

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Change in Christ, Part 2

Romans 6:15-7:6

Introduction:

A. Jeff's former elder shows the danger of not changing

John Wooden was a highly successful basketball coach at UCLA. He won an unprecedented 10 NCAA championships. And he was loved by his players not only because of their success, but because of the wisdom he imparted to them. Some years ago I hear him speak, and he noted that, "Failure is not fatal, but failure to change might be."

If you were here last week, you heard me share the tragic story of my former senior pastor. He failed to make necessary changes, and it led to a problem with alcohol, an inappropriate relationship with another woman, and ultimately, the destruction of his family and ministry. "Failure is not fatal, but failure to change might be." We've all know of pastors with these kinds of stories. This week I searched on Google for sites with both the terms "pastor" and "arrested." I got over 26 million results.

And the problem is not limited to pastors. Most of us have also seen or heard about a solid layperson who made some really poor choices that led to destruction. At a previous church I attended, I met one of the elders as he taught a series in my Sunday School. He had a very winsome way about him. He was loving towards his audience, honest about his shortcomings, and had great Biblical insights on relationships. He was friendly as I chatted with him after Sunday School. Later on, I found out he was considered a top Christian counselor in the area.

Sadly, he made some choices that led to an inappropriate relationship with a client. And rather than lose his license and deal with the fallout with his family and at church, he took his life. I went to his funeral. I saw his parents, experiencing the pain of outliving their son. I saw his wife and two beautiful daughters, with tears of deep sorrow. Makes me want to tear up just thinking about it.

B. "Why change?" and "How do I change in Christ?"

I'm sure this man didn't want to finish his life that way. He started well, a gifted counselor used by God to help many grow spiritually. But he did not finish well. Perhaps you

can think of a thing or two in your life that needs to change if you are to finish well. Something that increases your distance with God and people. Something that could even unravel your life, if you don't change it.

Now unfortunately, as you know, real change is often very difficult. Sin is still a powerful force in our lives; its why the Bible has so many warnings to be watchful and compares our Christian life to agonizing to win a race. Counselor Larry Crabb, in his book *Inside Out*, describes our change in Christ in this way, "The process of change is something like a walk across America. Every step is progress but there's such a long way to go. The trick is to be encouraged with how far you've come without letting pride weaken your determination to continue on."¹

Change is hard, and obstacles can crop up even in unexpected places. Even God's grace, when thought about wrongly, can hinder change. We, like the Roman believers of Paul's day, know Romans chapters 1-5. We know that salvation is a gift received by coming to Jesus in faith. And when you enjoy God's love and have every sin forgiven, past, present, and future, it can make you wonder, "Why not keep living as I please? It seems like I can indulge in some sin because all my sins are forgiven in Jesus. So why change?"

And this potential lack of motivation is not our only obstacle to change. Even when you are motivated to make a change, you have to answer another difficult question: how do I change in Christ? Or in other words, how does one grow spiritually? Now there is perhaps no place in the Bible that answers these questions with greater detail than Romans chapters 6 through 8, which cover the topic of spiritual growth, or as it is sometimes called, sanctification. So if you've got a Bible, please turn to Romans chapter 6, verse 15. Romans 6:15. As we examine Romans we're going to consider two realities that can help us answer the questions, "Why change?" and "How do I change in Christ?" These two realities are real things we must remember day after day after day. Realities so important that God can use them to help you make important changes. Changes that can help you run your race well, to its very end.

C. Review - remember that sin is out to get you

¹ *Inside Out*, 195.

Now before we cover our two realities this morning, I want to refresh what we covered last Sunday. We looked at Romans 6:1-14, which has two additional realities to help us change in Christ. One reality from last week is that sin is out to get you. As Christians, we're still vulnerable to sin. And when we sin, we are choosing slavery and death. It's like a fisher and a fish. The fisher is like sin; it will dangle some delicious looking bait in front of you. Sometimes the bait will be a desire for something bad, like a perverted sexual desire. Other times it will be an "over-desire" for something good, like wanting career success so badly that you're willing to sacrifice your health, family, and morals to get it. Either way, when we bite down on that delicious-looking bait, there's a hook underneath. We think we're about to feast, but instead sin feasts on us. And when you can remember, day after day, that sin is out to get you, it will help you to change in Christ.

D. Review - remember that you are radically connected to Christ

The second reality we covered last week is that you are radically connected to Christ. We talked about how believers somehow enter into Christ's death and resurrection. So we enjoy His victory over sin and death. We are free from the penalty of sin, free to no longer be a slave to sin, and one day, free from the presence of sin itself, as we enjoy an indescribably glorious future with God in eternity. As those radically connected to Christ, we are placed where God's love is strongest, in His Son. And when we remember that we are radically connected to Christ, it can help us change for the better.

