

Biblical Change 6- The Power to Change

Romans 6:1 What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound? 2 Certainly not! How shall we who died to sin live any longer in it?

3 Or do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? 4 Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. 5 For if we have been united together in the likeness of His death, certainly we also shall be in the likeness of His resurrection, 6 knowing this, that our old man was crucified with Him, that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves of sin. 7 For he who has died has been freed from sin. 8 Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with Him, 9 knowing that Christ, having been raised from the dead, dies no more. Death no longer has dominion over Him. 10 For the death that He died, He died to sin once for all; but the life that He lives, He lives to God.

11 Likewise you also, reckon yourselves to be dead indeed to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus our Lord. 12 Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body, that you should obey it in its lusts. 13 And do not present your members as instruments of unrighteousness to sin, but present yourselves to God as being alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God. 14 For sin shall not have dominion over you, for you are not under law but under grace. 15 What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? Certainly not! 16 Do you not know that to whom you present yourselves slaves to obey, you are that one's slaves whom you obey, whether of sin leading to death, or of obedience leading to righteousness?

17 But God be thanked that though you were slaves of sin, yet you obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine to which you were delivered. 18 And having been set free from sin, you became slaves of righteousness. 19 I speak in human terms because of the weakness of your flesh. For just as you presented your members as slaves of uncleanness, and of lawlessness leading to more lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves of righteousness for holiness. 20 For when you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. 21 What fruit did you have then in the things of which you are now ashamed? For the end of those things is death. 22 But now having been set free from sin, and having become slaves of God, you have your fruit to holiness, and the end, everlasting life. 23 For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

I picked up a magazine recently and read about a fellow from Durban who had managed to lose 121 kilograms. After reaching well over 200 kgs, he decided to do a massive lifestyle change – diet, exercise, leisure habits. And he wrote that his body hit a kind of plateau after losing a set number of kilograms, he increased the intensity of his training programme, until he got down to the weight he wanted to be.

As I read that, I was reminded that Christians are not the only people in the world who change. Unbelievers world-over have shown they can change. Non-Christians stop smoking, stop drinking, lose weight, become more disciplined at work, learn to control their anger, and develop better spending habits. Psychology and therapy is partly there to enable some kind of change – get out of depression, be less stressed, have a happier marriage, be better parents. And there is no doubt that people do change. There is no doubt that the reason for the popularity of people like Dr Phil is that people have experienced results, some change as a result of following his ideas.

If unbelievers can change, then what's really the difference between an unbeliever's change and a believer's? What does a believer have that an unbeliever does not have?

If you were to observe it purely on the level of actions, a believer and an unbeliever's change will look identical. If an atheist and a Christian both choose to break an addiction to the Internet, it would look very similar. There would be a process of de-habituating, stopping old habits, and then re-habituating, beginning new habits. The discipline of controlling our choices is the same for all humans. Like we saw several weeks ago, discipline in the Christian life is not something completely different to discipline in any other area. It's the same thing, now applied to moral choices.

But as much as it would seem the same on the surface, the change a Christian experiences is completely different because of the reality behind his change. What has happened to a Christian and what is happening inside a Christian that causes change is fundamentally different. You might see a monkey and a human child each typing on a keyboard. They are doing the same action. But why they are doing it is totally different because they are completely different in their natures.

A Christian is a totally different creature to the unbeliever. At the end of the process, he is going to stop smoking or stop swearing or become patient the same way an unbeliever does, stop some actions, start some others. But what is going on under the bonnet, what is happening internally, what is driving those choices, and even making them possible is profoundly and fundamentally different.

Not only so, but that means the kind of changes, and the extent of the changes that a Christian can make will far exceed anything that an unbeliever is capable of. That's why so many of the things which Jesus calls for in the Sermon on the Mount – don't lust in your heart, don't hate your brother, love your enemies, don't retaliate, are not changes that an unbeliever can really make.

Romans 6 tells us what the dynamic or the power is behind a Christian's change. I don't believe I'm exaggerating when I say that Romans 6 is the most important chapter in the Bible for understanding why you can change, what basis or power is there to make it possible.

Paul is going to present two truths which appear throughout his other writings, and throughout the New Testament. This comes up in Ephesians, in Colossians, it comes up on a larger scale in Romans, Peter does it in his first epistle.

