

# How Do People Change?

## Part 1

How do people change? More often than not, it seems, people change by trying hard to be good, do good, and live good lives. A recent study done by Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, describes this as “Moralistic Therapeutic Deism.” They wrote up their findings in a book entitled *Soul Searching—The Religious Lives of American Teenagers*. As Smith and Denton describe it, Moralistic Therapeutic Deism is about inculcating a moralistic approach to life. It teaches that central to living a good and happy life is being a good, moral person. That means being nice, kind, pleasant, respectful, responsible, at work on self-improvement [sic], taking care of one's health, and doing one's best to be successful. In a very real sense, that appears to be true of the faith commitment, insofar as this can be described as a *faith* commitment, held by a large percentage of Americans. These individuals, whatever their age, believe that religion should be centered in being ‘nice’ -- a posture that many believe is directly violated by assertions of strong theological conviction.” (Albert Mohler, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary).

The reality is that for many Christians, change is a tough thing. We want to be moral. We want to do good. But stymied by repeated failures, people work harder at being good or simply give up and do what they want. Either of these options leads to a repressive and exhausting moralism or a “live and let live” mindset. Why does it happen?

The reality is that in many cases, at the most basic level, the heart has not really been changed! They’ve come to faith in Christ but they haven’t lived by faith in Christ. Jeremiah 17:9 notes that the heart is deceitful and desperately wicked; we can’t even know it! So how do people change? Here is a simple paradigm that flows from scripture that gives us a legitimate pathway:

- (1) We change when we reorient our lives around the gospel
- (2) We reorient our lives around the gospel because that’s the only way to address the radical self-centeredness of the human heart
- (3) We change when we let Christ touch every part of our lives, including the emotional part of our lives
- (4) Much of change has to do with addressing the idols in our lives that compete with Christ for our affection and meaning in life
- (5) We change through repentance and faith as we identify those areas that need to be addressed (which means we repent not only of our sin but also of our self-righteousness)

Today, we’ll only look at numbers 1 and 2. In subsequent meetings we’ll unpack points 3-5.

### **1. We change as we reorient our lives around the gospel.**

The gospel changes everything -- Christ is sufficient to change us. By way of definition: The gospel is the sacrificial life, death, and resurrection of Jesus (Mark 1:14, 1 Cor 1:23; 2:1-2; 15:1-8). Christ lived, died and rose from the dead. Paul describes this theologically as justification, adoption, sanctification, regeneration, etc. This gospel is to work itself out in every facet of our lives. Repeatedly, scripture tells us that the gospel has the power to change us. Consider the following verses:

The gospel saves and transforms us from the first to last of our lives (Rom 1:16)

The gospel continues to work throughout the course of our lives (Col 1:6)

The gospel is what we must apply if we are to truly change (2 Pet 1:3-9)

We may need to apply this gospel with the help of a counselor or a therapist or a trusted friend. We may need to apply it with help of community group or by reading books or listening to podcasts. We may need to apply it by listening to sermons and singing songs or going to worship services. We will need to apply it over the course our entire life. It's not just the ABC's of Christianity it's the A to Z of Christianity, as someone once said. From the start to the finish, the gospel changes us.

Christ is sufficient to do a work in our lives that we cannot do ourselves. It will take our entire life, but He will do it. So the critical task of change is for the individual to reorient his or her life around the truth of the gospel. Sadly, more often than not, in evangelical circles these days, this doesn't seem to happen. Christians orient their lives around other things—which will be explained farther down in the notes. The way theologians would put it is like this: “Our sanctification must flow out of our justification”. Consider this quote from Richard Lovelace, “The ground of our sanctification is our union with Christ in his death and resurrection in which the old nature was destroyed and a new nature created with the power to grow in newness of life.” (Lovelace, Dynamics of Spiritual Life, pg. 104)

So what does that look like? How do we apply this to our lives? A practical summary of the gospel's power to change may be applied like this:

(a) I am more sinful than I dared imagine (Jer 17:9)

In fact, I'm so sinful that Jesus had to die. So when someone confronts me about an issue in my life I can say, “There is probably more truth to that than you think.” And when I fail to obey, considering the level of my sin, I'm not surprised! I can't be judgmental because I'm just like other sinful people. I can't be proud because I'm just as bad as anyone else. I can grieve over the problems in the world and loss because this is the by-product of our sin. These are all important results of coming to grips with this truth from the gospel.

(b) I am more loved than I ever dared hope (I John 3:1)

In fact, God's love for me is so great that Jesus was glad to die. Therefore, I can be bold and honest about who I am, even if you don't like me. I can have good boundaries and say “no” when I need to say “no” because it doesn't matter if someone gets angry at me for saying “no.” God loves me! I can be generous with what I have because that's not what makes me significant. I can take an honest look at my weaknesses and strengths and have a realistic assessment of them without fear.

