

HOW WE CHANGE



THE PATTERN FOR
GROWTH IN GRACE

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HOW WE CHANGE

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SUGGESTED READING LIST: HOW WE CHANGE

- ☐ *Renovation of the Heart*, Dallas Willard
 - ☐ *You Are What You Love*, James K.A. Smith
 - ☐ *How Does Sanctification Work?* David Powlison
 - ☐ *How People Change*, Timothy Lane and Paul David Tripp
 - ☐ *Devoted to God*, Sinclair Ferguson
 - ☐ *Instruments in the Redeemer's Hands*, Paul David Tripp
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HOW WE CHANGE

LESSON ONE THE BASIC PATTERN

HEARING THE WORD

You need to change.

It's unlikely you have much objection to that statement, even though it's pointed—and pointed right at you! Every one of us could name areas in our lives where we fall short. You, your spouse (if married), your kids (if a parent), your friends, your colleagues, could undoubtedly offer a catalogue of flaws, bad habits, and, well, *sins*.

In addition to doing things we shouldn't do, we also don't always do the things we *should* do. As we pursue Christ-likeness, our aim is not simply to eliminate vices, but to cultivate virtue. In Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan, the priest who ignored the man left for dead on the side of the road didn't do anything wrong (like rifle through the man's pockets for any leftover money); however, he didn't do anything *right* either—and that, Jesus notes, is the problem (see Luke 10:25-37). So it is with us.

And so we're back where we started. We need to change.

But if we all know we need to change, why do we see so little evidence of change? Many, if not all, of us could point to areas where we've wanted to change—maybe for years—and yet, change eludes us. We still blow up at bad drivers in traffic. We still struggle to communicate well in marriage. We still speak careless words that wound those we love. We still don't spend as much time in the Word of God and prayer as we'd like. We still covet the comfortable, even luxurious life. And the list goes on.

Change is necessary, but change is difficult, in other words. It often feels impossible. But there is hope. God promises to sanctify us—to make us holy, transforming us into Christ-likeness—throughout the Bible (e.g., 1 Thessalonians 5:23-24; Philippians 1:6; Romans 8:28-29). Those whom God saves, he saves completely. The righteous tree will bear righteous fruit in the Spirit.

Having grounded ourselves in the hope of God's sanctifying power, we can now ask *how* we change. Does Scripture teach a reliable pattern for change? Yes and no. On the one hand, the Bible does not give us six easy steps to pursue life transformation. As David Powlison notes,

Both Scripture and personal testimony teach us that there is no single formula for the kind of problems that call for sanctification. There's no one-size-fits-all goal. No sound bite captures the range of truths that shape change. There's no one blueprint for the constructive influence of other people. There is no single formula for how God weaves together the turns of events, the intricacy and beauty of creation, the rich portrayals of life in literature and the arts—all things.¹

On the other hand, Scripture does lay a solid foundation for our understanding of how change happens, and what we can do to cooperate with and participate in the Spirit's work in us, as we'll see in this study. In this lesson, we'll explore the basic pattern for change, looking at Peter's exhortation to Christian pilgrims scattered in exile.

¹ *How Does Sanctification Work?* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017): 20.

Each lesson, you will examine yourself in light of a specific Bible passage. Read the text carefully, then prayerfully answer the meditation questions. We will ask the first four questions (taken from 2 Timothy 3:16-17) each lesson, followed by a final synthesis question before the written reflection.

Therefore, with minds that are alert and fully sober, set your hope on the grace to be brought to you when Jesus Christ is revealed at his coming. ¹⁴ As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance. ¹⁵ But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; ¹⁶ for it is written: "Be holy, because I am holy."

¹⁷ Since you call on a Father who judges each person's work impartially, live out your time as foreigners here in reverent fear. ¹⁸ For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your ancestors, ¹⁹ but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect. ²⁰ He was chosen before the creation of the world, but was revealed in these last times for your sake. ²¹ Through him you believe in God, who raised him from the dead and glorified him, and so your faith and hope are in God.

²² Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for each other, love one another deeply, from the heart. ²³ For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God. ²⁴ For,

*"All people are like grass,
and all their glory is like the flowers of the field;
the grass withers and the flowers fall,
²⁵ but the word of the Lord endures forever."*

And this is the word that was preached to you.

² Therefore, rid yourselves of all malice and all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and slander of every kind. ² Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation, ³ now that you have tasted that the Lord is good.

1 PETER 1:13-2:3

Teaching: What does God want me to *understand*? (What does this passage mean? to its original audience? for us today? What does this passage tell me, explicitly or implicitly, about the character of God?)

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Rebuking: What does God want me to *repent of*? (As I examine myself in light of this passage, what sinful behaviors, thoughts, feelings, or idols do I need to confess and repent of?)

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Correcting: What does God want me to *do*? (Is there anything this passage tells me I should think, feel, or believe? Is there a command to be obeyed?)

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Training: How does the *gospel* motivate my new obedience to Christ? (How does this passage point to Jesus and the gospel? Is there a promise to believe? How will that promise encourage and sustain me in my new obedience?)

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Peter gives a series of commands in this passage. What does he suggest should motivate our obedience for each command? What does that show us about the pattern for change?

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When we hear of a prominent Christian leader accused of grievous moral failure, or read the alarming statistics about Christians engaging in the same sinful behaviors as non-Christians, we get discouraged. Shouldn't we be different? Shouldn't our lives stand out as we walk in holiness? But they don't always. And it's not just other people—every one of us is a sinner. (And if you don't think you are, your sin is pride!)

So what do we do about it? That's where Peter takes us, in light of the glorious gospel he has expounded in the previous verses. In the first paragraph (verses 13-16), Peter lays out the basic pattern, and then he works it out in the following three paragraphs. Let's start by unearthing the pattern, and then we'll explore how it looks in relation to the three following commands.

THE BASIC PATTERN (1:13-16)

Peter opens the paragraph with "Therefore," showing that this follows from all that he has already said about God's eternal plan to secure our salvation and future glory in Christ. In light of the good news of the gospel, we need to do something—specifically, to set our hope on future grace (verse 13). But how do we obey a command to *feel*, as it were? When you're feeling hopeless in the face of ongoing sin, for example, having someone tell you to be hopeful is hardly helpful.

Peter gives us the answer: we need "minds that are fully alert." The image suggests preparing our minds for deep thinking the way an athlete prepares for rigorous exercise. And we must do this with sobriety, Peter says, not allowing ourselves to be intoxicated by distractions or a love of the world. But what is it that we're thinking about so seriously? The gospel, which Peter has richly described already in the letter. Consider what you know, Peter prods, and let that produce hope in you. You have an inheritance that nothing can steal (verse 4). God's power shields you until his salvation comes in fullness (verse 5). He is refining your faith in trials like gold refined in fire (verse 7). Clear, rigorous thinking about truths as glorious as those will produce passionate hope in us. The mind, in other words, serves the heart.

This might strike us as a bit odd, because we are largely committed to rationalism: "Facts before feelings," the saying goes. Yes, but facts produce right feelings in us. When we rehearse gospel truths, our emotions shift, and we get our

desires straight; we rightly “order” our loves, as Augustine puts it. Knowing truth helps us understand what we should desire. Where should my treasure lie? In what should I delight most? The mind answers for the heart.

Peter confirms this in the next verse. What will keep us from conforming to our evil desires is overcoming our ignorance (verse 14). Our misplaced preferences, disordered loves, evil desires spring from a failure to know (or at least carefully consider) the truth. As we rectify our spiritual ignorance by drinking deeply from the well of Scripture, our desires will increasingly conform to ultimate reality. God *is* the greatest treasure, our heart’s desire, and so our hearts increasingly desire and treasure him above all. Charles Spurgeon summarizes it nicely: “The mind must have illumination before the affections can properly rise towards their divine object. . . . There must be knowledge of God before there can be love to God: there must be a knowledge of divine things, as they are revealed, before there can be an enjoyment of them.”²

Let’s take an example from my own life to illustrate. In ignorance, I believed my achievements could win me the approval I so dearly craved. I conformed my actions to this evil desire by striving to succeed, especially academically. But when God saved me, and I began to think seriously about gospel truth, I grasped that my approval comes through Christ’s performance, not my own. There is no reason for me to earn what God has already freely given me! I can now set my hope on the approval I will hear in Christ—“Well done, good and faithful servant”—and orient my life around that new desire.

When we orient our lives around new desires, our behavior changes. This is exactly what Peter says next. We exchange ignorance for truth, evil desires for godly passions, and now, sin for holiness: “But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do” (verse 15). Conforming my desires to gospel truth produces new habits, a changed life. A young, single woman who desires to feel loved might compromise herself sexually; but as she thinks deeply about God’s perfect, unconditional love for her in Christ, her desires change. She now desires intimacy with the Father above all, and so chooses obedience (sexual purity, in this case) so she can experience that intimacy. “If you love me,” if your desire is for me first and foremost, Jesus says, “keep my commands” (John 14:15). Desire precedes doing.

Now we can discern the basic pattern Peter lays out for us. *Our mind (thoughts and feelings) shapes our heart (desires), which shapes our behavior (choices)*. As we’ll see as we progress in this study, it rarely works so neatly. Rather than a linear movement, it often proceeds in a messy cycle. But for the sake of simplicity, we might diagram the basic pattern like this:



Very briefly, let’s see how this cycle plays out in Peter’s following three commands.

LIVE (1:17-21)

Peter’s command is straightforward. As foreigners (exiles, pilgrims) in this world, we should live our lives in reverent fear. Because of our holy living, we should stick out like the one student who forgot to wear his school uniform on the

² As quoted in John Piper, *Reading the Bible Supernaturally: Seeing and Savoring the Glory of God in Scripture* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017): 100.

field trip. We don't look like the world anymore. But notice what motivates our new conduct: a *feeling*—fear. How do we stir fear in our hearts? Just as our deep thinking about the gospel produced hope in the last paragraph, so here, our deep thinking about what God has done leads us to fear him.

God chose Christ to redeem us from the empty way of life we inherited from the world. He did not redeem us with gold or silver, which would be impressive enough, but by the precious blood of his own Son. Remember, this Father judges impartially (verse 17). God is both Father and Judge! As we reflect on that transcendent tension between grace and holiness, our hearts begin to fear. He forgave us by Christ's blood spilled on our behalf. In other words, for us to experience forgiveness, Christ had to experience justice—God's righteous wrath. We don't live in terror because we know grace. At the same time, godly fear keeps us from presuming upon that grace. We fear treating the precious blood of Christ or the wonder of God's adoptive love as trash by casually disregarding God's purpose in redeeming us—to make us holy for the praise of his name. When we consider and truly *feel* the weight of glory, the cost of redemption, we desire to please the God who loves us, and so live lives of reverent fear. Our mind (thoughts and feelings) shapes our heart (desires), which shapes our behavior (choices).