I. Your New Position: Believe It's True (vv1-11)

The first 10 verses answer the question: should Christians keep sinning, or should they grow in righteousness? And we know what Paul's answer is, but take note of his argument. He is not using consequences as his main argument for stopping sinning and pursuing righteousness. He does not say, if you keep sinning, bad things will happen to you. He does not use guilt as his main argument – “after all that God has done for you, can you not at least repay him with some good behaviour?” He does not use pragmatism as an argument: “look, things will work out better for you if you stop sinning and start obeying.”

No, Paul's entire argument is an argument from nature: what you have become. His argument is an argument from identity, from a changed position. All that you are to do or stop doing, is rooted in this changed position, this new nature, this changed identity. In theology, this is called union with Christ, and it is probably one of the most important doctrines of the New Testament.

What does he say? Paul tells us that at Calvary, something happened not just to Christ, but to us. At Calvary, not only did Christ die for the penalty of our sins as Romans 5 teaches us, but we died with Christ, defeating the power of sin, according to this chapter. We were, by the Holy Spirit, baptised, or immersed into Christ, joined with Him, so that whatever relationship Jesus Christ has with sin, and with righteousness, is now our relationship by position.

I like how Dave Hunt put it years ago. He wrote that many people act like Barabbas. They say, Jesus died in my place, but then they go on to live their own lives. A genuine Christian understands that not only did Jesus die in my place, but I died with him. I accepted His death as my death, and His life as my life. John Gregory Mantle wrote, “There is a great difference between realizing, ‘On that Cross He was crucified for me,’ and ‘On that Cross I am crucified with Him.’ The one aspect

brings us deliverance from sin's condemnation, the other from sin's power."

From verses 3 to 10, Paul finds various ways to say the same thing.

*3 Or do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were **baptized into His death?***

*6 knowing this, that our old man was crucified with Him, that the **body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves of sin.** 7 For he who has died **has been freed from sin***

10 For the death that He died, He died to sin once for all; but the life that He lives, He lives to God.

That's the death side of the equation. But then Paul tells us in verse 5 that death and resurrection are inseparable.

5 For if we have been united together in the likeness of His death, certainly we also shall be in the likeness of His resurrection,

So just as we have Christ's relationship to sin by dying with him, we now have Christ's relationship to righteousness by rising with Him.

*4 Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even **so we also should walk in newness of life.***

*8 Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we shall **also live with Him,** 9 knowing that Christ, having been raised from the dead, **dies no more. Death no longer has dominion over Him.** 10 For the death that He died, He died to sin once for all; **but the life that He lives, He lives to God.***

We have been joined to the one who did the ultimate thing to sin: he took the cancer of sin upon himself, and then had all the chemo and radiation of the Father's justice pour on him until He died, and the sin, the cancer, died with him. And then the Father revived him, sin never again able to make a claim on him. He faced sin fair and square when Satan tempted him and won. He faced our sin fair and square and paid the full price. When he rose, He was vindicated not only as God, but as the only truly righteous Man, the Second Adam, the one who did not fail Satan's test, and the one who perfectly kept the Law. We are in union with him in His death, and in His resurrection.

The fundamental difference between Christian change and the change which unbelievers do is that Christian change is from the inside out. It is a past-tense miracle working its way out into present-tense reality. Christians believe their change is based upon a miracle that has already occurred, an internal, invisible, but real event which took place in the past, which is now progressively being worked out into external, visible, real actions. Christian change says, "Something has happened to you already. Something huge has already changed about you. Now work that change out. Become in practice, what you already are in position."

Now that is completely different from the world. The world thinks that change comes from the outside in. Start changing your behaviour, they think, and then you will change. They do not believe that anything invisible or miraculous has happened to them which prompts and enable their change. It is just determined actions of their will. And that means they can only change as much as their willpower lets them at the time. But Christians are not trying to make a change through sheer gritted teeth, Christians are actually responding to a change God has made, and continuing to work out what He has worked in.

All through the New Testament you have this pattern. First God shows you what He has done to you in the free gift of the Gospel. He then shows you how you must become what you are. You must

believe that God has made this change, and then behave in light of it. First the doctrine of your changed position, then the duty of your changed practice. God tells you of the Gospel reality, and then tells you what should be your response. Christianity is not a morality that says, act like this, and so you will become like this. Christianity says, by grace you are like this, now become like that by faith and obedience.

If you reverse that order, you become a legalist. You think that your changed behaviour will change your position before God. And if you skip out the truth of your position, you are nothing more than a moralist: someone who tries to be good for its own sake. Truly regenerate Christians change only because God has done something to them, and once they understand that, they by faith keep working out what God has worked in, they keep enacting what is already true of them.

Why is this so important? Because it is impossible to truly change, in the biblical sense, without it.

