

“You Can Change”
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Trying to impress God, others, or ourselves puts *us* at the center of our change project. “The thing that really separates us from God is not so much our sin, but our damnable good works.” (Tim Keller, “Preaching to the Heart.”) What should make you feel good is not what you’ve done, but what Christ has done for you. *You will cleanse no sin from your life that you have not first recognized as being pardoned through the cross. The essence of holiness is not new behavior, activity, or disciplines. Holiness is new affections, new desires, and new motives that then lead to new behavior.* John Piper says, “Conversion is the creation of new desires, not just new duties; new delights, not just new deeds; new treasures, not just new tasks.” (John Piper, “When I Don’t Desire God”) It’s not about achieving something so we can impress.

It’s about living out the new identity that God gives us in Jesus. ...we’re to live out our new identity, to be what we are. Our role is to live out this new identity as God’s holy ones or saints. We’re to live out our new identity, to be what we are. First, *growing in holiness is not sad, dutiful drudgery.* Second, *change is about living in freedom.* Third, *change is about discovering the delight of knowing and serving God.* Fourth, *becoming like Jesus is something that God gives to us.* I am forgiven. But I also really want to change. “We are more able to stop the sun in its course or make rivers run uphill as by our own skill and power to rule and order our hearts.” (John Flavel, “Keeping the Heart”).

I’ve tried to regulate my behavior with lists. Many of these things are good in themselves, and we’ll discover the role they can play in helping us grow in holiness. But our rituals and disciplines can’t change us. Our rituals might change our behavior for a while, but they can’t change our hearts. Deep in the heart of all of us is the proud desire to prove ourselves. This means we need to repent not only of our sin but also of our “righteousness” when we think of it as *our* righteousness, which we do to prove ourselves and which we think makes us better than other people.

A death and resurrection have taken place in us. My old sin-oriented self has died. I’ve been given a new life with new desires. ...his death becomes the death of our old self. And we’ve been united with Christ in his resurrection: we’ve been given a new self or a new life. But telling a *liberated* slave to be free is an *invitation* to enjoy his new freedom and privileges. We’re like a freed slave who still jumps at his old master’s voice. We’re like a man with a healed leg who still limps out of habit. We’re like a former prisoner who still wakes at prison hours. It’s no longer inevitable that we’ll sin when we face temptation. We have the power to say no to temptation. You opened your long-awaited Christmas present only to find you couldn’t make it work. The gospel is a gift that comes with “batteries included.”

Run, John, and work, the law commands,
Yet finds me neither feet nor hands;
But sweeter news the gospel brings,
It bids me fly and lends me wings.

The Spirit gives us the desire to do what is right and opposes our old sinful desires to do what is wrong. Our job is to follow the Spirit. “God is working in you, giving you the desire and the power to do what pleases him” ...so we still fall into sin. But we’re no longer enslaved by sin. We can change. Sanctification is God’s work. But we’re not passive. We have to respond with faith and repentance. Justification is a change of my status in God’s sight; sanctification is a change of my heart and character. We choose how we respond to circumstances, and what determines our choices are the thinking and desires of our hearts. Sin happens when we believe lies about God instead of God’s Word and when we worship idols instead of worshipping God.

We need to

- trust God instead of believing lies = faith.
- worship God instead of worshipping idols = repentance. Sinful acts always have their origin in some form of unbelief. *Behind every sin is a lie.* But every time we don’t trust God’s word we’re believing something else, and that something is always a lie. Sanctification is the progressive narrowing of the gap between confessional faith and functional faith. We follow this road by paying attention to the Word of God. God’s Word is our road map. The gracious promises of God give true life and health. The truth will guard our hearts and therefore our lives. Just as lies about God lead to the slavery of sin, so the truth about God leads to the freedom of service (Galatians 5:1,13). “Have you realized that most of your unhappiness in life is due to the fact that you are listening to yourself instead of talking to yourself?” “You are all I need.”

C.S. Lewis says, “The moment you wake up each morning, all your wishes and hopes for the day rush at you like wild animals. And the first job of each morning consists in shoving them all back; in listening to that other voice, taking that other point of view, letting that other, larger, stronger, quieter life come flowing in.”

1. **God is Great**—So We Do Not Have to Be in Control. We often associate the sovereignty of God with theological debates. But for all of us it’s a daily practical choice.
2. **God Is Glorious**—So We Do Not Have to Fear Others.
3. **God is Good**—So We Do Not Have to Look Elsewhere.
4. **God is Gracious**—So We Do Not Have to Prove Ourselves. Richard Lovelace claims the main reason Christians do not change is a failure really to grasp God’s grace: ...we need to nurture our trust in God’s greatness, our fear of God’s glory, our delight in God’s goodness, our longing for God’s future, our rest in God’s grace. We need to do this day by day through the Word, prayer, and the Christian community. ...when we face temptation we need to say not only “I should not do this,” but also “I need not do this.”

We sin because we desire or worship idols instead of worshipping God. John Calvin says, “Man’s nature, so to speak, is a perpetual factory of idols.” Whatever you set your heart on and put your trust in, that, I tell you, is your true god. (Martin Luther) *Our idols are those things we count on to give our lives meaning.* They are the things of which we say, “I need this to make me happy,” or “If I don’t have this my life is worthless and meaningless.” (Tim Keller) Whatever you treasure most is the thing that has your heart and controls your life. We excuse ourselves by thinking that we want to be good but are the victims of other factors (circumstances, history, biology, ill health, and so on). But the Bible’s radical view of sin tells us that we are responsible. We always do what we want to do. It’s not usually the thing we want that is the problem, but that we want it more than God. But a good thing can become a “god-thing” if it eclipses God, if the gift matters more to us than the Giver.