LOVE (1:22-25)

In this paragraph, Peter finally spells out what godly conduct is, at least when it comes to other people: we are to love one another deeply. Jesus, after all, summed up the law as it relates to our horizontal relationships in the one command, "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 22:39). It seems so simple: be holy, living in reverent fear of God, by loving each other well. And yet, if love (instead of selfishness) were easy, we wouldn't need a Savior! So how do we get there?

Once again, we start with sustained reflection on unchanging truth—in this case, the living and enduring Word of God, the very word preached to us. Indeed, we were born again through this word, because faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God (Romans 10:17). This truth purifies us, as we obey it. (To obey truth, by the way, is to believe what is true. We do not purify ourselves by our obedient *actions*, which would require we earn our salvation; rather, we respond to truth by obedient *faith*, which God credits to us as righteousness.) Once we believe, accepting the unchanging truth as truth, we have sincere love. Our desires have changed. For example, we no longer see the new gal at work as competition that we need to outperform in order to maintain our fragile ego; instead, resting in gospel truth and our new identity in Christ, we can serve and celebrate her. Our mind (thoughts and feelings) shapes our heart (desires), which shapes our behavior (choices).

CRAVE (2:1-3)

Interestingly, in this passage, the command has not to do with behavior, but rather with our desires. (Although the NIV translates "rid" as a command, it is a participle in the original; i.e., "Ridding yourselves of all this bad stuff, crave pure spiritual milk.") The implication seems to be that, if we get our hearts right, that will dam up certain streams of sin. After all, "out of the heart come evil thoughts" that lead to evil deeds (Matthew 15:19).

How do we press on in our spiritual growth? What concrete steps can we take to move toward holiness? Peter tells us we must crave spiritual milk. The context suggests that "milk" is the Word of God, as does the imagery, because we take in the Word for nourishment, like a newborn taking in milk. That means we are to crave unchanging truth that will keep reshaping our desires. For, in drinking in the Word of God, we "taste" the goodness of God—his love, faithfulness, glory, holiness, power, wisdom, and all the rest. That, in turn, will reshape our conduct, so that we live truly loving lives. Instead of malice, we will choose goodwill; instead of deceit, truth; instead of hypocrisy, sincerity; instead of envy, celebration; and instead of slander, affirmation.

The basic pattern is quite clear. Think about unchanging truths, so that his enduring grace enflames your heart, which will lead to the ongoing response of holy living. Our mind (thoughts and feelings) shapes our heart (desires), which shapes our behavior (choices).

We will walk through each of those four “levels” of the heart—thoughts, feelings, desires, and choices—in the rest of the study, defining terms and clarifying the process. However, before we get there, we want to explore why we must focus on the heart specifically, and not merely the behavior.

PASSAGES FOR FURTHER STUDY

Each week we will suggest four other passages for reading, studying, and meditation. If you wanted, you could choose one to study each day, providing you with a passage for your private worship time five days out of the week. We would highly recommend studying the preaching passage for the next Sunday as well, giving you six days of material, with one cheat day (which you don’t have to take!).

- ☐ 2 Peter 1:3-11
- ☐ 1 Thessalonians 5:23-24
- ☐ Titus 2:11-14
- ☐ Colossians 1:9-14

DOING THE WORD

Over the course of this study, choose a single area in which you want to change. Then, using the principles in the study, as well as the God-given means of grace, we will seek to put sin to death and cultivate righteousness in its place.

As a reminder, what you get out of this process will depend significantly on what you put into it. I would encourage you not to breeze through these exercises, but rather to spend time in prayer and self-examination as you work through them diligently. God longs and labors to see the character of Christ formed in you, and he will bless and empower your effort. You can “work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose” (Philippians 2:12-13). And because God has given us “everything we need for a godly life through our knowledge of him who called us,” you should “make every effort to confirm your calling and election” (2 Peter 1:3, 10).

As you pray through which area God would have you tackle in this study, here are a few thoughts to consider:

- Because we will be talking about this area for six lessons, be sure to choose an area substantial enough to warrant six weeks of effort and conversation. (If you are doing this with a group, make sure it is an area you feel comfortable discussing publicly.)
- Don't forget to think through both sins of commission (doing what we shouldn't do) and sins of omission (not doing what we should do). Both warrant grace-based effort.
- Although some acts are sinful in themselves (murder, adultery, taking the Lord's name in vain), *most* acts are not. They are sinful because of the underlying motivation (usually idolatry). While exercise, for example, is good in itself, it can become evil if the motivation is one of vanity or pride, or if it takes up more time and energy than is proper for a rightly ordered life. Thus, you may want to choose a behavior that doesn't *look* sinful to the untrained eye, because you know the sin beneath the not-so-obvious-sin.
- At the same time, let's be careful not to spiritualize what's really just a diet or other self-improvement project. Many of us want to make changes to our lives that are fine—a bit more order or discipline, establishing some helpful routines—but that have nothing to do with sin. If you want to cut down on sugar (an illustration I use in this study, in fact!), why? Is it because you truly believe you struggle with gluttony, or are managing stress and numbing pain through emotional eating, which would suggest idolatry? Or do you just want to eat better? If the latter, pick another area. If the former, all right—there's work to be done.

What area do you think God wants you to focus on in this study?

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Why did you choose this area?

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What manifestations of the sin have you noticed? Remember, sin involves not only doing what we shouldn't do, but not doing what we should do. Include both in your answer. Try to be as specific and as thorough as possible, without shifting blame or minimizing the sin.

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Do you have any questions about the basic pattern for change before we continue?

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HOW WE CHANGE

LESSON TWO

THE HEART AS CENTER

HEARING THE WORD

One of the great frustrations of human existence is our seeming inability to change. We could all point to moments in our lives when we wanted to change some behavior or other, only to see the attempt fail. Perhaps we experienced some short-term cosmetic change, but before long, the same pattern emerges. Why do we find lasting change so difficult to come by? As we dig into God's Word, we see the answer. When we attempt to change our behavior without addressing its source, the endeavor proves fruitless. In this lesson, we'll examine what Scripture says about the heart, and why the heart must be the center of our pursuit of true transformation. Although we'll consider several passages, Jesus' teaching about the heart (and the imagery he uses) will serve as the basis.

"No good tree bears bad fruit, nor does a bad tree bear good fruit. ⁴⁴ Each tree is recognized by its own fruit. People do not pick figs from thornbushes, or grapes from briars. ⁴⁵ A good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and an evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of."

LUKE 6:43-45

Teaching: What does God want me to *understand*? (What does this passage mean? to its original audience? for us today? What does this passage tell me, explicitly or implicitly, about the character of God?)

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Rebuking: What does God want me to *repent of*? (As I examine myself in light of this passage, what sinful behaviors, thoughts, feelings, or idols do I need to confess and repent of?)

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Correcting: What does God want me to *do*? (Is there anything this passage tells me I should think, feel, or believe? Is there a command to be obeyed?)

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Training: How does the *gospel* motivate my new obedience to Christ? (How does this passage point to Jesus and the gospel? Is there a promise to believe? How will that promise encourage and sustain me in my new obedience?)

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According to Jesus, where does our behavior spring from? Why does this matter for us as we pursue lasting change?

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Before we unpack Jesus' words, we need to define the key term for this lesson. What is the *heart* exactly? In our culture, the heart refers exclusively to our emotions or passions. In Hebrew thought, and in Jesus' usage here, however, the heart refers to the essence of a person, the core of one's being. To speak of the heart biblically, then, is to speak of the sum total of our thoughts, feelings, desires, and will. The heart shapes all that we do. As Dallas Willard says, "We live from our heart. The part of us that drives and organizes our life is not the physical. This remains true even if we deny it."¹ Thus, when we encounter the word "heart" in Scripture, we must be careful to read it as the writers intended, not solely in terms of feelings, but as a person's comprehensive inner working, in contrast to his or her outward displays.

In a famous passage, the father figure in Proverbs highlights the vital importance of the heart for our lives:

*My son, pay attention to what I say;
turn your ear to my words.
21 Do not let them out of your sight,
keep them within your heart;
22 for they are life to those who find them
and health to one's whole body.
23 Above all else, guard your heart,
for everything you do flows from it.
24 Keep your mouth free of perversity;
keep corrupt talk far from your lips.
25 Let your eyes look straight ahead;
fix your gaze directly before you.
26 Give careful thought to the paths for your feet
and be steadfast in all your ways.
27 Do not turn to the right or the left;
keep your foot from evil.*

PROVERBS 4:20-27

¹ *Renovation of the Heart: Putting on the Character of Christ*, 10th anniv. ed. (Wheaton, IL: NavPress, 2012): 13.

The heart is the wellspring, or source, of all the behavior that flows from it (verse 23). This brief poem presents an “anatomy” of discipleship, as it were, drawing attention to various body parts. The heart is at the center of the poem, just as it is the center of our lives. Notice that the verses before verse 23 mention “receptive” organs, like the ear (verse 20) and eye (verse 21). The father enjoins his son to pay careful attention to influences that might “muddy the spring,” so to speak. Then, the verses after verse 23 discuss parts of the body controlled by the heart, such as the mouth (verse 24), eyes again, but this time for determining one’s path (verse 25), and feet (verses 26-27).

The point is clear: because the heart is what “drives and organizes” our lives, we must guard it with the utmost zeal. With that in mind, let’s return to Jesus’ words as we explore how behavior springs from the heart.

THE HEART AS THE SOURCE OF BEHAVIOR

In many ways, Jesus offers the startling imagery of our passage this week to answer the question, “Why do we do what we do?” Jesus’ answer might surprise us. Just as an apple tree produces apples (and not pears), and a lemon tree produces lemons (and not avocados), so we behave in accordance with our fundamental nature. Whatever we are at our core—in our hearts—will spill out into all we do. In this passage, Jesus uses our words as an example. When we speak, especially if we speak off the cuff, our hearts pour out in our words like milk spilling out of a glass that’s been knocked over. The milk was already in the glass; the spill merely released it.

Dallas Willard is helpful here:

Our actions *always* arise out of the *interplay* of the universal factors in human life: spirit, mind, body, social context, and soul [in other words, the heart]. Action never comes from the movement of the will alone. Often—perhaps usually—what we do is not an outcome of deliberate choice and a mere act of will, but is more of a *relenting* to pressure on the will from one or more dimensions of the self. . . .

