

You Can Change, Part 3: "Change Your Thinking"

Sunday, January 26

Romans 6:1-11

Prayer

Book recommendation: "You Can Change" by Tim Chester

Introduction

- If I were to ask you what your life's biggest threat is, without answering me aloud, what would you say? What would you say is your greatest weakness? I wonder how many of you said something like, "My biggest weakness is my lack of dependence on the Spirit"? If I were to guess, I bet that very few of us thought that. But allow me share with you something that I have discovered about myself and what two decades of ministry, not to mention God's word, has taught me about you and me. Our biggest weakness is our lack of complete dependence on the Holy Spirit.
- Each and every day, we have a decision to make: depend on God or depend on self. God-dependence or self-dependence? The biggest mountain you have to climb is not, contrary to what you believe, that stubborn lust problem. Your biggest challenge is not the insecurity you battle. Your most fatal flaw that leaves you the most vulnerable is not your all-consuming problem with anger and even rage. **Our biggest sin is that we don't fully depend on God.**
 - Many, many times we all have pledged our undying loyalty to God after being tripped up by that weakness that always seems to get the best of us. Haunted by our guilt, we begin to make vows to God: "I have got to pray more consistently, so every day before work I'm going to get up early to pray." Or "Man, I have got to get in God's word in order to beat this! I'm not skipping another day." "I'm getting back in church. Enough is enough. No more of this. I'm tired of losing." We make these vows because it is in our moments of failure that we recognize

our need for God, that we simply don't have the strength to fight temptation on our own. (This is a good place to be, by the way - aware of our need of him).

- But not three days goes by and we have broken every one of these vows! (Which leaves us feeling even more ashamed. And, quite frankly, a lot of us are getting tired of always feeling ashamed, which is why so many Christians are becoming more and more disengaged with the church. Why keep subjecting ourselves to misery?) But this still begs the question of why we bail on our commitments to God.
- One reason, if not the biggest reason, that we throw off our vows to God is that what we are really looking for is **emotional relief**. Sure, we like the idea of change, but mainly because we don't like the way certain behaviors *make us feel*. If we can eliminate those behaviors, we can eliminate the source of sadness and depression in our lives, something to assuage the feeling of guilt. So some of us turn to God. But the Spirit's presence in my life and the spiritual disciplines, such as prayer, the study of God's word, and church participation, are misused. Sort of like using a tire iron to fix a faucet. We go to those things to fix a problem that has already been fixed by Jesus. When he died for us, he took upon himself God's judgment that we deserved. And when he was raised from the dead, Jesus was vindicated as righteous by God. Now, those of us who put our faith in Christ are also righteous. God declares us innocent and imputes Christ's righteousness to our account. We are not only forgiven for the sins of our past, but we are forgiven of the sins of our present and future. We are no longer guilty and we will never again be counted guilty. This means that we don't pray in order to get back in good standing with God. We don't read our Bibles or go to church in order to garner God's favor. On our worst day, we are forgiven, accepted, and loved. So we have to learn to think this way about ourselves (and I'm speaking to those of us who truly trust in Christ).
- Another problem associated with seeking emotional relief is that feelings are totally unreliable. Have you noticed that the farther you get from a past sin, the better you feel? You don't need church, the Bible, prayer, or even God, for that matter, to "feel better." Emotions are fueled by energy and none of us have

endless resourced of energy. So, generally speaking, you are not going to feel guilty for all that long. Here's the kicker: the negative energy of guilt motivates you to pray and read your Bible *for a while*, but it eventually burns out. This is another reason we break our commitments to God. We simply don't feel all that bad anymore. Our prayers, in sort of a twisted sense, have been answered. What we really wanted was to *feel* better and after a few days we do *feel* better. So we move back into a lifestyle of not depending on God - our biggest dysfunction.

