

How Do People Change? Part 2

Introduction

How do people change? How do people grow? Every church must answer that question then provide a pathway to get congregants on that path for discipleship to occur. The last time we met it was noted that people change through the gospel (Rom 1:16-17; Col 1:6; 2 Pet 1:4-9). The gospel changes everything. We become a Christian by faith in Christ's record on our behalf, and we grow as a Christian by faith in Christ's record on our behalf. This occurs as we respond in faith-filled obedience to the word and Spirit. Paul puts it this way in Galatians 3:3, "Are you so foolish? After beginning with the Spirit, are you now trying to attain your goal by human effort?" We are tempted to believe that we are saved by faith and work hard to change (see below) but when we do that, the result is often a raw and ugly moralism that can become stifling and pharisaical when we actually obey and guilt producing and withering when we fail to obey. The gospel is the means and motivation for any true change in our lives.

We also noted that there are four things to keep in mind about the gospel. First, we are far more sinful than we ever dared imagine. This is a tough sell for many in the west but it's gospel truth. So when someone brings something up as a legitimate constructive criticism, if we are in touch with this reality, we can rightfully say, "Wow -- you're right. And it's probably worse than you think!" Second, we are more loved than we ever dared hope. And because we are loved by God, even if others don't love us, or treat us with respect, we can boldly be who we are anyway. God loves us! Third, we are part of a new family. We have been adopted into God's family. God is our father. Jesus is our older brother. We are all family with one another, and we need others in the family to grow. We don't lose family status when we fail. We are sons not slaves and we are given an inheritance to boot. We are to act like sons! Fourth, we are to watch for things that compete with Christ and repent of them when we find them (Col 3:5; 1 John 5:21, etc.). Throughout our lives there will be things that promise to make us happy and give us joy and satisfaction apart from Christ. When we discover those things, and repent of them--change our minds about those competing affections--and trust Christ's promise found in the word, we change.

We also talked about the need to apply the gospel because of the radical self-centeredness of the human heart. Without applying gospel truth to our hearts we don't have the kind of real change the scripture talks about. Instead, we'll mix up gospel-centered change with:

Moralism - the belief that we become a Christian by faith; then grow by working hard at being good.

Intellectualism - the belief that we become a Christian by believing in Jesus and grow mostly through Bible knowledge. This makes spiritual maturity synonymous with what one knows *about* Christ not whether or not one actually knows Christ.

Antinomianism - the belief that we become a Christian by affirming the facts about Jesus but then can choose to live any way we want.

Mysticism - the belief that we become a Christian by faith but grow through various religious experiences.

It was noted that there were at least five pieces to this paradigm that gives us a legitimate pathway of change:

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. We change when we address our idols.
5. We change through repentance and faith - which means we repent not only of our sin but of our righteousness.

We covered the first two last time, and we'll cover the third one this time which is in reality nothing more than going deeper in one area on points 1 and 2.

We change when we let Christ touch us at every level of our lives, including the emotional part of our lives.

This is simply going deeper on the first two points. Because when Christ gets us, he gets all of us. We need to embrace a holistic view of spirituality and change. We have social, emotional, intellectual, physical and spiritual sides to us. The fall touches us at every level, at every side! And the tendency is to give God the parts of our lives that are easiest -- often our mind or our behavior -- and the parts that are hard to deal with we ignore, or we become unaware of; they become blind spots. Discipleship is bringing each of these areas into conformity with Jesus Christ through the gospel. It's been my experience that the hardest piece to put under the Lordship of Jesus Christ in our day and age is the emotional piece. And if you have a hard time with the emotional piece, you'll often end up having a hard time with the relational piece. Or to put it another way, if you have ongoing struggles with relationships, it's often because there is something going on emotionally that has yet to be addressed.

In short, when we fail to let the gospel touch us at an emotional level the following are some examples of what may happen:

- We may think loving people means keeping them happy even if keeping them happy makes our lives miserable, or destroys our church or our family.
- We may encourage false peace that keeps peace at any cost even when there is real and often legitimate conflict.
- We will let our anger get the best of us and create unhelpful conflict or we'll be confused about anger instead of asking, "Why am I so angry?"
- We will love our neighbors but not ourselves and live unbalanced, and boundary-less lives.
- We will be quick to speak and judge but slow to listen to others.
- We may over function and take responsibility for things that aren't our responsibility to take.
- We may work endless hours and fail to take care of ourselves thus wasting one of the greatest gifts God has given us to serve - ourselves.
- We will think differences of opinion mean division or lack of intimacy so we'll not express genuine disagreement in a gracious way.

