

{ The transforming power of the gospel }

I am a recovering Pharisee. I love the praise of man more than the praise of God. I naturally substitute a knowledge about God and godliness for truly knowing God. I can defend the truths of the Gospel, but I often fail to experience its transforming power in my life.

The depth of my Pharisaism was exposed several years ago when I co-taught a Doctor of Ministry class. During one session, my colleague realized how many of the pastors and Christian leaders in our class seemed discouraged and spiritually defeated. I, too, was struggling — just doing a great job of disguising it in front of the class.

Observing the pain all around him, he took me aside and suggested I divide the class into groups of three and lead them in sharing the Gospel with each other. I was stunned. "Why?" I wondered. Did he think some of these people weren't really Christians?

As he explained, however, I realized how faulty my reasoning had been. I had assumed that the Gospel was for non-Christians alone and had little or no relevance to the Christian life once someone was converted. I began learning that day that the Gospel is not just a gate I must pass through one time, but a path I should walk each day of my life.

It's a painfully common story. We begin the Christian life well, but gradually find ourselves increasingly experiencing little or no true spiritual transformation.

The good news for Christians is that a divine remedy for our cold and hardened hearts is available! And that remedy is found in the transforming power of the Gospel, the goal of which is not just our regeneration but also our transformation into the image of Christ. Its purpose is not merely forgiveness but change into true worshippers of God and authentic lovers of people.

However, we often reduce the Gospel to "God's plan of salvation" for lost people to be saved from sin's penalty, not realizing that it is also "God's plan of salvation" for Christians to be saved from sin's power. The same Gospel message that saves sinners also sanctifies the saints.

In order to understand more fully how the Gospel saves us as believers and thereby changes our hearts, we must first learn to reject the counterfeit spiritual remedies being freely dispensed today.

The Nominalist response to a lack of spiritual transformation in the heart of a Christian is to say, "Don't worry about it. That's just part of being human. Don't you know we're under grace and not law?" But the Bible teaches that any long-term friendship with sin should alert us to the deadness of our hearts and, perhaps, to our unsaved state.

The second prescription we must reject is that of the Passivist, who believes that, as Christians, we

make no real contribution to our spiritual transformation except to relinquish control of our lives to God. To solve our spiritual battles we just need to "let go and let God." This view can easily lead us to spend our entire lives chasing one false hope or experience after another in search of "something more" to make our faith more fulfilling. Instead of seeking "something more," we must learn to understand and draw upon all that we already have "in Christ" (Col. 2:9,10).

A final false solution is that of the Moralists, whose motto is, "Just try harder!" The view is packaged to look a lot more sophisticated and spiritual than that, but if you listen closely you still hear one core message: try harder to spend more time in the Word and prayer — try harder to be a better witness — try harder not to be angry or worried — try harder to be a more loving spouse or parent. We can hear only so many motivating pep talks before we find ourselves lapsing into either a lifestyle of spiritual denial or despair over the glaring lack of inward reality in our lives. The Apostle Paul wrote, "Are you so foolish? After beginning with the Spirit, are you now trying to attain your goal by human effort?" (Gal. 3:3).

The reason the above prescriptions inevitably leave people unchanged and in either denial or despair is because they all bypass the heart. Our root problem is not external or behavioral; it is a problem of the heart.

True spirituality is not only a matter of the mind and the will; it is also a matter of the heart. In his classic work *Religious Affections*, Jonathan Edwards writes, "A person who has a knowledge of doctrine and theology only — without religious affection — has never engaged in true religion."

One of the primary reasons my heart is not more transformed is because I have allowed what the Puritans called "the affections of my heart" to be captured by idols that grip me and steal my heart affection away from God.

The modern idols that capture our hearts' affections today are things like approval, reputation, possessions, power, pleasure, control, relationships, sex, or money. When we allow the affections of our hearts to be captured and corrupted by these idols, the outcome is always the same — a lack of God's transforming power and presence in our lives.

How, then, does the power of the Gospel transform our idolatrous hearts? Through repentance and faith. Jesus' message was simple but life-changing: "Repent and believe the good news!" (Mk. 1:15). The Apostle Paul made clear that repentance and faith were to be ongoing in the life of the believer when he wrote, "...just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, so walk in Him" (Col. 2:6).

Through repentance, we pull our heart affections away from our idols and, by faith, put them back on Jesus Christ. We must all learn to ask, "What idol does my heart presently crave?" Once identified, we must be willing to take radical action against our idols, sapping their life-dominating power.

Repentance, however, is only half of our responsibility in transformation — the negative, defensive side of the equation. The other responsibility given to us in Scripture is the positive,

offensive strategy called faith, which involves learning how to set the affections of our mind and heart on Christ. He wants us to enjoy Him and desire Him more than all of our idols.

Faith requires a continual rehearsing of and delighting in the many privileges that are now ours in Christ.

You are forgiven! Instead of continually punishing yourself for your sins, trying to earn forgiveness, or attempting to measure up to perfectionistic standards, you must learn to claim by faith God's promise of His eternal forgiveness through Christ's blood (Col. 2:13). The Good News is that you can do absolutely nothing to make God love you any more or less! Thinking that your behavior causes you to phase in and out of His favor will short circuit your growth in grace.

You are accepted. (2 Cor. 5:21). You no longer need to fear rejection. You no longer must win the approval of others or hide your weaknesses. You don't always have to defend or build your reputation. You can stop trying to be who you are not and admit to God and others that you are a sinner. Now you can move [^]s*ard others with a bold, Christ-like love — without fear of rejection.

You are adopted! (1 Jn. 3:1 - 2). You don't need to live or feel like a spiritual orphan anymore. God does not see you as merely a pardoned criminal, but as His very own son or daughter! You now have immediate access into the Father's presence, the promise of His provision for your every need, and the privilege of His discipline for your good.

You are free! No matter how defeated you may now feel in your battle with sin, you are no longer in bondage to it. (Rom. 6:5 - 18). No matter what your current struggle, true hope exists for lasting change.

You are not alone! Through faith in Christ you have been given the gift of the Holy Spirit to come alongside you, to comfort you, to encourage you and to empower you to live the life God has called you to live (Jn. 16:5 - 15).

It has been said that a stone lying in the sun can't help but grow warm. In the same way, as we learn to expose our stony hearts to the warmth and light of the Gospel, we can't help but be transformed. We should preach this Good News to ourselves and others constantly, so that no matter what our struggles and fears may be, we can be encouraged, strengthened, and changed by hearing God's voice repeating these eternal truths to our hearts again and again.

All God asks is that we continue to draw near to Him in repentance and faith through the cross of Jesus Christ. It is here that we humble ourselves, cast away all our pride and self-sufficiency, and admit what we really are to God. It is here that we find the supernatural power, courage, and strength to be more like Jesus Christ. •

—Steven L. Childers, *Reformed Quarterly*, Fall 1995