

## **Gospel-Centered Transformation**

Who doesn't want to change? Just a quick google search for New Year resolutions, and you'll find: How to lose weight; how to eat healthier; how to get a new job; how to change your bad habits; how to stop biting your nails; how to run a marathon; how to stop spending; how to be a better friend; how to stop procrastinating; how to have a happier life.

In fact, if you drilled down a bit more on the most popular ways to make changes to your life, here's a brief list from google: Compliment yourself; don't make excuses; let go of anger; practice forgiveness; be honest and direct; be helpful; be yourself; don't show up empty-handed (huh?); educate yourself; eliminate the non-essential; surprise yourself.

Sounds good, right? Not really. When we think about change, changing behavior and changing the heart are two entirely different things. You can change your behavior (temporarily) but never change your heart. But you can't change your heart and not have your behavior change. Because heart transformation is true and lasting transformation, our goal is heart transformation through the work of the gospel in our lives over time and in the context of community.

So, let's think about this concept of the heart and how it changes.

### **The heart**

In the Bible, the heart is all-encompassing. We often talk about the mind, will, and emotions as separate parts of us that make up who we are. The Bible doesn't separate these so nicely. Yes, the Bible speaks to each of these individually, but often the mind, will, and emotions are lumped together into the concept that the Bible calls, the heart.

When we think about changing, this is why it is vital that our heart changes. Our heart directs our desires (Psalm 21:2). Our resolve comes from our heart (Psalm 10:17). Our courage or fear comes from our heart (Psalm 27;14). Our gratitude springs from our heart (Psalm 9:1). Our discouragement or hope comes from our heart (Psalm 18:45). And, our sin and righteousness spring from our heart (Matthew 15:19). Ultimately, any real change in our lives comes from our heart.

### **How does our heart change?**

"Ok," you say, "yes, change comes from the heart. But, can my heart change?" In Romans 6:17, the Apostle Paul says, "But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed." He proclaims the great news that our hearts can change.

### **How does the gospel change us?**

But let's get practical. We are changed by the gospel, but how? If God's will for our lives is our sanctification in our sexuality (1 Thes. 4:3-8), how does the gospel produce

this kind of purity in our lives? How does the gospel keep us from looking at pornography on our phone when it is a daily temptation? How does the gospel cause us to not sleep with my boyfriend or girlfriend, yet again? How does the gospel change our lust into love?

If we put together the New Testament teaching on how we change, we see four main ways the gospel works in our lives to change us - by its *purifying forgiveness*; its *purifying promises*; its *purifying beauty*; and its *purifying power*.

### ***Purifying forgiveness***

How in the world does knowing that we are forgiven actually purify us? In other words, wouldn't knowing that we have forgiveness lead us to abusing that forgiveness by willingly sinning? How does forgiveness change us?

Forgiveness produces love

Luke tells the story in Luke 7:36-50 about a sinful woman and a proud man named Simon. Simon is a proud man who has lived his life keeping all the rules and has very little need for forgiveness. The woman is simply described as a woman of the city. In other words, she is a sinful, broken woman. As Jesus is eating in Simon's house, she interrupts the party with her tears and worship of Jesus. Simon is a bit ticked off at her and at Jesus for allowing such a sinful woman to worship Jesus in this way. Jesus then tells Simon a story about two people who owed debts. One owed a moneylender a measly amount, and the other owed an amount that could never be paid off in a lifetime. As Jesus tells the story, he says the moneylender cancelled the debt of both of them. He then asks a probing question. "Which of them would love the moneylender more?" "Of course the one who is forgiven more," Simon says. Even though Simon knew the right answer, the woman was actually the one who was right with God. She loved and worshipped Jesus because he was the moneylender who cancelled her huge debt. In other words, the more we recognize how deep the gracious forgiveness of Christ goes in our lives, the more we genuinely respond in love for him. And a love for him produces purity in us.

### ***Purifying promises***

The next way that the gospel changes us is through believing God's purifying promises. John Piper shares an example that might be helpful. He says that if you were to promise a person a million dollars if they didn't look at porn tonight, would they do it? 99% of the time, they wouldn't look at porn because there is a promise of something greater awaiting them if they remain pure. Piper goes on to say that people are "decisively controlled by what they believe - what they believe will happen if they act on the lust or don't."

What are the promises that we can believe that actually can purify us? Here's just a few:

His promise that He is our greatest satisfaction (Psalm 16:11) frees us from lusting after lesser things.

His promise that He is all we need (Philippians 4:11) frees us from discontentment that leads to worldly pursuits - sexually or non sexually.

As we continue to spend time in His word, we can bask in his countless promises toward us - all of which transform our heart.

### ***Purifying beauty***

Thirdly, in 2 Corinthians 3:18, Paul says, "And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit." What Paul is saying is that the more clearly we see the glory of Christ, the more we will be transformed to look like him. Author and pastor, Sam Storms says it this way, "beholding is becoming." In his book, *Pleasures Evermore*, he says,

"we were made to be enchanted, enamored, and engrossed with God; enthralled, enraptured, and entranced with God; enraptured, excited, and enticed by God; astonished, amazed, and awed by God; astounded, absorbed, and agog with God; beguiled and bedazzled; startled and staggered; smitten and stunned; stupefied and spellbound; charmed and consumed; thrilled and thunderstruck; obsessed and preoccupied; intrigued and impassioned; overwhelmed and overwrought; gripped and rapt; enthused and electrified; tantalized, mesmerized, and monopolized; fascinated, captivated, and exhilarated by God; intoxicated and infatuated with God!" (Pg. 107)

Have you ever thought of Christ in this way? When we see him in this way, though, we will be transformed. When we see him in this way, sin will increasingly look distasteful.

### ***Purifying power***

Finally, the gospel changes us at the core of our being (our heart) by the purifying power of the Spirit. According to the verse that we just looked at in 2 Corinthians 3:18, it is the Spirit that allows us to see Christ and become transformed. In Romans 8:1-4, Paul says, "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death. For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit."

For centuries before Christ, God's people, in their own self-effort, were not able to live out God's righteous requirement as given in the law (commands). But, through the gospel, Paul is declaring that those who belong to Christ have the Spirit who does what the law could never do - produces righteousness in those who walk by his Spirit. Commands could never change the heart. But God's Spirit transforms our heart - purifying our mind, giving us the will to obey, and providing the enabling power to carry out obedience.

**Conclusion**

So, as we think about purity in any and every area of our lives, while resolve, resolutions, addressing wounds in our lives, understanding triggers, having great Christian community, developing healthy habits, and growing in our biblical convictions are all good, God alone changes our hearts. The gospel alone produces the purity that will last. Christ has graciously secured our cleansing forgiveness. The promises of God toward us, as his children, change our lives. The Spirit enables us to see Christ whom our hearts long to see. And the Spirit gives us the power that no human resolve can achieve. He alone changes us!

Version 2019-06 | Jeff Lark