- Going back to the guilt issue and the promises we make, this leads to another problem. When we are feeling guilty because of our failures, some of us say things like, "Lord, I will never ever again do this." In the heat of the moment, we are sincere. We really intend to not engage in that behavior again. And even after the negative emotions subside, we have an artificial feeling of strength. We actually think that from this point forward, that problem has finally been vanquished. But these naive feelings of strength are just as fickle as our feelings of guilt. And we get sloppy. Cocky, even. As though that particular dysfunction or sin in our lives just vanished, *like we don't even have to try anymore*. (That's what some of us are going for. We see "deliverance" as not having to try anymore.) Suddenly, and to our horror, we find ourselves medicating again. Neck-deep in the same sin praying the same prayer, "Lord, please forgive me. I've asked you a million times to set me free from this..." We are stuck in a vicious cycle, once again fighting to stay above water.
- Here's the big question: Why do we deceive ourselves, stubbornly remaining in this **vicious cycle of sin, shame, sorrow, and sloppiness? [TABLE with accompanying attitudes]**
 - Because deep down, many of us believe that having to *fight* sin and dysfunction is inauthentic. Having to fight must mean that there's something wrong with me because when a person *really* becomes a Christian, sin should just...go away, right? After all, we sing and talk about Christ's resurrection and how it overcame sin, death, and the power of Satan. Doesn't this mean that sin in my life should just...vanish?

- Let's discover what the Bible actually says about the fight against sin. Let's see if it's actually true that authentic followers of Jesus should just get over their sin like we get over a cold.

Text: Romans 6:1-11

1 What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? 2 By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it?

- Obviously, it is impossible to understand why Paul says this without recalling his final point from the previous section. At the end of chapter 5, Paul is talking about the fact that through Adam's sin, all people became sinners, inheriting a sinful nature. We're all sinners before we even think about committing our first act of sin. Sin isn't something we have to learn. It's who we are, our identity. But in the same way sin invaded the world through one man, righteousness overcomes it through one man's obedience, Jesus (Romans 5:18-19).
- The fact is that all of us who embrace the way of Christ are counted righteous by God. This was the point of Romans 4 and 5. God counted Abraham righteous because he believed something impossible that God told him - that in he and his wife's very old age, they would have a son. And he believed it. He trusted God in the face of the impossible. So it is with us. Even though we all still do messed-up things, if we trust in Christ's righteousness, not allowing ourselves to be demoralized by our own inability, God counts us righteous. Regardless of how jacked up we think we are, if we put our faith in Christ's ability, we are accepted and counted righteous by God.
- "But what about my sinful *behavior?*," I can hear some of you thinking. "Yeah, that's great. God considers me righteous. But I still hate some of the things that I do. How do I change that? Would you *please* get to some practicals, now?!" Paul anticipates this and responds in chapter 5 verse 21 saying, "where sin increased, grace abounded all the more." A more literal translation is "where sin increased, grace also superabounded."¹ **Grace, supplied to us by the Spirit, is stronger than the sin in our lives!**

¹ Wright, N.T. Paul For Everyone. Romans: Part 1. Westminster John Knox Press. 96.

- But this leads to a new concern, that some of his readers will interpret this to mean that sin is no longer a concern to God. That being in grace means sin is a non-factor. That behavior, good or bad, is inconsequential since we're counted righteous anyway. Paul can hear the dark drum beats of these thoughts among his readers, "If grace abounds all the more when I sin, then what's the big deal, why not just keep sinning?"
- To be clear, Paul's words are not aimed at those who have no conscience for sin or who use God's grace as a license to sin. His words are meant to encourage those who truly desire to serve God, yet still struggle in sin. Paul is talking to people who sincerely fight the battle of temptation, but are demoralized by their defeats at times. When sin abounds, grace superabounds! It may feel like you're losing, but you're not! His words are meant to remind us all that no matter how stubborn our sin may be, God's grace more than compensates for it. You see, we all should *feel* sorrow for our sin; especially Christians. After all, as our hearts grow more and more like his, we will inherit God's sensitivities and values. **Maturing Christians are grieved more and more by sin, not less and less.**
- Some of us may be prone to shrug off sin and dysfunctional behavior because we think that "God will forgive us anyway. I'll just tell him I'm sorry later."
 - This is one of the ways that some of us have been terribly misinformed in our Christian upbringings. We narrow the gospel to forgiveness, which causes us to adopt the view that God is okay with us remaining as we are as long as we ask for forgiveness. But, as we are about to see, what Paul had in mind was not just forgiveness, as beautiful as that is, but freedom from slavery, an expulsion of sin from our lives, breaking free from the dominion of self-destructive habits and corrosive emotions. He had change in mind.
 - This also reveals another aspect of misinformed thinking. No where in Scripture are we told to say we're sorry to God. Rather, we are told to repent. Repentance is the act of re-orienting our lives around God and his ways. It's more than mere sentiment. It's actively changing our lifestyle. (But I'm getting ahead of myself. We'll talk more about that next week.)