- We may actually lie to keep people happy!
- We may have horrible boundaries and let people manipulate us, guilt us, or push us around in the name of “turning the other cheek” or “submission to authority.” When what they are doing has nothing to do with turning the other cheek or submitting to authority.
- We may not be able to accept what is when we have no other choice to accept what is
- We’ll live life thinking we are a mistake, an accident, often accompanied with deep feelings of worthlessness.
- We’ll believe the lie that we aren’t allowed to make mistakes, and live under the heavy burden of perfectionism.
- We’ll live under the illusion that we must be approved by certain people to be okay when we’re okay not for anything we do but because of the work Jesus did on the cross.

We are to let the gospel touch our life on an emotional level! This has to do with the following:

- Naming and managing feelings.
- Having genuine compassion for others.
- Having meaningful relationships with others.
- Breaking free from self-destructive patterns of behavior.
- Being aware of how our past affects our present.
- Asking for what we want or need in a respectful way.
- Respecting others and loving others without having to change them.
- Accurately assessing our strengths and weaknesses.
- Living with the limits that God’s providentially placed on our lives.
- Learning the capacity to resolve conflict in a gracious and tactful fashion.
- Being able to grieve well.
- Learning to listen to others even when we disagree with others or have a lot to say ourselves.

Group exercise

Get into groups and discuss the following questions:

1. Consider the list of what happens when we don’t let the gospel touch us on an emotional level. Which are you most likely to struggle with? Which are you less likely to struggle with? Why?
2. Consider the list of what gospel-touched emotions is about. Which is most intriguing to you and why?

The Basics

There are some basics, Emotions 101 so to speak, that we must accept if we are to make this work in our lives. First, we must remember that we are emotional beings because God is an emotional being. God created us in his image and that means we naturally will have an emotional component to our lives. For example: God loves his Son Jesus (Isa 42:1); delights in justice and righteousness (Ps 33:5); rejoices in his people (Is 62:5); takes pleasure in his ways (Ps 115:3); he grieves and expresses pain and sorrow (Gen 6:5-6); he experiences anger, wrath, and detests things (Ps 5:5-6); he’s compassionate (Ex 33:19); and he’s loving (Jer 31:33). Second, since we are emotional beings, we are to have self-control over our emotions. Feelings are feelings and they exist. But we don’t have to act on what you feel just because we feel it. “Well it just feels

right” is not a good reason to do something that is clearly wrong (1 Cor 9:25-27). Furthermore, we are to live in line with the truth of the gospel and scripture while processing our emotions. We don’t bail on our obedience to God’s truth while dealing with our feelings. For this reason, we need to be willing to live with the tension that our feelings often create. Emotions are the window to the soul. Sometimes what we feel (anger, jealousy, envy, greed, lust, etc.) is clearly wrong. At other times, those same feelings are clearly right (anger over the degradation of the poor or desire for the love of one’s spouse) Sometimes our emotions are fairly neutral. Don’t deny feelings. Even if they would be considered “wrong” we must become aware of them and ask why it’s there. The kingdom of God is now but not yet. This side of heaven we will struggle with our emotions as we will with every other facet of our lives. In some cases, we’ll need to change our mind about some feelings -- we’ll need to repent and ask God’s forgiveness for the fear, anger, greed, or whatever when it’s clearly wrong. But that doesn’t mean you deny it when it crops up. The emotions we experience tell us volumes about ourselves and we must listen to them. There is one more critical piece to keep in mind: There will be no true spiritual maturity without a measure of emotional maturity!¹

Consider Lamentations 3:1-26:

