the child born of a virgin, conceived by the Holy Spirit, and the savior of the world. He saved us by becoming one of us. And though he was perfect and without sin, he took on our sin and our punishment on a cross, rising again on the third day and conquering death once and for all, so that all who would repent and place their faith in Jesus might be forgiven and inherit eternal life. That is the Gospel, it is true, and it the hope of the world. This Gospel of Jesus Christ is preached week in and week out here at Colonial and in tens of thousands of churches all over the world. Most of the people in this room have at one time or another asked God to forgive you in Jesus’ name, and so many of you are confident that you will go to heaven when you die because you know yourselves to be forgiven in Christ…and that is wonderful, amen?

But here’s the problem we often find within the church…and it’s the same problem we find among those who don’t know Jesus: the sinful, evil behaviors and attitudes continue on. Though we believe we have been “saved by grace,” we would have to admit that our lifestyles have seemingly not changed as a result. We continue to be miserly, we continue to be grumpy and
selfish, we continue to struggle with addictions and destructive behavior, and we’re increasingly hopeless that these horrible habits and patterns of living will ever change…AND WE’RE CHRISTIANS!

This embarrassing admission is something we don’t like to talk about, but deep in our hearts we are gradually losing confidence in our salvation; we are losing hope that Jesus or anyone else can help our cancerous sin condition; and we feel like hypocrites of the highest order. You see, this topic is really relevant for Christians as well as non-Christians…this whole conversation is just universally relevant if you are a human being on planet earth.

So…what do we do now? Well, that’s what this series is all about. You see, the problem within the Christian camp is all too often the same problem as the pagans…we do not know our telos. We don’t know our end…the point and purpose of our existence. Even many of us who have repented and asked Jesus to cover our sins so that we might inherit eternal life have stopped short of what He saved us FOR. You see, we were saved to BECOME like JESUS. That is the new TELOS on this side of the fall…as Paul writes in Romans 8, “For those whom God foreknew He also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that He might be the firstborn among many brothers.” Paul prayed for the church in Galatia and writes in Galatians 4 that he is in “the anguish of childbirth until Christ is formed in you!” If you study the Gospels, Jesus is constantly saying, “Follow me. Do what I do. Think what I think. Live like I live. Love like I love. Forgive like I forgive. BE LIKE I AM.” The TELOS of our existence is to BE like Jesus, so much so that Paul will refer to the church as the Body of Christ.

Now, don’t dismay. I realize that there ain’t none of us like Jesus! No one is perfect, I know. But listen: the telos of your life now is to live like Jesus would live if he was in your skin. Live like Jesus would live if he lived in your house, worked in your job, parented your kids, and attended your school. This is what you were saved for…and consider this: to live your life as Jesus would live your life is, in fact, the LIFE YOU’VE ALWAYS WANTED. That nagging conviction that you should be better is the Holy Spirit prompting you to be like Jesus, and that is the life you were saved to live. It is a life characterized by what the Bible calls “fruit.” The fruit of a Christ-filled life is found in Galatians 5: it is a live characterized by love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control, and humility. We know that is true because we are drawn to people with these qualities, we aspire to have these qualities, and we feel bad when we lack these qualities. But here’s the truth: the qualities we long for…the “fruit” of the spirit if you will…are those qualities that come as a result of the Holy Spirit living in us, and our surrender to the work of the Holy Spirit in us.

Now listen…here’s what we tend to do…and this is what our secular humanist culture has trained us to do: we try to go get the fruit, but ignore the whole concept of growing the tree. Our grocery store, consumer mentality has completely corrupted this picture of “fruit” bearing lives
because we just want to jump to the end, go get the fruit, and skip all the rest. Well friends, how’s that working out for you? It doesn’t work, right? None of us can just produce joy…we cannot purchase patience…we can try with all our might to be kind, but true kindness is a by-product of what is happening within us.

So...how do we bear fruit? How do we come to a point in our lives where we are genuinely joyful, peaceful, patient, loving, humble people who exercise generosity and self-control?

