

Biblical Change – The Responsibility of Choice

Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, this he will also reap. 8 For the one who sows to his own flesh shall from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit shall from the Spirit reap eternal life. (Gal 6:7-8)

In February 1992, Stella Liebeck ordered a cup of coffee to go from McDonalds. Liebeck was sitting in the passenger seat of her nephew's car, which was pulled over so she could add sugar to her coffee. While removing the cup's lid, Liebeck spilled her hot coffee, burning her legs. Liebeck sued McDonalds. Liebeck was ultimately awarded \$160,000 in compensatory damages. She was also awarded \$2.7 million in punitive damages. She spilt her own coffee on her own lap, but it became the fault of McDonalds. Similar frivolous lawsuits abound – people suing tobacco companies for their lung cancer, people suing candy companies for their diabetes. Because of this foolish lawsuits, we now have all manner of ridiculous warnings and instructions on things:

On a hair dryer: *Do not use in shower*

On an American Airlines packet of nuts: *Instructions - open packet, eat nuts.*

On a baby pram: *Remove child before folding.*

On a household iron: *Never iron clothes while they are being worn.*

How did we get here? Human beings have always wanted to blame somebody else for their troubles. That's as old as the Garden of Eden. But what we are seeing in our culture is a rejection of the idea of personal responsibility for our choices. I am a victim of what someone else has done to me. I do what I do because of my background, my education, my family history. You cannot fault me; anything bad that I do is a consequence of what someone else has done.

I watch with interest every time they catch one of these shooters who goes into a public place and just starts murdering people. Inevitably, you'll see the news reports about the shooter's home life, and if he had friends at school, and what he watched on the Internet. And the implication is: that's why he became a shooter. Certainly, it is interesting to study the shaping influences in a person's life, but in the end does the person bear responsibility for his choices?

And alongside that idea that we are not responsible for our choices, we have this false idea that I have the power within me to do whatever I want to do. I just believe in myself, I positively confess my reality, and I create my own world. So we have these two poles which leads to a very immature way of thinking: when I do well, it was my independent choices; when I do badly, it's someone else's fault.

Biblical change depends upon a biblical understanding of human choice. Every one of us desires some kind of change. If you are interested in growing spiritually, then you are interested in change. If you want to break a stubborn habit, then you want change. If you want to finally begin a new habit that just doesn't seem to take, then you want change. If you want to put off certain sins: anger, laziness, lust, coveting, bitterness, then you want change. If you are longing for a better marriage, a better parenting relationship, better church relationships, then are you are seeking change.

Very often we look at the passing of time, and we see little change, and we become discouraged. We wonder why we are not changing the way we would like, and as fast as we would like.

The foundational reason why change does not take place has to do with our understanding of choice. If you get it wrong here, nothing else in the process will work. If biblical change begins with a right view of personal responsibility, then you will short-circuit the whole process of change if you get it wrong here.

And we see this in all kinds of ways. We see people waiting for God to make choices for them which they are supposed to make. We see people waiting for change to happen in others before they make any choices. We see people hoping change will happen passively. We see people stuck in victim-mode, where other people's choices paralyse them from acting.

If you desire change, be it in your character, be it in your habits, be it in your relationships, be it in your walk with God, then we need to believe and practise what God says about choice. We need to avoid the false ideas that our human will can create reality, but we also need to avoid the false idea that our wills are paralysed and passive.

In Galatians 6, Paul is going to state some things about human responsibility that we need to know and believe and apply at home, at work, at church. He is dealing with finances, but he says some things which are timeless principles, universal laws about human responsibility. Here are two laws about our choices, that if we obey them, are the foundation for biblical change.

I. Your Choices Are Your Responsibility

*Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a **man** sows, this **he** will also reap.*

What a man (singular) sows that shall he (singular) also reap.

Paul says, a man's own sowing will explain his own harvest. If his harvest fails – he cannot blame his neighbour. Nor can another take credit for his good harvest. You alone are responsible and will be held fully accountable for all of your choices.