I. God must be king (6:15-23)

A. You have only two king choices (sin or God)

So let's now consider our first new reality this morning that can help us change. We need to remember that God must be king. God must be king. Please follow along with me as I read Romans 6:15. "¹⁵ What then? Are we to sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means!" Here in verse 15 we see Paul ask a similar question to the one he asked in 6:1. He asks in verse 15, "Are we to sin?" And his answer is an emphatic, "By no means!" We cannot continue to sin, we must change.

Please look with me at verses 16-19 as Paul explains why we can't continue to sin. "¹⁶ Do you not know that if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to

righteousness? ¹⁷ But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed, ¹⁸ and, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness. ¹⁹ I am speaking in human terms, because of your natural limitations. For just as you once presented your members as slaves to impurity and to lawlessness leading to more lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness leading to sanctification.”

Look back at verse 16 - here we see that believers are slaves to the one we obey. And verse 16 notes there are only two options, be a slave to sin or to righteousness. Look again at verse 17. Here we see that before you were in Christ, your only choice was to be a slave to sin. And verse 18 shows us that thankfully, in Christ we've been set free from sin. We're now free to make God our king. Now although the passage says we only have two options for how to live, we like to think we have three. We like to think we can 1) live a really bad life and become a slave to sin, 2) live our life as we please, in control of it, or 3) live with God as king.

We'll see the foolishness of that second option as we continue in the passage. Please follow along as I read verses 20-21. “²⁰ When you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. ²¹ But what fruit were you getting at that time from the things of which you are now ashamed? The end of those things is death.”

Paul is saying, “You didn't used to just live as you please and everything was fine.” When God was not king, you were free from righteousness, but you were a slave of sin. So Paul is saying, “If you think you can just live as you want and be okay, you're tragically mistaken. There's no such thing as freedom to just do whatever you want.” When we try to have that type of “freedom” it comes with an awful price. You become a slave of sin, no longer in control. And as verse 21 notes, the fruit of that slavery is shame and death, the ruin of your life. Author Philip Yancy describes it this way, “Paradoxically, a headlong pursuit of freedom often turns into bondage: insist on the freedom to lose your temper whenever you feel anger, and you will soon find yourself a slave to rage. In modern life, those things that teenagers do to express their freedom - tobacco, alcohol, drugs, pornography - become their relentless masters.”²

B. God's kingship brings freedom

² *What's So Amazing about Grace*, 187.

Please follow along with me in verses 22 and 23 as we examine the better choice. “²² But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the fruit you get leads to sanctification and its end, eternal life. ²³ For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Look at verse 22. Again, we see our only other option is to be a slave of God. And when we are, it leads to our sanctification, our spiritual growth, to living with more love and health. And ultimately, we’ll enjoy eternal life with God.

Look again at verse 22. For the second time in our passage, Paul has connected slavery to God with a form of freedom. This is hard for us to accept in our culture. As Pastor Craig Barnes says it, “Freedom is found not in escaping limits, but in discovering the goodness of life within them. Our culture tells us just the opposite.”³ One of the paradoxes of Christian faith is when you make God king, you’re more free. Free to receive God’s love and pass it on to others. Free to enjoy grace and forgiveness, even when you really blow it. Free to join with God as He works in the world. Free to no longer be enslaved to sins that were destroying you. Free to live the kind of life that entices others to grow in Christ.

God is our creator; He knows what we’re designed to do. If I try to use my cell phone as a hammer, it won’t work well. That’s not what it was designed for. And if you try to run your own life and become a slave to sin, you’re not respecting your design. And over time, things will unravel. But on the other hand, if you respect your design and recognize, day after day, that God must be king, things will work so much better. God is pointing us to life when He calls us to make Him king.

C. God’s kingship means we can’t demand

Now although things work better for us when we make God king, that does not mean our circumstances always work out the way we want. Many of us have experienced an ongoing painful circumstance - chronic physical pain, or perhaps a parent or child that wounds you deeply, over and over. When we have something painful in our lives that won’t go away, we are in greater danger of failing to live out verse 22, which calls us to be slaves of God. Now God is a good king, so He wants you to cry out to Him for help when you’re in pain, and He loves to

³ *The Pastor as Minor Poet*, 96.

show His grace to be sufficient in those circumstances. However, if your desire for relief leads to making *demands* of God, you are no longer living as God's slave. When you make demands of God, you have revolted as His subject. You're no longer making God king.