We must clearly understand that there is a rigorous consistency in the human self and its actions. This is one of the things we are most inclined to deceive ourselves about. If I do evil, I am the kind of person who does evil; if I do good, I am the kind of person who does good (1 John 3:7-10). Actions are not impositions on who we are, but are expressions of who we are. They come out of our heart and the inner realities it supervises and interacts with.²

To use Jesus’ imagery, we produce fruit in keeping with the sort of tree we are. Or, as he says in verse 45, “A good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and an evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart.” How we think and feel about the world determines what we store up in our hearts, and from that store we (often unwittingly, as Willard notes) make our choices, like pulling a can of soup from the pantry of our hearts. If that’s the case, we must carefully select what we stock the pantry with! To change our behavior, we’d have to change the stock. How do we do that?

THE HEART AS ORGAN OF PREFERENCE

This might seem blindingly obvious, but we do what we *want* to do. Unless someone coerces us, we choose to do what we want. Even when we choose to do something we don’t want to do—like eat kale instead of bacon, or help with the

² Ibid., 39. (Emphasis original.)

dishes instead of lie on the couch—we do so because of a deeper “want.” We eat kale because we want to be healthy. We help with the dishes because we want to serve a family member (or at least keep them happy so we don’t have to hear from them later!). It is the heart that determines what we want to do.

The heart, then, is an organ of *preference*. Given a choice between two competing actions, the heart decides (under the influence of the mind, as we saw in Proverbs 4) which we prefer. It is in this sense that the heart is the source of our behavior. If we do what we want, to change our behavior, we must change our wants—what we desire, what we love, or even what we *worship*. (The Bible uses all three terms to describe this idea, so we should keep all three in our vocabulary too.)

In Matthew 6:19-21, Jesus connects our hearts to our worship, using the language of treasure:

“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. ²⁰ But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. ²¹ For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

We all seek some sort of treasure, something that we think will give our lives meaning, significance, and happiness. That treasure—whether God himself, worldly riches, power, pleasure, or anything else—will control our hearts. We will choose based on that preference—and in that way, this treasure will control our behavior as well.

The prophet Ezekiel makes this same point with regard to idolatry (our worship, once again):

Some of the elders of Israel came to me and sat down in front of me. ² Then the word of the LORD came to me: ³ “Son of man, these men have set up idols in their hearts and put wicked stumbling blocks before their faces. Should I let them inquire of me at all? ⁴ Therefore speak to them and tell them, ‘This is what the Sovereign LORD says: When any of the Israelites set up idols in their hearts and put a wicked stumbling block before their faces and then go to a prophet, I the LORD will answer them myself in keeping with their great idolatry. ⁵ I will do this to recapture the hearts of the people of Israel, who have all deserted me for their idols.’”

EZEKIEL 14:1-5

Notice what happens in this passage. The elders approach Ezekiel with a question for God, which seems good and right. However, God won’t even talk to them on account of their idolatry, because these idols will distort their perception of anything God says. They have “put wicked stumbling blocks before their faces,” so they cannot see the glory and goodness of God. Thus, before God can answer their question, he must deal with their idolatry—and in so doing, he will “recapture the hearts of the people.” The heart is the center of his focus.

Paul David Tripp draws out five key insights from this passage:

1. Our hearts are always being ruled by someone or something.
2. The most important question to ask when examining the heart is, “What is functionally ruling this person’s heart in this situation?”
3. Whatever controls my heart will control my responses to people and situations.
4. God changes us not just by teaching us to do different things, but by recapturing our hearts to serve him alone.

5. The deepest issues of the human struggle are not issues of pain and suffering, but the issue of worship, because what rules our hearts will control the way we respond to both suffering and blessing.³

What we love/desire/worship most will exert invincible influence in our lives, controlling all that we do. To change what we do, then, we must change what we love/desire/worship.

THE HEART AS THE FOCUS OF CHANGE

If we're going to change what we love/desire/worship, we must focus on the heart, the organ of preference. Consider Jesus' imagery once more. If you have an apple tree in your backyard that is producing withered, rotten fruit, what do you do? You could staple plastic apples to the tree, which would help the appearance without changing the underlying problem. We do this when we hide our sin beneath a false religious veneer. You could staple real apples from another tree, which will help for a while, but then the fruit will rot. This is what happens when we white-knuckle sin into submission. Or, you could nourish the roots, trusting that the good fruit will come once the tree is healthy. To nourish the roots, we must look to the heart. Because the heart is the source of our behavior, and thus the source of our sin problem, lasting change will only come when we address behavior at the heart level. God changes people by changing our hearts.

Let's close with an extended quote from the excellent little book, *How People Change*, which summarizes all that we've learned so far:

The Bible is full of principles and commands to be patient, speak the truth in love, listen well, and speak gently and in edifying ways [etc.]. Yet a behavioral approach to change is hollow because it ignores the need for Christ and his power to change first the heart and then the behavior. Instead, even the Christian version of this approach separates the commands of Scripture from their Christ-centered, gospel context.

The Bible passages that emphasize the need for new behavior are all built on the foundation of God's grace at work to change our hearts through the power of the Spirit. The Word and Spirit work together, enabling us to see Christ in all his power and mercy. This leads to heart change at the level of what we worship and cherish at any given moment. This kind of radical heart change reorients me vertically—person to God—and I repent of what I have cherished in place of Christ. This vertical change then leads to new behavior on the horizontal, person-to-person, plane. An approach to change that only focuses on external behavior is never enough. Biblical change is so much more!⁴

PASSAGES FOR FURTHER STUDY

- ☐ Proverbs 4:20-27
- ☐ Ezekiel 14:1-5
- ☐ 1 Corinthians 4:1-5
- ☐ 2 Timothy 2:20-22

³ *Instruments in the Redeemer's Hands: People in Need of Change Helping People in Need of Change* (Phillipsburg, PA: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2002): 71.

⁴ Timothy S. Lane and Paul David Tripp, *How People Change*, 2d. ed. (Greensboro: New Growth Press, 2006): 24.

DOING THE WORD

Remember, in this study we are going to focus on a single sin issue, as we attempt to walk through the process of lasting change. We will begin the process in earnest next week, but for now, consider what your efforts at change in this area looked like before. (Note: If you haven't tried to change in this area before, you might want to answer these questions with regard to an issue you *have* tried to change.)

Have you tried before to change in the area you selected last week? What did you do to try to change?

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Given that you wouldn't have selected it unless you were still struggling, what do you think prevented you from seeing lasting change in this area?

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In what ways have you focused on changing behavior instead of seeing your heart transformed? What would you like to do differently going forward in light of this lesson?

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HOW WE CHANGE

LESSON THREE THOUGHTS

HEARING THE WORD

Having examined the centrality of the heart in the process of change, we're now ready to consider the four "levels" of the heart individually, and how each relates to the process. To be clear, these next four lessons don't detail four linear "steps" in the transformation process. It's not that easy! Rather, we're trying to separate an integrated system into its four core functions to see how each leads us to do what we do. The process of change is circular, not linear, and messy, not orderly. Nevertheless, by understanding each level of the heart discretely, we can make adjustments at each level, leading to the (often gradual) change we seek so desperately.

We begin with the life of the mind. How do our *thoughts* shape our behavior? In the passage for this lesson, Paul lays out how important what we think really is.

What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase?² By no means! We are those who have died to sin; how can we live in it any longer?³ Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?⁴ We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.

⁵ *For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly also be united with him in a resurrection like his.* ⁶ *For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body ruled by sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin—* ⁷ *because anyone who has died has been set free from sin.*

⁸ *Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him.* ⁹ *For we know that since Christ was raised from the dead, he cannot die again; death no longer has mastery over him.* ¹⁰ *The death he died, he died to sin once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God.*

¹¹ *In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus.*

ROMANS 6:1-11

Teaching: What does God want me to *understand*? (What does this passage mean? to its original audience? for us today? What does this passage tell me, explicitly or implicitly, about the character of God?)

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Rebuking: What does God want me to *repent of*? (As I examine myself in light of this passage, what sinful behaviors, thoughts, feelings, or idols do I need to confess and repent of?)

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Correcting: What does God want me to *do*? (Is there anything this passage tells me I should think, feel, or believe? Is there a command to be obeyed?)

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Training: How does the *gospel* motivate my new obedience to Christ? (How does this passage point to Jesus and the gospel? Is there a promise to believe? How will that promise encourage and sustain me in my new obedience?)

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What does Paul’s repetition of the word “know” suggest about the crucial function thought plays in our lives?

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We would be hard pressed to overstate the importance of thought in our lives, and yet we rarely give much attention to our thought processes. Much of our thinking occurs in the background, as it were, like the operating system of a computer that enables us to open our web browser. We pay attention to whether or not the program opens, but not to all that takes place internally to make that happen. Dallas Willard draws this point out in reference to both the *ideas* we hold and the *images* that give them power:

Ideas are very general models of or assumptions about reality. They are patterns of interpretation, historically developed and socially shared. They sometimes are involved with beliefs, but are much more than belief and do not depend upon it. They are ways of thinking about and interpreting things. They are so pervasive and essential to how we think about and how we approach life that *we often do not even know they are there* or understand when and how they are at work. Our idea system is a cultural artifact, growing up with us from the earliest childhood out of the teachings, expectations, and observable behaviors of family and community. . . .

Closely associated with governing ideas are *images* that occupy our minds. Images are always concrete or specific, as opposed to the abstractness of ideas, and are heavily laden with feeling. They frequently present themselves with the force of perception and have a powerful emotional and sensuous linkage to governing idea systems. They mediate the power of those idea systems into the real situations of ordinary life. Every idea system is present among us as a life force through a small number of powerful images.¹

The relationship between ideas and images, especially those left unexamined, is what drives the entire advertising industry. Using forceful images—impossibly beautiful people caught up in rapturous joy—advertisers tap into a deep-seated set of ideas: “I deserve the good life. God wants me to be happy. Material possessions will serve as the pathway to that happiness.” Without consciously thinking, we’ve acted (making a purchase) because we’ve bought into an idea about how the world really is.

¹ *Renovation of the Heart: Putting on the Character of Christ*, 10th anniv. ed. (Wheaton, IL: NavPress, 2012): 96-97, 99. (Emphasis in first paragraph mine.)

THE DANGER OF WRONG THINKING

At this point, we can understand why we must carefully examine our thoughts—our ideas and the images that reinforce them. In many ways, our thoughts serve as a sort of map to guide and direct us. If we never bother to confirm the map’s accuracy, we could soon find ourselves badly lost.