(c) I am part of God's family and have Christ's righteous qualities by faith (Gal 4:19; 5:22-23)

God is my father. Christ is my older brother (Heb 2:11). I have all the rights of a son and an inheritance as well. I have all of this because Christ lived a life I should have lived. He died a death I should have died. And by His sacrificial life and death He saves me from how I have lived and shows me how to live. I'm forgiven for my sin and guilt. Christ's righteous life is applied to my life by faith (Rom 4:6; 5:17). God is delighted in me because of Christ, and moves me experientially towards Christ-likeness (Gal 4:19). So Christ becomes the means and motivation for change. His righteousness is credited to our lives, He shows us what a perfect life looks like, and gives us His Spirit's power through our union with Him, to produce change at the behavioral and motivational level that would not have been produced in any other way. And when I trust the revelation of Himself through His law, His Word, and act on that in faith, I gain the grace to change (e.g. Ps 50:15; Prov 3:5-6; Matt 6:33; Rom 8:28, 32; I Cor 15:10; James 4:6, etc.).

(d) I watch for things (idols) that compete with Christ and repent of them when I find them. (Col 3:5; I John 5:21, etc.)

Throughout our entire lives, there will be things that promise us joy and satisfaction apart from Christ. When I change my mind about those competing affections (that is, when I repent of those competing affections) and trust Christ's promises found in His Word, I change.

The important thing to consider is that we must line our lives up constantly with this gospel truth and we must do so at every level: in the kitchen, in the bedroom, in families, at work, while practicing our hobbies, in the way we use money, in the way we solve conflict. All of life must be viewed through this gospel lens in order for us to change. In his commentary on the book of Galatians, Martin Luther wrote this compelling thought, "And this is the truth of the gospel. It is also the principal article of all Christian doctrine, wherein the knowledge of all godliness consists. Most necessary, it is therefore, that we should know this article well, teach it to others, and beat it into their heads." Martin Luther, *Commentary Galatians 2:5*, pg. 58.

## **2. We reorient our lives around the gospel because that's the only way to address the radical self-centeredness of the human heart.**

Biblically, the heart is the seat of motivation. Obedience springs from the heart. So to change, we need a changed heart. This is why the prophets said what they said in Ezek 36:25-27; Jer 31:33-34. This is what Samuel was referring to in 1 Sam 16:7 and what Mark was noting in Mark 12:28-33. The apostle Paul says essentially the same thing in Ephesians 1:15-18. The heart's deceitfulness is the reason we love darkness over light. Steve Borgman in his book *Feelings and Faith*, notes that this is the reason we delight in "moldy Vienna sausage" to satisfy us and not the most "succulent cuts of perfectly prepared filet mignon of Divine joy" (Borgman *Feelings and Faith* pg. 51). It's not even a matter that we won't or can't change or desire God, it's that we don't even want to!

This kind of message is absolutely offensive to North Americans and those in the west. But it's critical to grasp because it's our failure to acknowledge this that leads to the self-righteous religiosity that flows from fear and pride in Christians that is such a turn-off to non-Christians!

Jonathan Edwards, the Puritan theologian, took that theological truth and unpacked it in several books and sermons (including *Charity and its Fruits*, *The Nature of True Virtue*), and noted that people do what they do for two reasons: fear or pride (I am dependent on Tim Keller's explanation for this because even though I've actually read these works by Edwards, I didn't understand exactly what he was saying. See Keller, *Gospel in Life—Grace Changes Everything*, pg. 22-23). People are virtuous, or change their behavior, out of either fear or pride.

So, for example: We tell the truth because if we don't, we are afraid that our business will fail or that we'll lose friends or that people will think ill of us; that's the fear version. Or we tell the truth because we aren't like those nasty liars over there who lie, we're not like other people who cheat; that's the pride version. The problem with that motivation is that when we change out of fear or pride, we don't, according to Edwards, change the radical self-centeredness of the heart. So when we think it's in our best interest, we will actually lie or not tell the whole truth, or cheat, or have an affair, or be selfish, or power up on someone to get our way (Example: A husband bellowing "I'm the head of this house" when his wife doesn't do what he wants), or whatever, because the heart's not been changed! In fact, we actually nurture these qualities of self-righteousness in our hearts when fear or pride are the motivating factors.

Edwards points out that true virtue occurs not when you do good because it's good for you, but when you do good because you are smitten by the beauty of the One who is truly good—God, Himself. So you tell the truth and love the truth for God's sake, for truth's sake, for good's sake! And you change because you delight in God not because He does something for you—though He does—but for God's sake. You do good because by doing it you get God, you experience God, you meet God, you enjoy God! See Psalm 131 for an example of what this looks like.

Here is the point. Apart from the application of the cross to our lives, we don't get a new heart. And any change in us is purely a matter of common virtue. But when I let the gospel change me, I can't change or do good out of a sense of pride because the cross says I'm more sinful than I ever dared imagine. Furthermore, I don't have to change or act to do good out of fear since the gospel teaches me that I'm more loved than I ever dared hope.