I am the man who has seen affliction by the rod of his wrath. He has driven me away and made me walk in darkness rather than light; indeed, he has turned his hand against me again and again, all day long. He has made my skin and my flesh grow old and has broken my bones. He has besieged me and surrounded me with bitterness and hardship. He has made me dwell in darkness like those long dead. He has walled me in so I cannot escape; he has weighed me down with chains. Even when I call out or cry for help, he shuts out my prayer. He has barred my way with blocks of stone; he has made my paths crooked. Like a bear lying in wait, like a lion in hiding, he dragged me from the path and mangled me and left me without help. He drew his bow and made me the target for his arrows. He pierced my heart with arrows from his quiver. I became the laughingstock of all my people; they mock me in song all day long. He has filled me with bitter herbs and sated me with gall. He has broken my teeth with gravel; he has trampled me in the dust. I have been deprived of peace; I have forgotten what prosperity is. So I say, “My splendor is gone and all that I had hoped from the LORD.” I remember my affliction and my wandering, the bitterness and the gall. I well remember them, and my soul is downcast within me. Yet this I call to mind and therefore I have hope: Because of the LORD’s great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. I say to myself, “The LORD is my portion; therefore I will wait for him.” The LORD is good to those whose hope is in him, to the one who seeks him; it is good to wait quietly for the salvation of the LORD.

So how can we let the gospel touch us at an emotional level? There are six characteristics of emotional health that flow out of the gospel.² They are as follows:

¹ Emotional maturity may be defined as a healthy self-awareness and the ability to love others well.

² These are taken from the book *Emotionally Healthy Church* and are also expressed in the book *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality* by Peter Scazzero.

Look below the surface

Be real about how you feel! What do those feelings mean? Why do we do what we do, act the way we act, say things consistently the way we say them in response to them? These behaviors and actions are often connected to our emotions. What do these things tell us about ourselves? Often, because we aren't aware of them, these emotions reveal blind spots. Mark 7:14-21 tells us that what comes out in our behavior comes from the heart. When we become aware of how we feel, we are not being negatively self-absorbed or destructively introspective! What we are doing is seeking to understand and know the content of the heart. What are we sad, glad, mad or afraid of? Be honest about this. It's like an iceberg. The vast majority of an iceberg is below the surface of the water and unawareness of its presence can have deadly consequences. So also, these emotions are windows to our soul and to deny the emotion because it's unsavory, is to miss out on what God may be saying to us or about us in it. We may be angry because we honestly don't believe that God's fair. We will never come to grips with this lie about God unless we feel our anger at God. Because of the gospel, we know that God loves us. We can live deeply in the love of God and have the courage to look below the surface of our lives and be honest.

Break the power of the past

Realize that your family shapes you more than you think. Each of our families deposited ideas into our lives about how to use money, the role of women, use of alcohol, sex, attitudes towards other cultures, relationships, grief and loss, feelings and emotions. Often these ideas are not in line with scripture. Much of discipleship is the process of putting off sinful patterns of our family of origin and learning how to live new in God's family. We have been adopted into God's family, and while the past may affect us, it need not strangle us. In the Hebrew Scriptures, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and their sons were all liars. David and his family suffered greatly for his inability to control his sexual urges. The tendencies we have to behave in certain ways are all tied to our families of origin. Exodus 20:4-6 notes that the sins of the fathers are passed down to the 3rd-4th generation. There is a progression. Our families of origin can become more important to us than God himself. But while that is true, we see in the bottom of v. 6 that God's grace trumps our family problems. Because we are part of a new family, and accepted as such, we can have the courage to look honestly into our family of origin and identify patterns of behavior that trip us up and make corrections. It's important here to note that this is not about blaming our parents or others for our issues. It's about awareness and responsibility! There is tremendous power in the past and unless we become aware of the past, and address it, we will often simply reproduce the sins of our forefathers even if we are a Christian.

Live lives of brokenness and vulnerability

Be honest about your problems and be willing to be weak in front of others. This is the beauty of Psalm 51. In the confession of his sin of adultery, he gains healing and wholeness. It's in hiding sin that trips us up (Ps 32:3; Prov 28:13). Much of our lives are spent trying to be something in front of others that doesn't reflect reality. We pretend things are okay in our lives when they are not. We live a lie. We lie to others and ourselves about our needs, wants, feelings, hurts. We act as if everything is okay when it's not. And then others live a lie in front of us. So rather than embracing what St. Paul said in 2 Corinthians 12:10, that in weakness there is strength, that the gospel frees us to be honest and walk in the light as he is in the light, we don't admit weakness. It's understandable why people refuse to walk in brokenness and vulnerability. Those who admit

weakness can get taken advantage of. But it's only in living in brokenness and vulnerability that we truly understand the depth of God's grace in the gospel. Live in brokenness and vulnerability because the honest truth is we are all cracked vessels that need Christ to fix us. Walk in the light. Live as children of light (Eph 5:8). Quit trying to be something you are not. Embrace the freedom found in the gospel to be real.