Can the Ethiopian change his skin or the leopard its spots? Then may you also do good who are accustomed to do evil. (Jer 13:23)

You need a change in nature to end up with a real change in behaviour. When you are unsaved, you have only one master- selfish unrighteousness. You please yourself. Now everybody does this differently. Not everyone becomes a serial killer. Not everyone sins in extravagant, scandalous and flamboyant ways. Most people sin in respectable ways. They become the nice people next door, the nice colleagues, the nice relatives. They are nice, but they are completely immune to God's claims on them. They are alive only to their own wants and wishes, however modest, or however ambitious those might be. You are alive only to self, and free to do all those things that please self. So the changes that such a person can make are all within the boundaries of what will please self. If his selfishness wants to stop smoking, he might do so, only if the selfishness that wants to stop is greater than the selfishness that wants to continue. If his selfishness wants a better marriage, he may act unselfishly, but only if the selfishness that will be pleased by a happier wife is greater than the selfishness of just pleasing himself all the time. His only power to change is his desire to please himself.

But if you have believed in the Gospel, then you know that something has changed at the very deepest level. Your own identity has changed. And identity is everything. If I were to ask you today, who are you, how would you define yourself? What would be the first thing you say? I am so-and-so's spouse. I am so-and-so's child. I am an accountant. I am a housewife. I am a pilot. I am a director. I am a driver. Or maybe your hobby? I am an athlete. I am a collector. Your identity shapes what you do because it is who you really think you are.

Paul had radically re-shaped his identity when he said, *"I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me. (Gal 2:20)*

I think we go wrong because we do not believe what God says about our identity. Verse 11 tells us that we are to believe and count this new identity to be true. *11 Likewise you also, reckon yourselves to be dead indeed to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

Do you remember the comics where a good angel and a bad angel appears on either shoulder of the character and he must choose which one he is going to do? That's not the picture Paul is painting. He is showing a man whose umbilical cord to sin has been cut, and who is now connected to Christ.

How do you think of yourself in respect to sin and the old life, and God and the new life? Do you

see yourself as someone dead to the old and alive to the new?

Someone says, well, I believe it, but it just doesn't feel like it is true. That's where the second aspect of Christian change comes in. Not only must you believe that you have a new position, a new identity, a new relationship to sin through your union with Christ,

II. Your New Practice: Behave Like It's True (vv12-23)

If you are going to believe it's true, then according to the book of James your faith is going to work its way out from being just an idea or an intention into an action. True faith is never mere speculation, it results in action.

So once you believe that this union with Christ is yours, the way you enact that is not by waiting to see how dead you feel to sin. You do not believe it by toying with temptation to see how alive sin still seems to be in you. No instead, you become what you are, you do in practice what God says you are in position.

Through this chapter there are two images which work in parallel. One is death and resurrection, the other is freedom and submission. When you are dead in one way and alive in another then you are free from some things and submitted or enslaved by others. And when you die to that life, and come alive to another, you are now released from an old master, and can serve a new one. You are always only free from one master. You can never be totally free from any master. You are free from one, but submitted to another. So what does that look like?

12 Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body, that you should obey it in its lusts. 13 And do not present your members as instruments of unrighteousness to sin, but present yourselves to God as being alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God.

Once you are in Christ, you have a new position, a new nature, and a new master. But the new master does not completely replace or destroy the old master of self. You still have access to the old master. The old master's legal and actual grip on you has been broken. Your relationship to the old master is now entirely one of *want to*, not have to. If you're renting a flat, and the landlord comes at the same day of the month each month and demands the rent in cash, you have to pay him. But if a kind benefactor bought the flat, and put it in your name, you have no obligation to pay rent any more. If the landlord comes knocking, your position is one who is dead to the old debt. You can pay if you want to, but you have no obligation to do so.

Verse 14 says that since we are under God's grace, and not under a heavy legal burden, sin should not dominate us.

The believer who keeps sinning is like a married woman who goes onto Facebook to look up old boyfriends. Her relationship with those people is over. She has a legal, binding relationship with her husband, with whom she is in union. But if she wants to, she can go and kindle old relationships that are legally dead.

That's the true situation of a believer. Before you are saved, you are free from God, and serve only self. But whichever you choose, will increasingly master you.

16 Do you not know that to whom you present yourselves slaves to obey, you are that one's slaves whom you obey, whether of sin leading to death, or of obedience leading to righteousness?

19 I speak in human terms because of the weakness of your flesh. For just as you presented your members as slaves of uncleanness, and of lawlessness leading to more lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves of righteousness for holiness.