Apart from the cross's application to our lives on a regular basis, we will simply fall into other ways to think about how we change. Some of the more popular will look like this:

(a) I become a Christian by faith then grow and change by working hard to apply the scripture. Sadly, this leads to moralism or, in a worst case scenario, legalism, if I can actually do the things I think are moral.

(b) I become a Christian by faith then grow by learning Bible truth. This leads to an intellectualism where my Bible knowledge becomes synonymous with my maturity. I may know all kinds of scripture but be rude, arrogant, self-righteous and unable to get along with people.

(c) I become a Christian by acknowledging the facts about Jesus and then live any way I like. This is antinomianism. I believe in Jesus and because of His grace I can live any way I want. This is a perversion of the gospel.

(d) I become a Christian by faith then grow by having religious experiences. This may be called mysticism because what I really worship and serve is the religious experiences I get at various fellowships and I'll judge others based on whether or not they enjoy or have the same religious experiences.

And while it's helpful and it's important and even biblical to work hard, to learn the Bible, to know the facts about Jesus, and to have experiences of the presence of God in worship, when they are had apart from the cross, and the gospel, it doesn't really change you.

The following is a partial list of what happens when we don't address the radical self-centeredness of the human heart through the gospel. We'll:

- Believe that God owes us a good life because we are good instead of us owing God because He's good
- Feel proud and arrogant in our own achievements rather than acknowledge God for what He achieves in and through us
- Express a false humility rather than a willingness to acknowledge our genuine gifts and skills that come from God
- Feel self-righteous towards those we don't perceive as worthy or right—the democrats or the republicans or those ungodly people or those lazy people or those from other religious backgrounds or those (fill in the blank)

- Be angry at God when faced with suffering because we'll believe that God isn't keeping His part of a bargain when in fact suffering is part of life in a fallen world and may be God's discipline but not God's punishment
- Despair when others don't like us, rather than rejoice because God does
- Not accept the reality of the consequences of our sin and fail to see that Christ can take anything we have done and redeem it
- Be self-loathing when we fail, instead of truly sorry and repentant and move on
- Seek to hide our struggles, marriage problems, addictions, and pain behind a veneer of religiosity or denial instead of walking in brokenness and vulnerability before God and man
- Drive ourselves to do things for God instead of being with God
- Seek our spiritual joy in the newest religious experience instead of seeking God in every facet of life including the most mundane facets of life
- Use God to run from God by refusing to see my motivation for doing good is often my own self-interest or self-seeking
- Seek God to get things from God instead of seeking God for God's sake
- Ignore how our families of origin affect us and pretend that we can ignore years of family history which affect us in more ways than we can imagine rather than see ourselves as part of a new family where new patterns of behavior are developed and groomed
- Be unaware, or unwilling to be aware, of what our emotions tell us so we'll not ask, "Why am I so angry, so bitter, so sad, so whatever?" and remain aloof from what these things tell us while Christ in the Psalms invites us to explore these emotions for what they mean
- Have a joyless, legalistic Christianity full of man-made rules which we use to advance ourselves or condemn others rather than an ongoing sense of delight in God's world
- Build our meaning in life, our happiness in life or our worth on something other than Christ

All of these things become forms of self-salvation where we address our real needs in ways that never satisfy and we don't really change. The default mode of the human heart is to strive to correct what we know is wrong on our own strength and to be religious. None of these things addresses the heart. So what does it really look like when I apply the gospel to various facets of my life?

It would take more time than we have to unpack all of this but here are a few passages of scripture where we see the gospel applied. Notice what Paul does in each instance.

#### 2 Cor 8—money and possessions

Most churches try to motivate people by guilt; if you are a good Christian you'll give, if you're a good person you'll be generous

Paul used the work of Christ to show that because God was generous, we can be too. Think of what God's done for you and eventually you'll become a generous person in your heart

#### Gal 2—racism and feelings of superiority towards others different

Most of us have feelings of superiority towards others who are not like us

We assume sameness equals intimacy

But Paul used the work of Christ to show that we should not forget the generous welcome God gave us, His enemies, because of the cross and when we remember that we'll be welcoming ourselves even towards those who are different

#### Eph 5—marriage and family

Many marriages struggle and husbands and wives think that they can find their satisfaction in people other than their spouses

Paul points us to Christ and says let that be your motive for sacrificial love and submission

Because He sacrificed for us we can serve each other and because He submitted to the Father we can submit to each other

### **Questions for discussion**

1. Dave noted that a practical summary of the gospel's power in our lives included four things: (1) I am more sinful than I ever dared imagine (2) I am more loved than I ever dared hope (3) I am part of God's family and have Christ's righteous qualities by faith (4) I watch for things (idols) in my life that compete with Christ and repent of them when I find them.

(a) Which of these four things do you find most compelling to live out?

(b) Which of these four things do you find most difficult to live out?

2. Which of the tendencies of radical self-centeredness of the human heart are yours and why (see the list above)?

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