Receive the gift of limits

Each of us is different. No one has all the strengths available to human kind (1 Peter 4:10-11). Limits are God-given boundaries put on us for use of our time, resources, energy, and material goods. We have mental, emotional, physical, and relational limits. Sometimes limits come as a result of a stage in life. If we have babies or young children, we naturally have limits put on our lives! Do we receive our limits and live accordingly or do we try to be something we were never intended to be? Because, when we don't live according to the limits in our lives, we get over-extended; we end up doing things *for* God rather than being *with* God; we get exhausted and bitter because we are always on the go, always active, always feeling guilty for not doing enough for God. We are frantic Marys when God wants us to be contented Marthas (Luke 10:38-42). Limits test our ability to trust God's sovereign plan for our lives. We may consider our lives and wish we were someone else who was more gifted, more beautiful, more intelligent, or whatever. We may wish we had other people's gifts or skills or energy or abilities. But the gospel says we are incredibly valuable just the way we are!! When we grasp this, we will be delighted to live within the limits God has put on our lives. Live with the gift of limits. It's an act of self-care that gives us the strength to give in a way that truly benefits others.

Embrace grief and loss

Face pain and grieve. Sadness and loss come part and parcel with a fallen world. The struggles we face sometimes get larger, because we have not enlarged our soul through grief and loss. To always try to be happy is to forget that God himself has grieved. Consider the losses we may experience in our life: We lose our youth, our dreams and hopes. We lose stability in times of transition, as well as relationships, hobbies, and routines that feel comfortable. We lose family members to death, or relationships to conflict. We may even experience loss when we lose our false ideas of God or church as we mature in Christ. And while we are happy for the growth we received at a different time in our spiritual journey, there is still loss. To deny or minimize the loss we feel or wounds we have can, over the years, dehumanize us. Wrestle with God over the loss and grief in our lives. Job did! He never quit engaging God. He grieved and mourned and complained to God. So while turning towards our pain seems counter intuitive, it's critical. Jesus said, "Blessed are those who mourn!" How are we blessed when we mourn? Grief allows us to accept what is and move on! Because of the gospel, we have hope against loss, and because of the gospel we can embrace grief and loss.

Make incarnation your model for loving well

When Christ entered our world, Paul tells us that he emptied himself. That is, he "made himself nothing" (Phil 2:7). He became like us by entering into our place of existence. The timeless, eternal, God entered time as one of us. He felt what we felt. He lived like we lived. Yet in so doing, he never gave up his divinity. He was still fully God while at the same time he was fully man. The implications of this "incarnation" are mind-boggling. Paul says we are to have the same kind of attitude towards one another. We are to enter into each other's lives, while not

giving up our own. We are to be present to one another, listen to one another, love one another in a way that is profoundly godlike. This can be confusing because it sounds like we must become nothing or not take ourselves into consideration. It doesn't mean that. Jesus never stopped being God, he never denied his identity, his makeup, or the things most important to him. When he needed time away from people in the presence of God the Father, he took it. He loved people well by being present to them while, at the same time, hanging on to who he was. Loving incarnationally means learning to listen to others well. It may mean being able to say to someone, "Well, if I was in your shoes and put myself in the situation you are in, what you are saying makes sense," even if what they're saying to you doesn't make sense to the situation you yourself are in! Or in some cases, loving others well may mean saying, "I hear what you are saying and I'm trying to understand, but frankly I'm having a hard time with it and I think that I must respectfully disagree." This kind of mindset frees us to love the most unlovely and even those who radically disagree with us. Loving well means we choose to be a peacemaker and not a peace keeper, who lives in false peace. It means we recognize the emotional allergies that lead us to react when things happen so that when those allergies are triggered, we keep our anxiety and reactivity low. We can do all of this because God loves us. And because God loves us -- people who were his enemies -- and he died for us, we can seek to love others well.

Group Exercise

Get into groups and discuss the following questions:

1. Which of the six characteristics grabs your attention and why?
2. Which of the six do you have the hardest time doing? Why? Which of the six do you have the easiest time doing?
3. Why is it so important for the gospel to be understood in order to apply these things to your life?
4. What is one thing you'll do this week to apply this to your life?

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