It begins with the roots. Every tree is only as good as the root system, and when it comes to human beings, the root system is how we think. A. W. Tozier writes, “What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us.” Now let me be clear: it’s not what we think about in terms of hypothetical, disembodied truth that is the most important thing about us…it’s what we hold to be true in our hearts. We read in Proverbs 23:7, “As a man thinks in his heart, so is he.” In other words, what we think in our heart is what we actually act upon. We live consistent with what we believe in our hearts. So what do you believe in your heart about God? What do you believe in your heart about morality, marriage, ethics, and so on? Do you know? That’s where we’ll start in this series…the battle of the mind, which is ultimately a battle of the heart. (show graphic of Believe wheel) In order to be like Jesus, we must think like Jesus and understand the way Jesus thought. That will be the first 10 weeks of our series as we consider the truths Jesus held concerning God, God as a personal God, salvation, the Bible, our identity in Christ, the Church, humanity, compassion, stewardship, and eternity.

The second ten weeks will focus on what it means to act like Jesus, (show Believe wheel) here’s what we know: how we think and what we believe does not bear fruit until we actually act upon those truths. This is pretty much the whole point of the book of James, right? But what practices should we be emulating in our lives that our consistent with the life of Jesus and the way he thought? That’s the second 10 weeks of our series when we will consider the practices of worship, prayer, Bible study, single mindedness, total surrender, biblical community, spiritual gifts, offering of time, giving of resources, and sharing our faith.

The third ten weeks of our series we will focus on what it means to be like Jesus. (Show the Believe Wheel) In the end, our best life is not behavioral compliance or theological agreement…the greatest life possible is when we are becoming like Jesus in the essence of our identity and our character. That happens over time, but the fruit is predictable and a blessing to the whole world. We will look at what it means to be like Jesus in terms of love, joy, peace, self-control, hope, patience, kindness/goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and humility.

If you have a passion to see the world become a better place…if you have a passion to see your life become what God intended when He saved you…if you have a passion to improve your marriage or your relationships with others…it all begins here: with what you believe.
I invite you to join us on this journey, and to do the work each week as we work through this series. First, please pick up a copy of the book and read a chapter each week for the next ten weeks. If possible, please pick up age-appropriate copies for your children and have them read along as well. Finally, please consider being part of a BELIEVE group where you can process what you are reading, view some teaching from Pastor Randy Frazee, and discover the encouragement of Christian community. Then, at the end of each week, I invite you to be here as I unpack the question of the week and try to address some of the questions and misunderstandings that can derail our progress in becoming like Jesus.

Now…before we close, let me echo what Pastor Randy Frazee has written in one of his books: You can’t do this. There is no way you can read a chapter each week; there is no way you can make this commitment and stick with it…there is no way that your life will really change and become like Jesus…it simply cannot be done by your own effort. You have your sin nature working against you; you have the Enemy of our soul who hates you and will do everything possible to distract you and lie to you such that you will be tempted to give up; and then we all have people in our lives who knowingly or unknowingly sabotage our best efforts at doing anything new or different. So…it’s a lost cause…unless, you have the Holy Spirit within you. Only the POWER of the Holy Spirit can accomplish transformation in a human soul. Only the Holy Spirit has the power to overcome and thwart the attacks of the Evil One and evil people. Only the Holy Spirit can bring conviction at the heart level such that we actually change the way we think, the way we act, and eventually the way we are.

So…if you do not have the Holy Spirit living in you, the life you’ve always wanted is impossible, and any effort to make a change will be exhausting and futile. But listen: God is most pleased to give you His Holy Spirit if you will but ask. Jesus once said, “What father, when asked for some bread, gives his child a snake? If you then, who are corrupted, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more with the Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask?” The Holy Spirit comes to dwell within us when we repent of our sin, (which means to turn away with every intention of never turning back), and then we ask for forgiveness in Jesus’ name, thanking God that Jesus paid the debt that we could never pay that we might inherit a life we could never earn. If you are feeling convicted of your sinful condition today…that is the Holy Spirit pressing in on you with love and power. It is your choice, however…you are free to choose: will you surrender, or will you resist?

If you have never repented and sought forgiveness from God, that is the place to start this morning. As Peter said to the men and women in Jerusalem who asked, “What then shall we do?” Peter responded, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.”
For those who have the Holy Spirit, I plead with you to surrender to whatever He is convicting you of this morning. Surrender your agenda, surrender your schedule, surrender your life to what He wants to accomplish in and through you this fall. Isn’t it time for the church to think like Jesus, to act like Jesus, and to be like Jesus? Would that not change the world, beginning with our very city?

BELIEVE starts now. So, sometime this week, read chapter one as we ask the most important question of all: Who is God? Let’s study God’s Word, discuss and pray about that with our family and groups, and I’ll address that question next Sunday.

I’m excited church…this is going to be a game-changer. Let’s pray.