3 Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? 4 We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. 5 For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.

- Pay attention here to Paul's line of thought: Those of us who have come to Christ have fully aligned with his ways, his identity, who he is. So much so that we were baptized, it says, into his death. (When you are water baptized as a new believer, you aren't just fulfilling some sort of religious formality. Through that act, you are more than declaring your full allegiance to Christ. You are declaring that his identity is your own now. That in the same way he died to our sin, we die to our sin, as well. So how can we who are baptized into Christ, taking on Christ's identity, not die to the same sin that put him on the cross? This is what Paul is saying, that it's inconceivable that we remain in our sin, unchanged.
- But in the same way Christ was raised from the dead into new life, we are, as well! **We have actually, literally, really become new creatures in Christ!** And please don't look at this like a math problem, asking, "When did I become a new creature, at the point of faith or when I was baptized?" The answer is YES! It's all about becoming like Christ, taking on his identity! It's about immersing ourselves in his ways.
- Before we move on, it's helpful to consider that Paul was likely appealing to the Book of the Exodus in which God delivered his people from Egyptian slavery through the waters of the Red Sea. This was a *real* deliverance and God has a *real* deliverance in mind for us, as well. But we must also keep in mind that just as God brought Israel out of Egypt, he had to get Egypt out of Israel. And that took 40-years. If you sink your teeth into God's word here, it won't take you 40-years to get this. When Israel was in the wilderness before they entered the land of Promise, God was re-forming them into what they already were - his people. Once they grasped this, they were ready to move forward and begin taking some ground. But not until then. Yes, they were God's people, even when they were in slavery. Bound and miserable. God brought Israel into the wilderness to help them grasp their identity as his children, not of Egypt's. To

teach them that their identity was not inseparably tied to hard labor, but to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. So God is doing the same with us here in Romans 6.

- I love what N.T. Wright says about these first several verses: “So what is Paul’s answer to...someone who declared that since God accepts us as we are, it is better not to change the way we are...? His answer is that in becoming a Christian you move from one type of humanity to the other, and you should never think of yourself in the original mode again. More particularly, in becoming a Christian, you die and rise again with the Messiah...what is true of him is true of [us].”² Your behavior stems from identity - what you believe about yourself.
- Because we have been united with the Messiah, we are no longer in sin. We are no longer “*located* in sin.”³ Our address has changed. Despite how obstinate our sin is, we are no longer bound to it. **Grace has come to take us somewhere else, not leave us forgiven, yet broken where we are.** So why on earth would we not immerse ourselves in the Person who is the giver of grace? Why would we not give everything we are to Grace Himself? Why would we withhold ourselves, even to the slightest degree, from our great God?

6 We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. 7 For one who has died has been set free from sin. 8 Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. 9 We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. 10 For the death he died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God. 11 So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.

- Paul’s goal here is to remind Christians of their new identity in Christ. It’s as though he is grabbing their chins and forcing them to turn away from the false belief - that they are still doomed to repeat their failures over and over again - and, rather, he forces

² Ibid. 101.