In the 1800s, Lt. George De Long led the *USS Jeannette* on a disastrous polar expedition. What went wrong? De Long looked to the ultimately deluded maps of a man who believed a “thermometric gateway” existed leading to a vast (and fair-weather) polar sea atop the world. “But it turned out he was heading to a world that didn’t exist. As perilous ice quickly surrounded the ship, [biographer Hampton] Sides recounts, the team had to ‘shed its organizing ideas, in all their unfounded romance, and to replace them with a reckoning of the way the Arctic truly is.’”²

The world and the powers of darkness conspire together to sell us a false map of the way the world really is. After all, sin entered the world when Satan convinced Eve that things were not as God said they were. Since that time, we have believed lies and half-truths that distort our understanding of God, the world, and ourselves. With a faulty map rarely examined for its accuracy, we proceed merrily on our way; but “a people without understanding will come to ruin” (Hosea 4:14b).

In this week’s passage, Paul gives us an example of how this actually worked in the lives of some of his recent converts. “What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase?” (verse 1). In this case, it seems that some had adopted a perverted form of Christianity, one that sees grace as a license for sin. If God saves us on the basis of Christ’s works, and not our own, then what does it matter what we do? If we think that way, even at the unconscious level, we will follow this dangerous map down the road to perdition, indulging in sin until our hearts are hardened beyond the possibility of repentance. No wonder, then, that “Ideas and images are, accordingly, the primary focus of Satan’s efforts to defeat God’s purposes with and for humankind. When we are subject to his chosen ideas and images, he can take a nap or a holiday.”³

A CHANGE OF THOUGHT

In light of how powerful thought is in the life of the individual, true transformation will begin with a transformed mind. As Paul famously said, “Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but *be transformed by the renewing of your mind*. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will” (Romans 12:2). To experience a change of heart, we must experience a change of thought.

Consider how often Paul’s counsel demands we take great care with *what* and *how* we think. In counseling a Corinthian church under the sway of false teachers, he writes, “The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ” (2 Corinthians 10:4-5). What strongholds does the enemy hold in our hearts? According to Paul, when we demolish strongholds, we demolish *arguments* and human pride that sets itself against the *knowledge* of God. Rather than allowing hollow or

² James K.A. Smith, *How We Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2016): 21.

³ Willard, 100.

deceptive philosophies to take us captive (Colossians 2:8), we take every *thought* captive to the obedience of Christ. The battle for the heart *is* the battle for the mind.

We see this pictured poignantly in our passage this week. The Roman church, seemingly in danger of falling into a “grace-sanctioned” immorality, must *think* very carefully. Before he addresses their behavior in verses 12-14 (which we’ll study in the last lesson of this study), he first must remind them of what they know:

- “Don’t you *know* that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?” (verse 3)
- “For we *know* that our old self was crucified with him so that the body ruled by sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin.” (verse 6)
- “For we *know* that since Christ was raised from the dead, he cannot die again; death no longer has mastery over him.” (verse 9)

Undoubtedly the Roman believers had heard these truths many times before, which is why Paul assumes their knowledge. But it seems these interesting tidbits hadn’t transformed their system of thinking yet. They hung these facts like new artwork in a decrepit edifice, rather than using them as the foundation of an entirely new structure.

To change our minds truly—that is, to develop an entirely new system of thought, the renewing of our minds—is extraordinarily difficult. But this is what must happen if we are to become more like Christ. This is part of what Christ came to do; indeed, it is what Christ came to do *first*. When Jesus began his earthly ministry, he did not jump immediately to his atoning death. He first took three years to proclaim the truth about God and the kingdom. “No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has *made him known*” (John 1:18). Considering how little the disciples understood even at the time of his death and subsequent resurrection, we can safely say it takes a while for knowledge to sink in.

THE POWER OF RIGHT THINKING

But what happens when that knowledge *does* sink in—when we are transformed by the renewing of our minds? God uses the analogy of a desert bursting into bloom after a passing thunderstorm to illustrate. (There’s the power of *image*, by the way!)

*“For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
neither are your ways my ways,”*

declares the LORD.

⁹ *“As the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts.*

¹⁰ *As the rain and the snow
come down from heaven,
and do not return to it
without watering the earth
and making it bud and flourish,
so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater,*

¹¹ *so is my word that goes out from my mouth:
It will not return to me empty,*

*but will accomplish what I desire
and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.*

¹² *You will go out in joy
and be led forth in peace;
the mountains and hills
will burst into song before you,
and all the trees of the field
will clap their hands.*

¹³ *Instead of the thornbush will grow the juniper,
and instead of briars the myrtle will grow.
This will be for the LORD's renown,
for an everlasting sign,
that will endure forever."*

ISAIAH 55:8-13

As Paul David Tripp notes, "God's Word changes people this dramatically. The rain that soaks the parched land always has an effect. It bathes soil, which feeds roots, which nourish plants, which produce flowers. So it is with the Word of God. It changes what it touches, producing beauty and fruitfulness in people's lives."⁴

To return to our earlier illustration, the truth God's Word contains offers us a new "map" for our spiritual pilgrimage—one that corresponds perfectly to God's reality. Rather than following Satan's lies on a disastrous journey to ruin and remorse, we let God's Word renew our minds, transforming the trip—and the destination.

Paul's point, and the main takeaway for us this week, is that *we must consider what we know* if we are going to let God renew our minds. In order to let truth take hold of our thoughts, we must *consider* it—reckon with it, chew on it. This is exactly what Paul implores in verse 11, when he says to "count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus." Don't just give intellectual assent to the truth you encounter. Count it true of yourself. Reckon with it. It is an active engagement with the truth, not a passive spectatorship. Lies and half-truths will pop up like weeds in an untended flower bed unless we're vigilant in *considering what we know*.

This, by the way, is why we must devote ourselves to the foundational discipline of meditating on God's Word, and spend so much time rehearsing gospel truths. Reading truth one time will produce no more change than dipping a tea bag into a pot of boiling water for an instant. Just as the tea needs to steep over time, so we need to steep our minds in God's truth to see lasting change.

Consider how the truth can set us on a different course if we let it shape us. In our passage this week, Paul reminds us of some foundational truths. For example, in verse 2, he reminds us that we have died to sin, and thus should live in it no longer. If you believe the lie that grace offers us a license for immorality, because God will forgive us anyway, you will persist in sin like a wooden ship trying to sail through the polar ice cap, with the same results. If, however, you allow God's truth to renew your mind, you will seek to put sin to death, knowing that God has raised you to new life—and

⁴ *Instruments in the Redeemer's Hands: People in Need of Change Helping People in Need of Change* (Phillipsburg, PA: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2002): 23.

new *living*—in Christ. You won't pass off sinful tendencies as "just who I am," but will plead with God to keep working in you through his Spirit until Christ is fully formed in you.

PASSAGES FOR FURTHER STUDY

- ☐ 2 Corinthians 10:1-6
- ☐ Colossians 2:6-8
- ☐ Romans 12:1-2
- ☐ Ephesians 4:17-19

DOING THE WORD

Thinking about thinking is always a heady affair, so let's make sure we keep the practical—living out the truth—in mind. Before we turn to the sin issue we've each chosen to address in this study, let's spend some time developing the spiritual skill of *considering what we know* in order to shape and renew our thoughts.

For each of the following examples, describe how considering what we know would transform our thinking—and ultimately our decision-making. What would happen if they believe the lie instead? If you're unsure, give it your best try. (There might be more than one answer, too!)

- **A young professional finds himself earning a considerable amount of money, despite having relatively few expenses. He faces a choice between living in self-indulgent luxury or giving in self-denying generosity.** (Stuck? Consider what you know from Matthew 25:14-30; Matthew 6:19-24; 1 Timothy 6:2b-10; 2 Corinthians 8:1-15.)

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- **An office gossip betrays the confidence of a colleague, doing immense damage to her relationships and threatening her livelihood as a result. The victim wonders how to respond, and has begun plotting some truly diabolical schemes.** (Stuck? Consider what you know from 1 Peter 2:21-25; 3:8-12; Colossians 3:5-14; Ephesians 4:25-32.)

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- **Two parents are horrified to see their son emphatically abandon the faith after a semester at college. They wonder what happened to their sweet boy—and where they went wrong as parents. Besieged by guilt, they try to map out a proactive response.** (Stuck? Consider what you know from Luke 15:11-32; 2 Corinthians 5:12-21; Proverbs 3:1-12.)

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- **A wife has grown immensely frustrated by her husband's lack of change, despite prodding, counseling, and all the rest. She contemplates leaving him because she just can't take it anymore.** (Stuck? Consider what you know from Ephesians 5:22-23 and 1 Peter 3:1-7.)

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If you have time, develop your own example based on your personal experience or other common issues, such as the “respectable sins” we see so often in the church. What “false map” might people be tempted to follow? Considering what truths from God’s Word would lead to a better way?

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Now think through the sin issue you've chosen for this lesson. What lies or half-truths have you been believing? How has that "false map" led you astray?

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How would "considering what you know" to be true from God's Word transform your thinking and provide a revised (and accurate!) map going forward? Be as specific and exhaustive as you can.

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HOW WE CHANGE

LESSON FOUR **FEELINGS**

HEARING THE WORD

As we turn to the second “level” of the heart, that of *feelings*, we do well to remember that change does not proceed in an orderly, linear fashion. While we might wish our carefully considered thoughts would determine our feelings, which in turn would determine our desires, life is not so clean. When it comes to the relationship between our thoughts and feelings, on the one hand, and how those two combine to shape our desires, we might almost call the process “atmospheric.” Our thoughts and feelings form a mutually reinforcing atmosphere that slowly influences our desires, like a tender piece of meat marinating in sauce and seasoning.

Thus, understanding the relationship between thoughts and feelings, and how we can use each to mold the other, will help us create a proper atmosphere in which godly desires can develop and thrive. Because the Psalms give voice to the depth and breadth of human emotion, while at the same time communicating profound truth about God’s eternal nature, we will turn there for our meditation this week.

*Answer me when I call to you,
my righteous God.*

*Give me relief from my distress;
have mercy on me and hear my prayer.*

² *How long will you people turn my glory into shame?
How long will you love delusions and seek false gods?*

³ *Know that the LORD has set apart his faithful servant for himself;
the LORD hears when I call to him.*

⁴ *Tremble and do not sin;
when you are on your beds,
search your hearts and be silent.*

⁵ *Offer the sacrifices of the righteous
and trust in the LORD.*

⁶ *Many, LORD, are asking, “Who will bring us prosperity?”
Let the light of your face shine on us.*

⁷ *Fill my heart with joy
when their grain and new wine abound.*

⁸ *In peace I will lie down and sleep,
for you alone, LORD,
make me dwell in safety.*

PSALM 4:1-8

Teaching: What does God want me to *understand*? (What does this passage mean? to its original audience? for us today? What does this passage tell me, explicitly or implicitly, about the character of God?)