Negative and positive. Do not present yourself to be used by sin, don't submit to sin, present yourself to righteousness, submit to God. It is the very familiar two-stage action of change in the Bible. Repent and replace. Put off the old, put on the new. Turn away from certain habits, turn to certain others.

Here is where on the outside, the believer might look a lot like the unbeliever. He is stopping certain things, and starting others. But for very different reasons, and in very different ways.

The unsaved man wants to be free of bitterness and wants to forgive. But he does so because his bitterness is eating away at him and making him unhappy. So he tells himself to let go, and feel positive about his enemy. Maybe he succeeds to some degree.

The Christian says to himself, Christ died for my sin of bitterness, and on the day I was born again, I died to bitterness with Him, and rose again to forgiveness and kindness. For God's glory I will keep deadening bitterness by turning away from bitter thoughts, not giving my heart occasion to sin by dwelling on past hurts. I will submit myself to righteousness by choosing thoughts of good, praying for my enemy, and finding words, thoughts or deeds of kindness. I will keep doing this by the power of the Spirit and for the love of God.

The unbeliever sees his laziness needs to change, because he is not getting that promotion, and his friends are getting further in life than he is. So he sets himself some goals, and is more strict with himself, and becomes more diligent.

The Christian says, when I am lazy, I am pleasing self. I died to a life lived for pleasing self, and I am alive to a life of loving God. I am going to repent of my laziness in sleeping, in my work habits, in my study habits, and to honour my new Master, I am going to replace those things with diligence, measured eating and sleeping.

The unbeliever wants to kick his pornography habit because his wife has become suspicious and he fears repercussions. So he becomes more careful about what he watches and when, and tries to distract himself from too much time online with some exercise.

The believer says, impurity of thought and mind offends God. The hold this had on me before I was saved is broken through the death I died with Christ. I do not have to give my eyes and ears and body to this. I'm alive to purity, cleanness of thought, genuine love, and God's view of sexuality. So I'll show that I count myself dead to this by fleeing from temptation, turning away from images that tempt, putting accountability in place, and I'll count myself alive to God in Christ by replacing it with images, books, films that are like Philippians 4:8. I'll replace fantasy images with real friendships with real people who I can love and serve.

The non-Christian feels he is always wanting more, and even his friends tell him he is hungry for money. So he tries to deal with it by living a bit more in the moment, telling himself that he doesn't need a fancier car or house, and surrounds himself with people who seem to be content themselves.

The believer says, God wants me to know that He Himself is the great reward, the ultimate treasure, and gifts are no good without the Giver. My discontent is dishonouring God. Discontent does not have to rule me, since I died to that in Jesus. The Holy Spirit has actually baptised me into the resurrection life of Jesus which is content and rejoices in God. I'm going to by faith practice those positions by cutting off my discontent wherever it surfaces – when I shop, certain conversations, when I see people and compare what they are wearing. Right there I will repent of discontent, and

replace it immediately with thanksgiving. I'm going to connect to my new life in Christ by choosing to submit to His portion for me with gladness.

As a Christian keeps on living out the death by putting off the old, or fleeing temptation, or repenting of sin, or refusing to be available to sin, the old habits keep weakening and dying. As a Christian keeps living out the resurrection of Jesus by putting on the new, and following after Christlikeness, and imitating Jesus, and feeding his soul with righteousness, and making himself available to the Lordship of Jesus, the new habits keep growing and strengthening.

Look at the testimony of the Romans.

17 But God be thanked that though you were slaves of sin, yet you obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine to which you were delivered. 18 And having been set free from sin, you became slaves of righteousness.

20 For when you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. 21 What fruit did you have then in the things of which you are now ashamed? For the end of those things is death. 22 But now having been set free from sin, and having become slaves of God, you have your fruit to holiness, and the end, everlasting life. 23 For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

The Romans did present themselves as slaves to righteousness, having broken from their former master. The life of sin had no profit, only shame and death. The life of righteousness has fruit and eternal life. Only now is Paul reminding them of consequences, of fruit, of practical benefits. But he didn't begin there.

He started, as we must always, with the Gospel. What has God done to me and for me by grace? What is already true of me? Because I have the same death-life relationship to sin and holiness that Jesus does, I am going to continue to die and live, put off -put on, repent-replace, forsake the old master and present myself to the new master. This is change, but it is change for God's glory, change achieved by God's grace in the Gospel, change achieved by faith, change empowered by the Holy Spirit. It could not be more different to the change of an unbeliever.