Now we nod and we say we believe that. But what is the reflex action when we are blamed for something wrong? What's the first thing your mind begins doing when you are accused of something? It begins running through the options of who else can be blamed for your choices.

We see it in Adam and Eve blaming-shifting.

But the Bible teaches, your choices are yours. What you sow, you reap.

Now it is true that you also experience the consequences of other people's choices. It is true that you have no control over what other people do for you or to you. It is true that what someone else has done to you influences and affects your choices. But he or she is not the reason for your choices. You do what you do, and God holds you accountable for your choices.

Because if you believe the lie that you are a product and a victim and result of other people's choices, then you are always off the hook. What you do is never a self-caused choice, it is just a reflex, like a knee that jumps when the doctor gives it a tap with his rubber hammer. Nothing I do comes from within me – it is all a result of outside inputs. Whatever I do, ultimately is a result of things that have happened to me – my upbringing, my education, my family, my church, my standard of living, what I was exposed to.

Why are you grumpy at home? It's because of my wife. Why are you so lazy at work? It's because of my unfair boss. Why are you so anxious all the time? It's because of all these pressures others have put on me. Why are you courting an adulterous relationship? It's because my husband doesn't show me any attention. Why do you never pray? It's because my work just exhausts me.

When God asked Adam why he had sinned, he said it was the woman's fault. When He asked Eve, she said it was the serpent's fault. When Jacob asked his son's why they had massacred a town, they said it was the town's fault for abusing their sister.

We see it when Aaron makes the golden calf and when asked why he did this, he says, “The people

gave me the gold, and I put it in the fire – and out came this calf”.

When Samuel asks Saul why he intruded upon the priestly office and sacrificed, he said it was Samuel's fault. “You were late, and the people were scattering, and so I forced myself.”

Two chapters later, he asks Samuel why he has not obeyed God and has kept some of the spoil from the Amalekites, and he says, “The people did it, and the rest is to be a special sacrifice to God.”

The start of change is to embrace this first principle – my choices are my responsibility. God will judge me not for what others have done to me, but for what I did with my choices. Your actions are yours and you will be called to account for them and them alone. You can legitimately be punished or rewarded. You are not held accountable for what was decided for you. You are held accountable for what you decide.

Why am I grumpy at home? Because I have chosen to be grumpy in response to my spouse. Why am I lazy at work? Because I choose to be lazy in response to my work environment. Why am I always worrying? Because I am choosing to be anxious for everything and pray about nothing.

When you are desiring to change, and you wonder why it isn't happening, no one's face should pop into your mind. Not your parents. Not your pastor. Not an unsaved spouse or relative, not a saved spouse or relative. Not your children, not your boss, not your friends, not the church. Do you know whose face should come into your mind when you want to change? Your own. The reason I have not changed in this area is because I have been sowing a kind of seed, and the harvest that I am experiencing is the consequence.

God has given human beings the responsibility of choice. It's a powerful and terrifying thing to be given choice. A.W. Tozer said, “God has made us in His likeness, and one mark of that likeness is our free will. We hear God say, “Whosoever will, let him come.” We know by bitter experience the woe of an unsundered will and the blessedness or terror which may hang upon our human choice.”

God wants us to know what he has given us. God expects change from us, because He has given us choice.

II. Your Choices Always Produce Consequences

*Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, this he **will** also reap.*

The law of sowing and reaping says that actions produce consequences. The Bible is comparing our choices to the act of sowing, and the consequences to the act of reaping. As surely as God brings planted seeds to germination, He brings consequences to deeds. Sow and you reap. Act and you face consequences.

Sowing is everything you do. It's also everything you choose not to do, not to think, not to say. These are the seeds you plant all day every day. They grow into consequences which you and others must face.

Now not every choice you make has as significant a consequence as another. Our lives are filled with minor, trivial choices. Some consequences are negligible. Our lives also contain major, significant choices.