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Rebuking: What does God want me to *repent of*? (As I examine myself in light of this passage, what sinful behaviors, thoughts, feelings, or idols do I need to confess and repent of?)

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Correcting: What does God want me to *do*? (Is there anything this passage tells me I should think, feel, or believe? Is there a command to be obeyed?)

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Training: How does the *gospel* motivate my new obedience to Christ? (How does this passage point to Jesus and the gospel? Is there a promise to believe? How will that promise encourage and sustain me in my new obedience?)

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**What feelings does the psalmist express in light of his circumstances? Of what truth does he remind himself?
How do the two work together to change his state of mind?**

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David feels distress because of difficult, painful circumstances. Perhaps he is still fleeing from Absalom, as he was in Psalm 3, when he cries out to God here. Whatever the exact situation, people have slanderously dishonored David, God's chosen king, trusting in the false promises of a false savior (verses 2-3). Needless to say, losing his crown, his reputation, and the comforts of his home, and suffering threats on his very life, has produced strong feelings of despair (verse 1) and anger (verse 4) both in him and in his loyal followers.

This is significant, because feelings move our lives—for better or worse—so we must take great care with them. Many of the most animating feelings we experience lead to destructive tendencies, as David even notes in verse 4: “Tremble [in anger], *but do not sin*.” Dallas Willard is instructive here:

It is part of divine and human wisdom to realize that feelings are central to our existence and to make sure they are *good* feelings. And indeed they can be strong, healthy ones. We do not have to be victimized by destructive feelings. Even the feelings that harm us are, for the most part, not bad in themselves, but are somehow not properly limited or subordinated. They are out of order. Feelings are, with a few exceptions, good servants. But they are disastrous masters.¹

If Willard is right, the question arises, “How do we cultivate good feelings instead of destructive ones?” To answer that, we must examine the relationship between thoughts and feelings.

¹ *Renovation of the Heart: Putting on the Character of Christ*, 10th anniv. ed. (Wheaton, IL: NavPress, 2012): 122. (Emphasis original.)

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THOUGHTS AND FEELINGS

“Feeling inclines us toward or away from things that come before our minds in thought.” To take a silly example, you might find the thought of eating an insect repulsive for no rational reason, it being common enough in many parts of the world to consume them. Nevertheless, if your feeling is strong enough, it will outweigh other considerations, such as the reasoned pleas of your host. At the same time, without an idea to contemplate, there can be no feeling. Even if we can’t consciously articulate what we’re thinking when we’re “blinded” by emotion, the thought process is still there, forming the basis for the emotional response. Thus, “feeling and thought always go together. They are interdependent and are never found apart. There is no feeling without something being before the mind in thought and no thought without some positive or negative feeling toward what is contemplated.”²

Let’s take a more serious example, one touching on the theme of the study as a whole. An employee believes his company has treated him unfairly, denying him opportunities for promotion and appropriate pay raises. This thought (whether conscious or not) produces strong feelings in him. He lets it fester, brooding in his anger and resentment. These strong emotions reinforce his thought patterns, so that he soon has an entire catalogue of injustices, real or imagined, he’s suffered at the hands of others. Left unchecked, this thought-feeling complex will shape the entirety of his personality, his mind having distorted his desires, which leads to damaging choices. The mutually reinforcing thought-feeling relationship has created an atmosphere that can only corrupt, in this case.

David faces a similar test in our passage this week. Feelings of distress and anger are no less powerful, and with no less potential for lifelong damage, than those of our imaginary employee above. But notice how David refuses to give into destructive feelings (and indeed calls others out of them) by meeting his distress and anger with truth powerful enough to redirect his emotions.

In discussing the relationship between thoughts and feelings, it is worth pointing out the twin dangers of overemphasizing one or the other. John Piper captures each danger well:

Intellectualism [i.e., overemphasizing thoughts] stresses the use of the intellect and its discoveries without the corresponding awakening of all the emotions that those discoveries are meant to kindle. Emotionalism [i.e., overemphasizing feelings] stresses the energetic stirring of the emotions that are untethered to truth as their warrant and guide.³

Our thoughts and feelings must function *together* to move our hearts in a proper, Godward direction.

MOVING FROM FEELINGS TO THOUGHT

A strong emotional response, especially when the emotions are negative, serves the same purpose a dashboard warning light does. When the “Check Engine” light flicks on, you know to pop the hood and see what’s going on underneath. Similarly, when you are trembling with rage—like David’s companions—you need to stop and see what’s going on underneath the emotion. Let’s say someone cuts you off in traffic, so that you have to slam on the brakes to avoid a collision. You’re seeing red, and the faintest wisp of steam rises from your ears. You’re trembling with anger,

² Ibid., 33.

³ *Reading the Bible Supernaturally: Seeing and Savoring the Glory of God in Scripture* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017): 101.

which is fine—notice that David actually commands his friends to tremble, to *feel* the emotion fully—but you know you can’t let it lead you into sin. You take a deep breath and think through what just happened. You’re justifiably angry, but then, God was justifiably angry with you, and yet forgives you by the blood of his Son. So much for holding a grudge. Plus, if you’re honest, you’ll admit that your anger isn’t *wholly* justifiable. You did speed up when you saw the other driver coming because you didn’t want to let her in. With a bit of reflection, you recognize your selfish driving habits (not for the first time), and slowly but surely you repent of your sin.

Do you see what you’ve done? You’ve moved yourself from strong, potentially destructive feelings to careful thought, which has now transformed your feelings from unrighteous anger to forgiveness and forbearance. Not bad!

Destructive feelings spring from distorted thoughts. When the warning light of strong emotion pops on—“Check Heart”—we must consider what we know (as we learned in the last lesson). The truth of God will redirect our thinking, which in turn will redirect our emotions. Notice how many truths David preaches to himself (and others) in this brief psalm. He reminds himself that God is righteous and attentive to our prayers, a merciful God who helps those in distress (verse 1). He reminds his friends that they cannot let anger lead them into sin (verse 4). He remembers the promised blessings of God (verse 6), and that God alone will keep him safe (verse 8). These are powerful truths, and they produce a powerful change in David’s emotions. He moves from distress and anger to trust (verse 5), joy (verse 7), and peace (verse 8). Importantly, trust, joy, and peace are not surface emotions (though the surface will reflect them), but deep inner conditions. David doesn’t—and we shouldn’t—settle for managing feelings only, but rather massage the truth deeply enough into our hearts that it changes our whole condition.

There is an important corollary to the idea that destructive feelings spring from distorted thoughts. Because so many of our thought processes are operating in the background, strong feelings—the “Check Heart” light—will bring them to the foreground. Strong feelings expose our thought processes so that we can examine them in light of biblical truth. For example, because of the prevailing cultural mindset, many Christians approach trials with unbiblical thought processes: “I’ve got this. I can take care of myself. I will get out of this situation through my effort and ingenuity.” We would never say that out loud, but we act in accordance with those false beliefs. However, when those lies fail us and we discover we’re alone and unable, we experience despair, depression, anxiety, loneliness, and fear. When those “lights” go on, it exposes our unbiblical thinking and allows us to replace it with biblical truth: “The LORD is my shepherd. . . . Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me” (Psalm 23:1, 4).

MOVING FROM THOUGHT TO FEELINGS

We need to examine the flip side of the relationship too, and Psalm 23 proves a useful example. Simply stating facts, no matter how true or even profound, will rarely stir the heart. We need truth that grips the imagination and stokes a feeling within us. In order for truth to take full hold of us, we need not only to believe it to be true, but to *feel* it to be so.

In the midst of uncertainty, loneliness, and fear, certain propositional statements have genuine relevance:

- God is present in our trials.
- He offers the necessary guidance, resources, and rest to sustain us through it.
- Because of his protection and provision, we need not fear any circumstance.

Note that all of those statements are completely accurate, but not terribly helpful. If a friend offered those brute facts as comfort to you when you were suffering, you would smile politely and go away unmoved. But what if your friend stated those same facts like this:

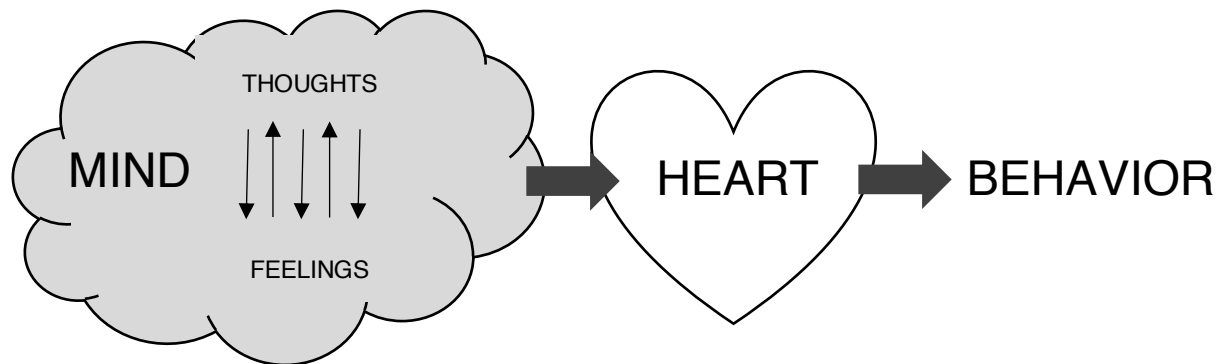
The LORD is my shepherd, I lack nothing.
² *He makes me lie down in green pastures,*
he leads me beside quiet waters,
³ *he refreshes my soul.*
He guides me along the right paths
for his name's sake.
⁴ *Even though I walk*
through the darkest valley,
I will fear no evil,
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff,
they comfort me.

PSALM 23:1-4

The content is identical, but the impact is radically different. David's striking image of God as Shepherd captures the imagination, so that the thoughts come alive in us. We cannot help but form pictures in our minds, imagining ourselves trekking through a dark valley or basking in green fields beside a quiet stream. We move from information to imagination—and thus from thought to feeling. Indeed, David ends the stanza with the feeling those images produce: comfort. (As an aside, this is why the songs we sing during our times of corporate worship matter so much. The very best hymns and spiritual songs wed profound theological reflection with music that stirs our emotions so that we feel the truth to be true.)

