

The Transforming

Power Of The Gospel

By Steven L. Childers ©

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. Over the years I have developed several intricate strategies to cover up the lack of spiritual reality in my heart. 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 at RTS/Orlando. 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? I could see stopping the class to share needs and pray but not to evangelize each other.

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. Although we still believe sound doctrine and practice spiritual disciplines, our hearts seem unchanged. Our relationship with God grows cold and distant. We know something is wrong, but we're not sure what it is. No real joy abounds in our lives; we no longer truly sense God's presence or power. Ultimately, we know we are forgiven, but in the midst of our daily lives we have no authentic power over temptation. What is the answer?

GOOD NEWS!

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 worshipers 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.

A few years ago, a major leader in the Navigators ministry revealed to a gathering of hundreds of Christians that he had discovered his own view of the Gospel had been truncated for most of his ministry.

"Imagine," he said, "drawing a time line of your life. A dot on the extreme left represents your birth; a dot on the extreme right represents your death. Picture a cross in

the center, signifying your conversion. What one word would summarize your greatest need from birth to conversion?" Most of the group replied, "The Gospel."

"Now," he continued, "give me just one word summarizing your greatest need from your conversion to your death." Some said "growth", others said "sanctification."

"For most of my ministry, I would have agreed with you," he confessed. "Being a Navigator, my choice would probably have been 'discipleship.' But today that word would be "Gospel."

After decades of active discipleship, he realized that his view of the Gospel had been virtually disconnected from living the Christian life. Now he is convinced that the Gospel is needed just as much after conversion as it is before.

The Bible teaches that our salvation encompasses all three tenses: Past - we have been saved from sin's penalty (Eph.2:8); Present - we are being saved from sin's power (Phil.2:12); Future - we will be saved from sin's presence (Rom.13:11).

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?" The Nominalist believes that spiritual growth is optional. 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. True Christians don't surrender, they "...press on toward the goal..." (Phil.3:14).

A 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 *Moralist*, 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).

OUR CORE PROBLEM: HEART IDOLATRY

The reason the above prescriptions inevitable 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.

We were all created in God's image to be creatures who must worship something. This is why the essential character of our sin should always be seen as "heart idolatry". The First and Second Commandments, "You shall have no other gods before Me" and "You shall not make for yourself an idol", remind us of the very dangerous and natural tendency we all have to be idolaters.

The modern idols that capture our hearts' affections today are not the graven images of Baal or Molech, but 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.

THE DIVINE REMEDY: REPENT AND BELIEVE IN THE GOSPEL

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).

Coming to Jesus Christ in repentance and faith is meant by God to be more than a mere one-time event by which we are saved from sin's penalty. Repentance and faith in Christ is also the God-ordained process by which we are to return continually to Jesus Christ - daily, moment by moment - to be saved from sin's power and have our hearts transformed.

Through repentance, we pull our hearts affections away from our idols and, by

faith, put them back on Christ.

One of the reasons we don't experience more of God's power and presence in our lives is because we have not sufficiently studied the idolatries of our own hearts and don't realize how subtly idols capture our hearts' affections. 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. In Romans 13:14 Paul wrote "...make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desire." All that is idolatrous must be drained of its vivid appeal. The Puritans called this mortification.

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. God does not want a relationship of impersonal, religious servitude. Instead, He wants us to enjoy Him and desire Him more than all our idols.

THE BLESSINGS OF YOUR INHERITANCE

Faith requires a continual rehearsing of and delighting in the many privileges that are now ours in Christ. When we are united to Christ through faith, we are given a very rich and remarkable spiritual inheritance in Him. Like children born into a royal family, we need time to realize the full extent of the riches of our birthright.

We grow in our experience of God's transforming presence, power, and joy only as we learn to fill our minds with, reflect upon, and act in accordance with our many spiritual blessings in Christ. Even though glaring inconsistencies may exist in our Christian walks, if we are in Christ we can still claim certain wonderful truths by faith.

Each doctrine related to the Gospel

helps us understand the many facets of what we now have in Christ.

YOU ARE FORGIVEN! No matter how great your fear of punishment or how condemned you may feel, in Christ you are eternally 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! Unless you have a secure status as God's child, you will never behave naturally in His presence. Thinking that your behavior causes you to phase in and out of His favor will short circuit your growth in grace.

YOU ARE ACCEPTED! No matter how debilitating your fears of rejection or your feelings of disapproval may be, because Christ's perfect righteousness has now been credited to your account through faith in Him, you are absolutely 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 toward others with a bold, Christ-like love - without fear of rejection.

YOU ARE ADOPTED! No matter how deeply you may have been wounded or damaged
By the lack of love from others in your past, you are now deeply loved. You have been adopted as a child of God and given all the rights and privileges that were previously granted only to the Father's one natural Son, Jesus (1Jn.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. Although sin's influence will always be with you, its dominion over your life has now been broken through the cross. Although you were once a slave to sin, the Good News is that you are now free from that old master (Rom.6:5-18). You are now called by God to claim that freedom from sin's domineering power over your life. No matter what your current struggle, true hope exists for lasting change.

YOU ARE NOT ALONE! No matter how alone or powerless you may feel in this life, 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). As you learn to "live by the Spirit", God's Word says you will not gratify the desires of your sinful nature (Gal.5:16).

CLAIMING THE GOOD NEWS BY FAITH

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.

As Christians, we are called by God to a lifestyle of radical obedience. But our efforts

to obey God perfectly will inevitably lead us into denial and despair if we do not learn how to cultivate a lifestyle of ongoing repentance and faith in the Gospel.

The law of God has no power to change us. Only the Gospel transforms lives. We are destined to be powerless if we do not allow it to penetrate deeply enough into our lives to transform our core character- to save us not only from sin's guilt and penalty, but also from sin's corruption and power in our lives.

In the Gospel, we see the multi-colored splendor of our new lives in Jesus Christ and find the divine remedy for hearts wounded by conviction of sin. In the Gospel, we find the streams of living water that well up in the heart of a believer who keeps coming to Christ in faith (Jn.7:37-38).

As we learn to drink deeply from the well that is Christ, we will experience the transformation of our hearts and find the living waters of the Holy Spirit flowing through us into other lives. This well never runs dry. Here are the springs of personal, corporate, and national revival!

All God asks is that we continue to draw near to Him in repentance and faith through the cross of Jesus Christ. The Apostle Paul wrote, "May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ..." (Gal.6:14). It has been said that grace, like water, always flows to the lowest place - the foot of the cross. 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.

A man once told of taking a walk and coming upon a house across a field. Beside the house, far in the distance, was what looked like another man Pumping furiously at a hand pump. As the hiker watched, the man continued to pump at a tremendous rate; he seemed absolutely tireless, pumping on and

on, up and down, without ever slowing in the slightest, much less stopping.

Truly it was a remarkable sight, so our observer began to walk toward the figure. As he drew closer, he could see that it was not a man at the pump, but a wooden figure painted to look like a man. The arm that was pumping so rapidly was hinged at the elbow, and the hand was wired to the pump handle. The water was pouring forth, but not because the figure was pumping it. You see, it was an artesian well, and the water was pumping the man!

What a beautiful picture of the Holy Spirit filling and overflowing the lives of all those who will keep drawing near to Jesus Christ in repentance and faith. All we have to do is "keep our hands on the handle."

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