But the mistake we make is that we see the significance of some choices, but we ignore the ongoing choices. Someone sees the choice of a marriage partner as a big choice. So she takes it very seriously, as well she should. But in the meantime, she makes choices to neglect her prayer life, or

to harbour envy, or to cultivate materialism. A man sees the significance of the choice to change jobs, and sees the consequences of that action, but he doesn't see the consequences of being continually irritable with his children, or filling his mind with trashy movies, or having no discipline of Bible intake.

But these choices add up. The sluggard in Proverbs makes small surrenders to sleep, but these small choices add up.

9 How long will you slumber, O sluggard? When will you rise from your sleep? 10 A little sleep, a little slumber, A little folding of the hands to sleep-- 11 So shall your poverty come on you like a prowler, And your need like an armed man. (Pro 6:9-11)

You do not regret your life because of the one or two big decisions you made. What we really regret is the thousands of choices of neglecting something important, the hundreds of choices to put off something we needed to do, the hundreds of times we procrastinated and never followed through with prayer, with

Small sins add up. Small omissions done over years become major omissions. Small acts of obedience done over years become great acts of obedience. Jesus said things like: "But I say unto you, That every idle word that men shall speak, they shall give account thereof in the day of judgment." (Matt 12:36)

For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil. (Eccl 12:14)

Sow thought, reap act, sow act, reap habit, sow habit, reap a character, sow character reap a destiny.

Sometimes, a couple will come for counselling with severe marriage problems. And we will sit and begin to work on the problem. What emerges pretty quickly is that there are all kinds of problems brought about by all kinds of choices, some of which were bad choices trying to solve some of the other bad choices. Occasionally, a couple will have an expectation that I will give them one or two things to do that will fix everything. But I often have to say, it took you ten or twenty years to get here. You have made hundreds of choices over years to create this situation. You're going to need to start making a lot of better choices for a long time to come to enjoy real change in your marriage.

Choices bring consequences.

In fact, if consequences were not inevitable, then God would be mocked. Then you could do what you want, and nothing would come of it. God's authority would be theoretical nonsense. But the reason God is not mocked is because He has built life, and even designed eternity so that you always face what you have done. Consequences are inevitable, and ultimately, just.

The person I am today is the consequence of many, many choices. I have the marriage I do, as far as my side of the marriage goes, because of the many choices I have made. My control over my tongue is the consequence of many choices. My closeness to the Lord is not like the weather, it is the consequence of choices I have made to draw near or not.

Not only do choices bring consequences, but the kind of choices determine the kind of consequences.

8 For the one who sows to his own flesh shall from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit shall from the Spirit reap eternal life.

A farmer never sows apple seeds expecting oranges. He never sows corn and expects grapes. The laws of God's universe are: the seed contains the basic nature of what it will produce. What you get from the harvest relates to what you put in.

Here the Bible says: he that sows to his flesh – i.e. his choices are devoted to faithless, man-centred pleasing of self, will experience a harvest of fleshliness. And what will that mean? Look back at the list in chapter 5 verses 19 through 21 - being immoral, impure, idolatrous, at enmity with others, filled with jealousy, strife, conflict, fits of anger, drunkenness and so on – a life of self-destruction here, and then Paul adds: “they which do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God.” It will destroy you now and later.

On the other hand, he that sows to the Spirit, i.e. his choices are God-centred, motivated by love for God, dependent on the Spirit, will experience a harvest of the Spirit. And what will that harvest be? Verse 22-23: love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, self-control, gentleness – all the things people seek.

Notice the Bible puts our choices into two neat categories. Choices made for self, and choices made for God. Sinful choices and righteous choices. Obedience and disobedience. “Just two choices on the shelf – please God or please self”. Sowing to the Spirit is nothing like the false teachers' ideas about choice. You do not create your reality, you submit and yield and obey the will of God, and trust in Him.

Why am I not changing? Why am I still in the same place? Well, what kind of choices have you been making?