We desperately need biblical truth to capture our imaginations—stir our hearts—if we're going to change truly. It is not enough for us to know it is true; we must *feel* it to be true too. A man on the verge of an affair with his “work spouse” may know adultery is sinful and that lasting joy, satisfaction, and pleasure cannot be found in defiance of God's moral standards. But if he does not feel that to be true, he is unlikely to pull back from the precipice. He requires the stirring images of Jeremiah 2:5-30, or others like them, to recapture his heart. A woman cannot forgive her mother's painful verbal offense, and has cut all contact indefinitely. She may know that she should forgive as God has forgiven us in Christ. But if she does not feel it to be true, she is unlikely to walk boldly toward gospel reconciliation. She requires Jesus' piercing parable of the unmerciful servant (Matthew 18:21-35), or something like it, to recapture her heart.

As we continue to work out the (messy, circular, “atmospheric”) process of change, we now see the relationship between thought and feeling in the life of the mind. Remember, our mind (thoughts and feelings) shapes our heart (desires), which shapes our behavior (choices). Given what we’ve learned in our lesson, we can update our visual representation of the process.



PASSAGES FOR FURTHER STUDY

- ☐ Psalm 23:1-6
- ☐ Deuteronomy 32:10-12
- ☐ Psalm 11:1-7
- ☐ Proverbs 12:25, 14:30 & 17:22

DOING THE WORD

As we seek to apply the truth we've just studied, we will continue to focus on the sin area we identified in the first lesson. However, we have many emotions—and many sinful tendencies!—and so we'll begin with a few unrelated questions to help equip us to keep examining our feelings biblically.

When has the “Check Heart” light gone on for you this week? What did you see when you “popped the hood” of your heart and examined what was going on underneath?

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As you think through some of your favorite Bible passages, what scriptural images most stir your heart? Why do you think that is?

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As you think through the sin issue you've chosen to tackle in this study, what destructive feelings do you notice? How do those feelings expose distorted thoughts?

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In the last lesson, you identified the biblical truth that could help bring change in this area. What do you need (images, stories, songs, etc.) to help you feel that truth to be true? In other words, what will God use to capture your imagination and stir your heart in this area?

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What positive feelings result from trusting obedience in this area? How have you experienced those so far?

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HOW WE CHANGE

LESSON FIVE **DESIRES**

HEARING THE WORD

At last we come to the heart of the matter, quite literally. We learned back in lesson two that we always do what we *want* to do. Our desires precede and determine every choice we make. They form the foundation of our very character; they are the root from which the fruit of our behavior springs. If we are going to change truly, then, we must change how and what we desire.

Indeed, our failure to make permanent changes undoubtedly results from our inattention to our desires. We stand transfixed by the behavior without bothering to dig beneath to see where it comes from. We are content to pick dandelion heads without digging up the roots, and then find ourselves shocked when the dandelion of sin blooms again! The Scottish preacher Thomas Chalmers exposed this folly in his monumental sermon “The Expulsive Power of a New Affection.”

You may remember the fond and unbroken tenacity with which your heart has often [returned] to pursuits, over the utter frivolity of which it sighed and wept but yesterday. . . . [After thinking about the Word of God, you may] feel for a moment as if on the eve of a practical and permanent emancipation from a scene of so much vanity. But the morrow comes, and the business of the world, and the objects of the world, and the moving forces of the world come along with it—and the machinery of the heart . . . brings it under a kind of moral necessity to [act] just as before.¹

We have all experienced this dynamic. A powerful sermon or time of private worship prompts a momentary confidence that elusive change has finally arrived, only to discover we’re the same person—making the same poor choices—the very next day. To break the cycle of sin, we must change our desires (or what Puritans like Chalmers called our *affections*). Paul makes this case powerfully in his famous passage detailing the fruit of the Spirit.

You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love. ¹⁴ For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” ¹⁵ If you bite and devour each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other.

¹⁶ So I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. ¹⁷ For the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh. They are in conflict with each other, so that you are not to do whatever you want. ¹⁸ But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law.

¹⁹ The acts of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; ²⁰ idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions ²¹ and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.

²² But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. ²⁴ Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. ²⁵ Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. ²⁶ Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other.

GALATIANS 5:13-26

¹ *The Expulsive Power of a New Affection*, Crossway Short Classics (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020): 44-45.

Teaching: What does God want me to *understand*? (What does this passage mean? to its original audience? for us today? What does this passage tell me, explicitly or implicitly, about the character of God?)

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Rebuking: What does God want me to *repent of*? (As I examine myself in light of this passage, what sinful behaviors, thoughts, feelings, or idols do I need to confess and repent of?)

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Correcting: What does God want me to *do*? (Is there anything this passage tells me I should think, feel, or believe? Is there a command to be obeyed?)

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Training: How does the *gospel* motivate my new obedience to Christ? (How does this passage point to Jesus and the gospel? Is there a promise to believe? How will that promise encourage and sustain me in my new obedience?)

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What motivates the flesh's acts and the Spirit's fruit? According to Paul, how do we go about moving from the former to the latter?

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In our passage this week, Paul addresses a congregation torn by two competing factions. On the one hand, we have a group promoting *legalism*, the idea that we must keep the law in order to be saved. On the other hand, we have a group falling into *libertinism*, the idea that we can do whatever we want because God saves us by grace, not by works. Into this quarrel Paul speaks a better way—the gospel way. To track with his careful argument, let's look at the problem, the proof, and the principle in turn, in order to see why and how we transform our desires.

THE PROBLEM: TWO FORCES (5:13-18)

There are two forces battling for control of our lives. That is the problem. The flesh and Spirit are at war with one another—and the battleground is self. If we live by the flesh, the Spirit opposes us; if we live by the Spirit, the flesh hinders us. This is an issue. This battle rages—will rage—in our lives. In Paul's thought, flesh is that self-regarding element in human nature which has been corrupted at the source. It is our sinful nature. Don't use your sinful nature to indulge the flesh, Paul says. So much for libertinism!

On the other side, Paul's opponents saw the law as a necessary check on the license to sin. "We've got to make sure the church doesn't turn into a bunch of libertines, so let's give them the law," they argued. The legalists thought the law could eliminate pleasure and passion, but it can't do that. The law shows us what we should desire, but is in itself powerless to make us desire what is right. So much for legalism!

For Paul, the freedom of the Spirit is an antidote to both legal bondage and unrestrained license. What is the nature of this freedom exactly? God did not free us to do whatever we want, because we want what is evil (and self-destructive, frankly). The flesh and the Spirit war with each other "so that you are *not* to do whatever you want" (verse 17). But if God could change our desires so that we wanted to submit ourselves freely to him and his law, then we could do whatever we want! True freedom, in other words, is the freedom to do what we want because our desires align perfectly with God's. (We will not know this sort of perfection until glory, but we labor towards it in God's grace.)

In the opening paragraph of his sermon, Chalmers sets forth the two ways we could seek to overcome our sinful nature. Notice how closely this mirrors Paul's argument in our passage.

There are two ways in which a practical moralist may attempt to displace from the human heart its love of the world—either by a demonstration of the world’s vanity, so as that the heart shall be prevailed upon simply to withdraw its regards from an object that is not worthy of it; or, by setting forth another object, even God, as more worthy of its attachment, so as that the heart shall be prevailed upon not to resign an old affection, which shall have nothing to succeed it, but to exchange an old affection for a new one.²

It is not enough merely to preach the law: “Stop sinning already!” That would be resigning an “old affection” without replacing it with a new one, which can’t work. We must set forth another object, and show its greater worth, so that our desires shift, producing new behavior in us. Thus, Paul urges us, “Live by the Spirit and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh” (verse 16). He has already reminded his converts that they received the Spirit at the beginning of their Christian life. Now, Paul says, show it! Demonstrate his presence in your life. “Live by the Spirit,” that is, walk in the Spirit’s way, the way of freedom and love. And if you do that, “you will not gratify the flesh.”

THE PROOF: TWO FACTS (5:19-23)

In this next section, Paul makes a simple point. Now that we’ve learned we have two forces waging war for control of our lives, we can see which force is winning the battle for our hearts based on our actions. If we commit “acts of the flesh,” we have given into our fleshly desires; if we see the Spirit producing his fruit within us, we have set our heart’s desire on a greater pleasure, pleasing God himself. Every choice we make springs from some desire within us, even if we aren’t aware of the desire at the time. Because our individual choices become habits, and our habits eventually become our character, we may choose without active deliberation. Still, that choice springs from a deep desire buried under a lifetime of choices. This is why we must pay such careful attention to the *fact* of our behavior. What we pass off as a poor decision or momentary lapse of judgment may in fact be proof of a deeply corrupted heart.

In other words, our actions are the proof—the indisputable fact—of what rules our hearts. Russian filmmaker Andrei Tarkovsky’s dystopian film noir, *Stalker*, makes just this point. The film centers around the “Room,” to which the titular character leads the others, because (as he promises them) in the Room they will achieve their heart’s desire. When the group finally arrives at the Room, however, they hesitate to enter. Why? It dawns on them that they don’t really know what they want. Geoff Dyer, in his book about the film, observes, “That’s for the Room to decide. The Room reveals all: what you get is not what you *think* you wish for but what you most *deeply* wish for.”³ What a terrifying prospect—to get what our hearts truly desire, whether we know it or not! When I first read the account of this film (which I haven’t seen), I sat in befuddled silence for several minutes, trying to determine if I know what I desire most.

Paul helps us out here, for our deepest desire manifests in our daily habits, because our actions spring from our loves. Let’s see how this works, looking at an act of the flesh compared to its opposing fruit of the Spirit. To stick closely to our passage, let’s focus on the issue his readers were facing at that moment: “biting and devouring” one another (verse 15). Suppose a member of your church holds a differing opinion than you on some subject or other, and loudly denounces you for your position. She speaks carelessly and cruelly, and her reckless words pierce you like swords. Immediately, flesh and Spirit conflict, because you have two competing desires. On the one hand, you want to defend yourself, to prove you’re right, and to avenge yourself of this wrong you’ve suffered. If that desire (in essence, self)

² *Expulsive Power*, 27.

³ As quoted in James K.A. Smith, *You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2016): 28. (Emphasis original.)

rules the day, you will fall into discord, rage, factions, and the like (verse 20). On the other hand, you want to please God and live in a manner worthy of the gospel (which, you remember, involves Christ forbearing with you even when you treat him cruelly). If that desire (in essence, love) emerges victorious, you will act in love, peace, forbearance, kindness, and self-control (verses 22-23). How do you know what you love most—self or God? Look at how you respond, and you'll have proof of the answer.