Larry Crabb discusses the danger of demanding things from God in *Inside Out*. He notes, "Demandingness is a serious problem partly because it rarely feels like a problem. We may actually feel stronger and more alive when we pursue our demands and rehearse to ourself their credibility."⁴ Have you ever had that sort of inner dialogue, where you angrily accused God for failing to do something He *must* do? Maybe you pointed out to God your faithful prayer, your responsible effort in the situation. As Crabb describes it, "Many of us who are thirsty come to Christ for water - in fervent prayer, renewed commitment, and zealous service - but motivating our appeal is a demand for relief rather than a determination, come what may, to believe, to hope, and to love."⁵ When our service to God includes an attitude of demanding, it will stunt our ability to change in Christ. Our esteemed pastor, Dave, told me that he has made it a practice to remind himself, "There is a God, and it is not Dave." It's just a way to keep reminding himself that if he wants to change for the better, God must be king.

II. **Grace is the better motivator (6:15; 6:23 - 7:6)**

A. **The law cannot properly motivate**

It's not easy to avoid a demanding spirit in hard times. And even when circumstances are good, it's still not easy to make God king, day after day. We're going to need a powerful motivator to help us. Let's look together at chapter 7, starting in verse 1. "7 Or do you not know, brothers—for I am speaking to those who know the law—that the law is binding on a person only as long as he lives? 2 For a married woman is bound by law to her husband while he lives, but if her husband dies she is released from the law of marriage. 3 Accordingly, she will be called an adulteress if she lives with another man while her husband is alive. But if her husband dies, she is free from that law, and if she marries another man she is not an adulteress."

Please look back at verse 1. Paul notes here that a person is only bound to the law only as long as he lives. To clarify this point, he makes an analogy between the law and marriage in

⁴ *Inside Out*, 159.

⁵ *Ibid*, 101.

verses 2 and 3. He notes that in a marriage, a wife is only bound while her husband lives. If he dies, she is no longer under the law of marriage.

So let's look at verse 4 to see how this analogy relates to our relationship to the law. ⁴ Likewise, my brothers, you also have died to the law through the body of Christ, so that you may belong to another, to him who has been raised from the dead, in order that we may bear fruit for God." Paul is saying in verse 4, as we talked about last week, that we've somehow participated in Christ's death. And because we have participated in His death, like Christ, we are no longer under the condemnation or jurisdiction of the law. We're dead to it.

Now let's look at verse 5 and see why Paul wants us to know this. ⁵ For while we were living in the flesh, our sinful passions, aroused by the law, were at work in our members to bear fruit for death." We see here in this verse that the law is not a strong enough motivation. It's not that the law is bad. It's just that our sinful desires took advantage of the law.

Sometimes our sinful desires make us want to rebel against God's law. There's something in us that doesn't want anyone telling us how to live. The classic example of this comes in Augustine's book *Confessions*. As a teenager, Augustine stole a bunch of overripe pears from a neighbor's tree. He pointed out that his family had plenty of higher quality pears in their vineyard. And he wasn't even hungry when he stole them. He barely took a bite and just threw the pears to some hogs. Later Augustine determined that he stole the pears just because it was forbidden, just for the sake of evil. As embarrassing as it is, probably all of us at some point have done something wrong, just because it was forbidden.

But what about those times when we resist the urge to disobey, when we follow the law? Even when we obey, we can still become enslaved. For sinful desires can cause our obedience to the law to slip into legalism. When we focus on how we're following the law, it can lead to pride and judging others. We can become like the Pharisees if we're not careful.

I learned this lesson the hard way early in my marriage. When Stephanie and I got married I worked as an auditor. We got married in January, the beginning of auditing busy season. So I was working a ton of hours at a job I did not enjoy at all to get us on good financial footing. So one night, as I'm driving home from work, I start thinking about my "many" contributions to our marriage. I think about how I'm working more hours at my job, how I'm

making more money, how I did a lot of housework that week, and to top it off, I even talked to Steph a long time about a frustration from her job, even though I didn't want to. This beginning husband thought he was bringing an early 2000s Tim Duncan-like level of excellence to the craft of marriage.

So when I get home that night I see Steph reading on the couch. Now she's been working all day too, and was contributing to our marriage in a ton of ways. But that didn't stop me from thinking, "I can't believe she's not working on dinner, after I've done all this." And since I was hung up on what Steph "should" be doing, I didn't feel like making dinner. And believe it or not, this beginning husband might have made a little comment suggesting that she should be making the dinner; and that little comment might have led to an argument. In the end, my legalism led to distance and pain in my relationship with Steph that night. Like a Pharisee, I was blind to how my legalism was such a poor motivator. On the car ride home that night, I was ironically thinking of all *my* wonderful contributions while at the same time convincing myself that *I* was so unselfish. When your motivation is just following the law, you're not going to be empowered to love as you should. You'll be self absorbed instead, as you focus on how *you're* doing.