You cannot keep adding the wrong ingredients and be surprised if the recipe doesn't turn out. You cannot try to build something and ignore the instructions, and keep leaving stuff out and throwing arbitrary stuff in. You don't change the taste, if you keep adding more of the same.

The kind of choice brings the kind of result.

We can take it one step further. Your choices bring consequences, and those consequences correspond to your choices not only in kind, but also in measure. It's not just what you sow – it is how much of it you sow. The measure of every choice determines the measure of the outcome.

But this I say: He who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and he who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. (2Co 9:6)

A farmer does not expect a large harvest from a small sowing, or from no sowing at all. When he sows generously, his expectations are higher and rightly so. A farmer knows that he cannot obtain more than he puts in.

Someone says, I am not changing. Well, what kind of choices are you making? Well, some good ones and some bad ones. Okay, well, on balance, which is more? How much are you sowing to the Spirit? How much are you sowing to the flesh? The man who feeds his envy every hour at work, and feeds his discontent, and comes home and feeds his worldliness, is not going to have a great harvest because he sows to the Spirit for one hour on Sunday, or a few minutes in the morning. The man who consecrates his work to God, and does it for the Lord will find a great harvest, even though he might not have been able to read the Word that morning.

Farming is one of those areas in life where you can't cram at the last minute. He cannot leave his fields all year, and then cram seed in the week before harvest is supposed to take place. You need a steady measure of sowing at the right time, and the right amount of watering, fertilising and so on. Likewise, you can't cram good choices into those crisis moments. People want to cram some good decision after years of bad financial decision, or bad relationship decisions, or bad spiritual decisions.

On balance the kind of choices you are making, and the amount of choices that are sown to the Spirit will give you your harvest. You harvest a crop in keeping with your spiritual sweat. God has set up the Christian life so that if you seek, you find, if you knock, it is opened, if you ask, it is given. The measure in which you seek is the measure in which you find. Blessed are they that hunger and thirst, after righteousness, for they shall be filled. 'You shall seek me.'

A.W. Tozer said, "It may be said without qualification that every man is as holy and as full of the Spirit as he wants to be. He may not be as full as he wishes he were, but he is most certainly as full as he wants to be."

There is a difference between willing and wishing. Wishes are options that we like, but have not yet become decisions. You might wish you were more spiritual, but until it comes into the realm of your heart, soul and mind and becomes a seed sown to the Spirit – it remains just that – a wish. And wishes don't count as a harvest, now or later.

We should all read spiritual biographies. And as you do, what should grip you is that these great saints were great not because they were God's favourites, not because they were genetically spiritually superior, but because they wanted to be as spiritual as they were. The difference is the measure in which they sought God. The measure in which they sowed to the Spirit.

He told us in 2 Peter 1:3 that He has granted us all things that pertain to life and godliness. What remains then? The measure in which you sow.

We know that because God says to Israel in Isaiah 5 – "What more could have been done to my vineyard that I have not done in it?" God gives us desires, but He expects us to stir up those desires, fan them into flame, nurture them through seeking and obedience.

God will teach you what choices you should make. God will work in your heart to give you the desires to make those choices. God will enable and strengthen you when you make those choices. But God will not make those choices for you. God will not do your obeying for you. God will not do your repenting for you.

I would not have you go away from this message thinking that I have downplayed God's grace. By no means. God is the author and the finisher of our faith, the beginning and the end of our every good choice. But sandwiched between author and finisher, between working in us to will and to do, is the actual choices we must make, which God will not make for you.

So as you think about the area of your life where you desire change – your speech, your prayer life, your disciplines, your use of time, your thought-life, begin with considering what God says about choice. Your character and your life will be judged, because your choices are your responsibility, and no one else's. If something is sinful and displeasing to God, it is not someone else's responsibility to change.

Second, change only takes place when you change the kind of seed, and the amount of seed. Change the quality and the proportion of your choices if you want a different harvest.

That's the material. Next week we'll consider the motive for change.