THE PRINCIPLE: THE EXPULSIVE POWER OF A NEW AFFECTION (5:24-26)

As he closes this section of his letter, Paul offers a simple principle for lasting change: We must crucify “the flesh *with its passions and desires*” (verse 24). Keeping in step with the Spirit instead, we have the power we need to forego gratifying the desires of the flesh (verses 25, 16). Considering, however, how often we choose sin over Spirit-living, we would do well to ask just *how* exactly we go about crucifying the flesh with its passions and desires. To answer that question, let's turn to Chalmers once more, with a little help from Augustine along the way.

Chalmers makes clear that we cannot simply do away with desire, as if removing the fleshly desire were sufficient. Like the “strong man” returning to the house swept clean with seven other evil spirits (Luke 11:24-26), a motley crew of evil desires will rush to fill the vacuum in the heart. To eliminate the evil desire permanently, we must replace it with a new desire. That is the “expulsive power of a new affection.”

[The heart's] desire for one particular object maybe conquered; but as to its desire for having some one object or other, this is unconquerable. Its adhesion to that on which it has fastened the preference of its regards cannot willingly be overcome by the rending away of a simple separation. It can be done only by the application of something else, to which it may feel the adhesion of a still stronger and more powerful preference. Such is the grasping tendency of the human heart, that it must have a something to lay hold of.⁴

As others have noted, God designed us to worship—and if we will not worship him, we will fix our hearts on some lesser desire. Our hearts cannot help but “adhere” to some preferred object or other. That object or desire may be inherently wrong, as in the case of a person who wants to make a name for himself (rather than glorifying God's name) through career advancement. More likely, however, the desire is simply wrongly *ordered* or wrongly *placed*. A person who, rightly, desires to be loved may attach that desire to extramarital sex or pornography. The right desire (love) has been wrongly placed (on illicit sex). Or, a person who, rightly, wants to provide a good life for her children may let them miss church regularly in order to participate in the sport of their choice. The right desire (family) has been wrongly ordered (above God's family).⁵

⁴ *Expulsive Power*, 36

⁵ If the contrast between a wrong, wrongly ordered, or wrongly placed desire is still confusing, here's another example using a single desire (sexuality): Desiring to have sex with someone of your gender is a *wrong* desire, because there is no context in which such an act would be right. Skipping prayer or Bible meditation regularly because you desire to have sex with your spouse is a *wrongly ordered* desire, because—although the desire itself is right and godly—it has taken on an outsized influence in your life. Desiring to have sex with a member of your gender other than your spouse is a *wrongly placed* desire, because—although the desire for sex with a member of the opposite gender can be right and godly—when placed outside the context of covenant marriage, it is wrong.

Please note, this is true of sins of omission too. We can refrain from doing what we know we should do because our desires are wrong, wrongly ordered, or wrongly placed. How many of us, for example, have not given generously because we have placed security or comfort above obedience to God (an example of a wrongly ordered desire)? We all desire, because God made us to love/desire/worship. If we don't desire rightly, we will—without doubt—desire wrongly (or wrongly place or order that desire).

An illustration may help. At one point, I decided I wanted to be done drinking soda, which isn't very good for one's health. (Note that my decision to stop drinking soda came from a deeper desire: I prioritized my health over my taste buds.) But giving up soda didn't mean I stopped being thirsty. I still needed to find some new beverage to satisfy my thirst. (I ended up settling on sparkling water.) Our hearts "thirst" for pleasure unceasingly. To change, then, we cannot eliminate drinking; instead, we must find a new beverage that will satisfy our very deepest thirst. (This, by the way, is exactly the imagery Jesus uses in John 4:13-14.)

Few, if any, have plumbed the depths of the power of our desires as profoundly as Augustine. In his *Confessions*, he describes the expulsive power of his new affection forcefully:

During all those years [of my rebellion], where was my free will? What was the hidden, secret place from which it was summoned in a moment, so that I might bend my neck to your easy yoke? . . . How sweet all at once it was for me to be rid of those fruitless joys which I had once feared to lose! . . . You drove them from me, you who are the true, the sovereign joy. *You drove them from me and you took their place*, you who are sweeter than all pleasure though not to the flesh and blood, you who outshine all light yet are hidden deeper than any secret in our hearts, you who surpass all honour though not in the eyes of men who see honour in themselves.⁶

We sin because we delight in sin, and believe (foolishly) that it will bring us lasting pleasure. Once our eyes behold the beauty of God—reckon him our "sovereign joy"—the world's pleasures pale in comparison. Indeed, we might summarize grace as God giving us sovereign joy in himself that conquers—expels—the lesser joys this world offers us. The Spirit applies this grace to our daily lives, such that when we keep in step with him, we desire what he desires, having crucified the flesh with its sinful passions and desires. The Spirit produces in us a deep delight in God, the gospel, Scripture, and the beauty of holiness.

When we devote ourselves to God's Word, rehearsing the great truths and promises of the gospel, and glorying in the splendor of God's majesty, our affections change. See the power and wisdom of God in his creation and sovereign working of his redemptive purposes in history. Behold his mercy, compassion, love, goodness, holiness, and justice at the cross. Fix your gaze on his beauty and bounty at the coming wedding supper of the Lamb and his bride, the church. Chalmers reminds us that "the same revelation which dictates so mighty an obedience, places within our reach as mighty an instrument of obedience. It brings for admittance to the very door of our heart an affection, which once seated upon its throne, will either subordinate every previous inmate, or bid it away."⁷

- In light of gospel joy, we set our desire for love on the Father who loves us perfectly and unconditionally at the cost of his very Son, and not on fleeting and destructive romantic or sexual encounters.

⁶ *Confessions*, trans. R.S. Pine-Coffin (New York: Penguin, 1961): 181 (IX, 1). (Emphasis added.)

⁷ *Expulsive Power*, 50

- In light of gospel joy, we set our desire for approval on the Master who says, “Well done, good and faithful servant,” and not on the vagaries of career advancement or popularity.
- In light of gospel joy, we set our desire for security on the King who rules with perfect wisdom, goodness, and power, and not on bank accounts, markets, or our vain attempts to control our lives.
- In light of gospel joy, we prioritize our desire for comfort below our desire for Christlikeness, so that when troubles come, we can still give thanks rather than complain.

In the words of the prophet Isaiah,

*“Come, all you who are thirsty,
 come to the waters;
 and you who have no money,
 come, buy and eat!
 Come, buy wine and milk
 without money and without cost.
² Why spend money on what is not bread,
 and your labor on what does not satisfy?
 Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good,
 and you will delight in the richest of fare.”*

ISAIAH 55:1-2

PASSAGES FOR FURTHER STUDY

- ☐ Isaiah 55:1-2
- ☐ Psalm 37:1-4
- ☐ 1 John 2:15-17
- ☐ John 7:14-19

DOING THE WORD

Now that we've hit the heart of the matter, we have important work to do. First, we must identify the wrong (or wrongly placed or wrongly ordered) desire. Then, we must expel that desire by setting our hearts on a new, godly, gospel desire. Until we understand why we do what we do, it is unlikely we will see any lasting fruit. Take the time you need to dig beneath the surface of your heart so that you truly and comprehensively understand what desire motivates it.

First, let's make sure we understand the difference between wrong desires, wrongly placed desires, and wrongly ordered desires. As you look back on your life (even if you have to go back a ways), where do you see an example of each? Be specific.

As you turn to the area you're focusing on in this lesson, which do you think is at work—a wrong, wrongly ordered, or wrongly placed desire? Why do you think that?

How does the gospel of Christ Jesus, when rightly considered, powerfully expel that desire with a new, better, and truly satisfying affection? That is, how will delight in God, our “sovereign joy,” diminish the power of your sinful desire? What aspects of the gospel especially speak to it?

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HOW WE CHANGE

LESSON SIX **CHOICES**

HEARING THE WORD

In the last five lessons, we have attempted to dig deep beneath the surface to the root of our behavior. Whether we like to admit it or not, every choice we make springs from the heart: the desires that lead us to choose as we do, shaped by how we think and feel about the Word and the world. Even when we're not conscious of our thoughts, feelings, or desires, they express themselves undeniably in our habits and character.

Hopefully, we now have a better sense of how to change our thoughts, feelings, and desires, so that our behavior changes accordingly. At the same time, and as we keep reminding ourselves, this process isn't neat and linear. It is messy, disordered, and "atmospheric." What that means for this lesson is that we can't ignore our actions, simply letting the change of heart drive the change of behavior. We will often have to make conscious choices to obey God *before* the thoughts, feelings, and desires have fully transformed us. These decisions, as we'll see, will serve to reinforce the change of heart we're seeking.

To get us started, let's meditate on the rest of the passage we studied a few lessons ago:

Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires. ¹³ Do not offer any part of yourself to sin as an instrument of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer every part of yourself to him as an instrument of righteousness. ¹⁴ For sin shall no longer be your master, because you are not under the law, but under grace.

ROMANS 6:12-14

Teaching: What does God want me to *understand*? (What does this passage mean? to its original audience? for us today? What does this passage tell me, explicitly or implicitly, about the character of God?)

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Rebuking: What does God want me to *repent of*? (As I examine myself in light of this passage, what sinful behaviors, thoughts, feelings, or idols do I need to confess and repent of?)

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Correcting: What does God want me to *do*? (Is there anything this passage tells me I should think, feel, or believe? Is there a command to be obeyed?)

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Training: How does the *gospel* motivate my new obedience to Christ? (How does this passage point to Jesus and the gospel? Is there a promise to believe? How will that promise encourage and sustain me in my new obedience?)

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According to Paul, what choice must we make in light of our new identity in Christ? What might that look like practically?