³ Ibid.

them to look into the truth that they are no longer slaves. **There is no way we will ever quit acting like slaves until we start believing we are free.**

- And this is where we have to embrace a bit of work. We must work at thinking about ourselves differently.
 - You are NOT a porn addict anymore.
 - You are NOT a drug addict anymore.
 - You are NOT a manipulator anymore.
 - You are NOT an insecure person anymore.
 - You are NOT a rage-monger anymore.
 - You are NOT an alcoholic anymore.
 - You are NOT an abuser anymore.
 - You are NOT worthless.
 - You are NOT ugly.
 - You are NOT inferior.
 - You are NOT beyond repair.
 - You are NOT hopeless.
 - You are NOT stupid.
 - You are NOT sinister.
 - You are NOT a failure.
 - You are NOT broken.
 - You ARE a new creation in Christ. Believe the gospel. **Believe what Christ thinks about you**, not what you parents think about you, what your siblings think about you, what your friends think about you, what your classmates think about you, what your employer thinks about you, what your spouse thinks about you, what *you* think about you. Don't you talk bad about Jesus' stuff! You're his stuff!
- F.F. Bruce said that "The man we once were has been crucified with Christ."⁴ When we come to Christ, our sinful solidarity with the world was crucified with him. This means that **the tendencies and habits of old have no more dominating power over**

⁴ Bruce, F.F. Romans. The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries. IVP Academic. 131.

you. This means that it is not just possible to overcome, but guaranteed, so long as you remember who you are in the gospel.

- I like this: Bruce goes on to point out that an alternative meaning of the word “crucify” is to “fence off.” Literally, “the person I now am has been fenced off by the cross from the person I formerly was...”⁵ It is not possible to become again what I once was. Even when I fail.
- Finally, Paul zooms in on this concept, breaking it down a little more for us. Now this is big, so please think with me and grab on to this concept. In verse 11, he says that we must consider ourselves dead to sin. People have often interpreted this verse as a mere leap of faith. As some sort of over-spiritualized self-actualization in which we think real hard about our full potential and come to realize it. "When I grow up I want to be an astronaut."
- Another translation for “consider” (in that we must *consider* ourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ), that will bring some clarity is the word, “calculate.”⁶ We are to “calculate [ourselves] as being dead to sin.”⁷
- What we are talking about is that we must calculate, or reconcile, our records like an accountant does, in regards to our sinful behavior and thinking. What on earth could this mean? When we calculate, we don’t change the facts. Whatever amount was in the register or account is still there. But after calculating, we now know the exact amount. Similarly, when we calculate ourselves as being dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus, we are not trying to “look on the bright side” or change some negative, shameful reality about our lives. We're not trying to merely think positive about ourselves. We're not turning lemons into lemonade. We are reconciling accounts. We are reminding ourselves who we really are!
- Why is this important? Because we forget who we are every day. As a matter of fact, every transgression in our lives is evidence of a momentary lapse of memory. We forgot who we are, to whom we belong. We have been trained to interpret ourselves

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Wright, N.T. Paul For Everyone. Romans: Part 1. Westminster John Knox Press. 105.

⁷ Wright, N.T. The Kingdom New Testament: A Contemporary Translation. Harper One. Romans 6:11.

through the past, through our upbringing, through the idiosyncrasies and tendencies that we inherited from mom and dad. We view ourselves through our mistakes. We see ourselves through our failures. And we think we we're in the red. We think of ourselves as damaged goods. But that is not who we are anymore! And **it takes discipline to think truthfully about ourselves. This is also called *worship*.** To think correctly about ourselves in Christ. Thinking correctly about ourselves will draw us back to the truth. That we are not dead in our trespasses! We are not hopeless gratification addicts or locked into the same sinful status quo. We don't have to any longer follow our old appetites down the path of death. We are alive in Christ, new creatures! And we have to train ourselves - force ourselves - remember that every day. Every minute. **Old things have truly passed away.**⁸

Lord's Suppers

⁸ 2 Corinthians 5:17.