Repentance is a lifelong, continuous activity of turning back to God from God-dethroning desires. Repentance (turning from sinful desires) or mortification (killing off sinful desires) is Christ's work for us and the Spirit's work in us. But with the Spirit's help, we are active participants in the process. Sinclair Ferguson says: What then is this killing of sin? It is the constant battle against sin which we fight daily—the refusal to allow the eye to wander, the mind to contemplate, the affections to run after anything which will draw us from Christ.

It is the deliberate rejection of any sinful thought, suggestion, desire, aspiration, deed, circumstance or provocation at the moment we become conscious of its existence. We need to discipline our hearts to say no at the moment we become conscious of sinful desires. You discover that a desire is sinful when it produces bad fruit in your life (disobedience, anger, anxiety, and so on). When you see that bad fruit, trace it back to the idolatrous desires of your heart. Along with weeding out sin, we need to plant in grace. But turning from sin can also become a habit. Instead of temptation coming more quickly and strongly, it comes less often and less strongly. In moments of pressure, our minds go to God instead of to sin. Most of our moral decisions are reflex responses. The number-one reason why people don't change is pride, closely followed by hating the consequences of sin but actually still loving the sin itself.

Ed Welch: "Perhaps the person is mad at himself for repeating the same sin over and over again. This is actually a veiled form of pride that assumes he is capable of doing good in his own power. He is minimizing his spiritual inability apart from God's grace." Jerry Bridges claims, "God wants us to walk in obedience—not victory." Our problem, he explains, "is that our attitude toward sin is more self-centered than God-centered. We are more concerned about our own 'victory' over sin than we are about the fact that our sins grieve the heart of God." Humility is the secret to receiving grace. Jerry Bridges says we should use the language of disobedience to describe sin rather than defeat. "When I say I am defeated by some sin, I am unconsciously slipping out from under my responsibility. I am saying something outside of me has defeated me. But when I say I am disobedient, that places the responsibility for my sin squarely on me.

We may, in fact, be defeated, but the reason we are defeated is because we have chosen to disobey." We avoid responsibility for sin by minimizing it. We want our good reputation. So we hide, we pretend, we don't seek help. Such a stance meshes with proud self-reliance. We want to avoid exposure, so we tell ourselves we can manage on our own. But here's what's really happening: we love our reputation more than we hate our sin.

We need to be violent with sin. If we hold back, it's almost certainly because we don't want to be violent toward something we still love. A cross-centered life means an inevitable and resolute rejection of all self-confidence and self-righteousness. The secret of humility, and therefore of change, is never to stray far from the cross. It should be often in our thoughts, on our lips, in our songs, determining our actions, shaping our attitudes, captivating our affections. Joshua Harris: "What you see in your spiritual life today, is the direct result of what you've put in the soil of your life in days past..." So we sow to the flesh whenever we do something that strengthens or provokes our sinful desires. We sow to the Spirit whenever we strengthen our Spirit-inspired desire for holiness. Faith and repentance are the only true gospel disciplines. It's important to see not sowing to the sinful nature and sowing to the Spirit in this context.

Not sowing to the sinful nature = saying no to whatever strengthens my sinful desires = reinforcing repentance
Sowing to the Spirit = saying yes to whatever strengthens my Spirit-inspired desires = reinforcing faith

We're particularly vulnerable to temptation when we're hungry, angry, lonely, or tired (HALT). Don't ask, "How far can I go toward sin?" Ask instead, "How far can I run from sin?" What, then, does it mean in practice to say no to whatever might provoke or strengthen our sinful desires?

Some Christians sow to the flesh every day and wonder why they do not reap holiness. The best way to avoid weeds is to sow other plants in their place. Sowing to the Spirit means saying yes to whatever strengthens our Spirit-inspired desires. Here are seven things that reinforce faith. The only true spiritual disciplines in the Christian life are faith and repentance. I prefer the traditional term *the means of grace*.

1. The Bible The Word of God is perhaps God's primary means of changing us. Scripture must be our central tool in personal growth and ministry.

1. The Bible is the source of truth that counters the lies of sin that the world perpetuates. If we are not in the Bible day by day, our hearts will be immersed only in lies.

2. Prayer

3. Community

4. Worship

5. Service

6. Suffering

7. Hope

The church is one of God's means of grace to reinforce our faith and repentance. The Christian community is a community of confession, accountability, encouragement, and rebuke. These are the ways in which we reinforce repentance for one another. I sometimes describe our church as a group of messy people led by messy people. Analysis can be quick, but change is slow. The battle for holiness is made up of what Horatius Bonar calls "daily littles."

John Flavel says: "Keeping the heart is a constant work. Keeping the heart is a work that is never done until life is over." ...sanctifying faith is hard, disciplined work. "*Make every effort* to live in peace with all men and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord" (Hebrews 12:14, NIV). ...change is always possible. There's no sin that I need be trapped in. There's no area of life that I cannot change. Change will not be easy. Sin is habit-forming—not just habits of behavior, but also habits of thinking. However, change *is* possible. For just as sin is habit-forming, so is holiness. Speaking truth to yourself day by day will create habits of thinking. Every time you resist temptation, you weaken the influence of your sinful desires. Sin is never the last word for the children of God. Grace is always the last word.