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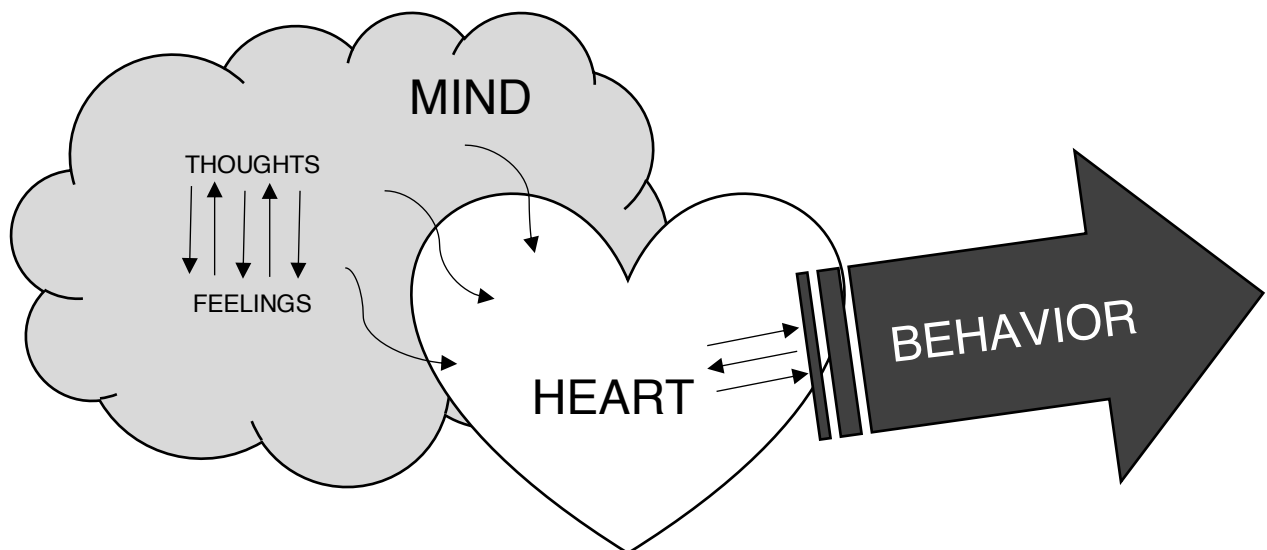
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In this short passage, Paul offers us clear instruction as to how to behave in light of our salvation in Christ. We saw in the first part of this passage (back in lesson three) that we must consider what we know. In particular, we must count ourselves dead to sin, now that we are alive to God. When we immerse our minds and hearts in that truth, it produces new desires within us—specifically, the desire to please God in all our choices. Therefore—in light of the glorious gospel truth—we must not let sin rule our lives any longer. God has given us everything we need for a godly life (2 Peter 1:3), and the implication is that we will actually *lead* godly lives going forward.

We might update our picture of how we change according to what we've learned so far. Our thoughts and feelings, constantly reinforcing each other, create the atmosphere in which our deepest desires form. From these, in turn, spring the choices we make.



INSTRUMENTS OF WICKEDNESS OR RIGHTEOUSNESS

Whenever we act, we choose to offer our bodies either as instruments of wickedness or instruments of righteousness. If we let sin reign in our flesh, giving into evil desires, we will choose poorly. If, however, we let the gospel reshape our desires, remembering that we are “those who have been brought from death to life,” we will choose to please God instead, offering ourselves wholly to him as living sacrifices in an act of spiritual worship (see Romans 12:1-2).

Notice how closely Paul ties the body to the heart in this passage. Based on our desires, we will either use the members of our body to serve sin or our Savior. We quite literally “embody” our will, enacting our desires in our behavior. Our behavior thus reveals our desires, calling attention to wrong—or simply wrongly ordered—desires. When our choices reveal evil desires, we must do the hard work of digging down to the roots to see the desire transformed. Grace, as Paul reminds us in verse 14, is our new master. We are willing servants of the Lord of the gospel, because his yoke is easy and his burden light (Matthew 11:30).

So what do we do when we choose poorly? We repent, believe and obey. When we *repent*, we acknowledge that we offered some part of ourselves to sin as an instrument of wickedness. Perhaps we’ve offered our eyes to sin by leering at a member of the opposite sex, or our feet to sin by traveling to a place we know will bring temptation, or our mouth to sin by speaking slanderously of a coworker, or our hands to sin by grabbing the toy we want from the kid who had it. (Okay, hopefully that last one isn’t true of you anymore.) Then we *believe*, meditating on the gospel truth that we’ve been brought from death to life—that we now live under grace, not the threat of law—in order to transform our desires. We take fresh delight in Christ. Finally, we *obey*, offering the offending member of our body back to God as an instrument of righteousness. A short prayer could express our new desire and resolve: “Lord, I just offered my mouth to sin as an instrument of wickedness in sharing that bit of juicy gossip about my neighbor. I repent of my sin. I want to offer my mouth to you as an instrument of righteousness now. I will only speak what is true, necessary, and edifying.”

But notice, in order to obey, we must actually act. We must embody the new desire, purified by the gospel. It is not enough to pray, expressing a desire to change, as in the example above. We must now speak differently. When the coworker annoys us, we offer no gossip to coworkers, not even a suggestive eyeroll for the benefit of those around us. Instead, we offer a brief prayer for the offending colleague, that God would give grace to them. We stop offering ourselves to sin as instruments of wickedness, yes, but then we press on to offer ourselves positively to God as instruments of righteousness.

PUT-OFFS AND PUT-ONS

Paul makes this point famously in Ephesians 4:22-24 by using the analogy of one’s wardrobe:

You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires;²³ to be made new in the attitude of your minds;²⁴ and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.

In turning from sin, we “put off” the old self with its old behaviors, like a person discarding a tattered old shirt from bygone days. (Notice, by the way, that the old self has been corrupted by “deceitful desires.” To change behavior, we must focus on the heart!) Then, renewing our desires through the life of the mind, we put on the new self, clothing ourselves with God-given robes of righteousness and holiness. We do not simply overcome vice, but cultivate virtue, like a gardener pulling weeds so she can plant flowers.

In the rest of Ephesians 4, Paul offers a series of examples of the “put-off/put-on” idea.

- We put off falsehood, and put on truthfulness (verse 25).
- We put off stealing, and put on hard work that allows for generosity (verse 28).
- We put off unwholesome talk, and put on gracious speech that builds others up (verse 29).
- We put off bitterness, anger, slander, and malice, and put on kindness, compassion, and forgiveness (verse 32).

One tremendous weapon in our battle against sin is searching God’s Word for the corresponding put-on. Simply telling yourself over and over again to stop sinning will produce little fruit. Rather than focusing on what we shouldn’t do, we would do better to set about doing what we should do. This redirects our eyes away from the sin (and temptation) and toward what pleases God.

We will not see lasting change without making concrete changes in our behavior. This is true partly because our behaviors reinforce—and help transform—our desires. I recognize this is exactly the opposite of all that’s been said so far in this study, but I’ve already confessed the process is messy, circular, and atmospheric, not straightforward! As God begins to change our affections, so that we truly desire to please him and not our flesh, we develop new habits. Those same habits, however, help our godly desires—our new “tastes,” so to speak—to stick.

For example, when I made the switch from soda to sparkling water, what happened? I had a new desire, prioritizing my health over my sweet tooth. However, that deep desire for health hadn’t changed the surface desires just yet. I still *wanted* the sugar. This is why so many diets and exercise regimens go astray! In order to complete the change, I needed to embody my new desire in concrete actions. I gave up sugar completely (not even fruit!) for two weeks in order to break the old habit, enjoying my water instead. By the time those two weeks were over, I couldn’t even drink soda anymore because it was too sickeningly sweet. In fact, even some of the sparkling water flavors I tried seemed a tad too sweet for me, even though they have no sugar or sweetener in them! A new habit, a new set of choices, reinforced the desires I had sought to develop.

It will rarely be that easy or that quick when it comes to mortifying sin, but the process is the same. A husband feels little love for his wife. He has a deep desire to honor the marriage covenant, but his surface desires haven’t changed. He’s not attracted to her, and she often irritates him. However, he chooses to put on a new habit, and begins speaking words of life-giving affirmation over her, and kicks up the romance several notches. In time, he discovers his “tastes” have changed. What had been an act of duty now becomes an act of desire.

Or, to take a more common example, a woman finds Bible study tedious and uninteresting. She wants to know God better, to experience true intimacy with him, but that doesn’t change the fact that she doesn’t enjoy her times of private worship. Nevertheless, she chooses to put on a new habit. Before she begins reading, she prays intentionally for God to incline her heart to his Word, open her eyes to see wonderful things in the passage before her, unite her heart to fear his Name, and satisfy her with his love.¹ She then commits to careful study and deep meditation. In time, although she still has the occasional “dry season,” she discovers she delights in God’s Word, and looks forward to her time in

¹ For this memorable IOUs acronym, see John Piper, *When I Don’t Desire God: How to Fight for Joy*, 10th anniv. ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013): 151.

meditation as much as anything else in the day. Her new habits reinforced her deep desire to know God more, helping the transformation set like concrete.

COMMUNITY FOCUS

As we close this study, we must take a moment to emphasize the monumental importance of community in the process of change. Though our culture preaches rugged individualism, the church is no place for lone rangers. Change is a community project. We need each other. Indeed, this is the whole argument of Paul David Tripp's excellent book *Instruments in the Redeemer's Hands*. The subtitle says it all: "People in need of change helping people in need of change." In summing up the biblical model for change, he says, "*God transforms people's lives as people bring his Word to others.*"² As Paul says in Ephesians 4:15, we speak the truth of the gospel in love to one another, so that we grow spiritually *as a body*—that is, corporately. Without a community of believers encouraging and exhorting us, we may remain unaware of sinful blind spots or harden ourselves in habitual, unrepentant sin. We may experience deep emotions but not know how to process them without someone pursuing our heart. We may grow discouraged when progress is slow, or simply not know where to turn in Scripture for put-ons, gospel truths, or stirring images that help us feel what we know. We need each other.

In a terrifying passage, God reminds us of how true, biblical community keeps us from unbelief, sin, and hardening our hearts to God's gracious advances:

See to it, brothers and sisters, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God.¹³ But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called "Today," so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness.

HEBREWS 3:12-13

May this passage serve as a manifesto for your church community going forward!

PASSAGES FOR FURTHER STUDY

- ☐ Ephesians 4:20-24
- ☐ Hebrews 3:7-19
- ☐ Romans 7:14-25
- ☐ 1 Corinthians 6:12-20

² *Instruments in the Redeemer's Hands* (Phillipsburg, PA: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2002): 19. (Emphasis original.)

DOING THE WORD

In this last lesson of the unit, we'll seek to put together everything we've learned so far as we develop an action plan for change. At the same time, we'll discuss the vital importance of community in the process of change.

Read through different passages that address your sin issue. (If you don't know where to start, you can usually find a list of topics in a good Study Bible.) How do those passages define the put-off? What is the corresponding put-on? Is the put-on what you expected, or did it surprise you?

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What habits can you practice forming now in order to reinforce your changing desires? Be as specific and exhaustive as possible.

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Write out a prayer of repentance-belief-obedience. Use Paul's language of instruments of wickedness and righteousness to help you develop the prayer. Think carefully through what facets of the gospel will most speak to your heart in this area.

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How has the community of believers helped you mature as a Christian so far? What can your community do to help you keep growing in grace now?

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