B. Grace is the right motivator

So what kind of motivator can help us to love and to recognize that God must be king, even in difficult circumstances? Our passage this morning started in verse 15 by asking, "Are we to sin because we are not under law but under grace?" The question shows we are no longer under the law. We are now under grace, which brings us to our last reality. Grace is the better motivator. Grace is the better motivator.

Grace is all over this passage. We read that we used to be slaves of sin, experiencing shame and separation from God. Until Christ came and set us free from sin and death. Christ came not only to set us free from sin's penalty. He came to bring us to Himself and help us be fruitful for Him. Look again at how verse 4 of chapter 7 describes it. "4 Likewise, my brothers, you also have died to the law through the body of Christ, so that you may belong to another, to him who has been raised from the dead, in order that we may bear fruit for God." We were set free from the law, not for immoral living, but to bear fruit for God.

And please now look at verse 6 of chapter 7. "6 But now we are released from the law, having died to that which held us captive, so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit and not in

the old way of the written code.” We are those who have experienced grace, and serve in the new way of the Spirit. The work of the Holy Spirit in our lives is a powerful example of God’s grace. And Chapter 8 of Romans is where Paul really gets into discussing the work of the Holy Spirit, and it just so happens that Dave is preaching that text. So, it will be up to him to explain the mysterious work of the Holy Spirit in our lives :) All I will say at this point is that the Spirit is always there to help do the work of change in our lives.

One way the Spirit works is by helping you see that God’s grace is a better motivator. I’d like to share a story of grace from an old preacher named Paris Reidhead.⁶ It’s supposedly a true story from the 1850s. After making a fortune on gold in California, an Englishman decided to return home. He traveled overland to New Orleans, where he was going to catch a ship. He had some time before his ship set sail, so he walked the city, ending up at the slave auction. A young, beautiful girl was on the auction block. And two seedy characters kept bidding against each other for the woman, all the while talking about the disgusting things they would do with her. It turned the stomach of the rich Englishman. So as the bidding got really high, he doubled the highest bid. People were shocked, as this was the highest bid ever at the auction. The Englishman paid the hefty bill, and walked over to the young girl standing on the auction block. She shot him a look of hatred and spit in his face, hissing, “I hate you.” After wiping his face he took her by the hand and led her to an office building. She couldn’t read and didn’t understand what was happening, as the man paid some money and received some papers. He gave her the papers, saying, “These are your manumission papers, they set you free.” “I hate you!” she hissed. He said, “You don’t understand, these papers set you free, no one owns you anymore.”

She said, “What?! You paid twice as much for me as anyone else sold in that place. I don’t believe you.” He says, “Yes, these papers give you your freedom.” “Stop mister!” she cries, “Do you mean to say that you bought me to set me free?” “Yes,” he says, “I bought you to set you free.” Tears stream down her face. She falls to her knees, puts her hands around his boots and through tears she sobs, “You bought me to set me free. You bought me to set me free. You paid more for me than anyone has ever paid before, just to set me free.” As tears continue to

⁶ It was from a sermon of his on Hebrews 1-2.

stream she looks up at him and exclaims, “Oh sir, all I want in life is to be your slave. You bought me, to set me free.”

Conclusion:

A. To change in Christ, we must remember four realities

If you’ve trusted in Christ, this is your story too. Jesus bought you to set you free. He longs to help you make changes that will keep you from spiraling out of control. Changes that will make you more loving, more inspiring to others, more alive. He wants to help you remember, day after day after day, that sin is out to get you, you are radically connected to Christ, God must be king, and grace is the better motivator.

B. God is building you into a palace

For no matter how much you’ve screwed up in the past, how many changes you’ve failed to make, that doesn’t have to be the end of your story. Today is a new day, for we are the people of grace. When I heard Tim Keller preach on Romans 6, he shared a quote from C.S. Lewis. Lewis says, “Imagine yourself as a living house. God comes in to rebuild that house. At first, perhaps you can understand what He is doing. He is getting the drains right and stopping the leaks in the roof and so on: you knew that those jobs needed doing so you are not surprised. But presently, he starts knocking the house about in a way that hurts abominably and does not seem to make sense. What on earth is He up to? The explanation is that He is building quite a different house from the one you thought of - throwing out a new wing here, putting on an extra floor there, running up towers, making courtyards. You thought you were going to be made into a decent little cottage: but He is building a palace, He intends to come and live in it Himself.”

Change is not easy, but as God builds you into a glorious palace, it’ll be worth it. Don’t hinder His construction in your life. Welcome His change, offer yourself to Him, completely. After all, He bought you, to set you free. He bought you, to set you free.