

GRACE PART 2: THE NEW WAY OF THE SPIRIT

This is the second article in a series on Grace. In the first article we looked at the old way of written code (Romans 7:6). Now we'll consider the new way of the spirit. First we'll recap what we said about the law.

We started well with our conversion: Repentance, faith and new birth. However, through the law, the “shoulds”, we soon became aware of our need to change. But the harder we tried to live up to the “shoulds”, the more we failed. Romans 7v15f: I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do... 18 I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do, this I keep on doing... 21 So I find this law at work: When I want to do good, evil is right there with me. For in my inner being I delight in God's law; but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members. What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?

The harder we try to keep the rules the more we find out we can't do it. This turns out to be the purpose of the law. It stirs up the sin in us and shows us that we can't sort ourselves out. The law confronts us with our need for a saviour. We'll never live a Godly life by trying to keep all the rules of the law. God's solution is counter-intuitive, to set us free from the rules. Without the law, sin has nothing to rebel against and loses its power. When we're born again, we're no longer under the rules. We've been totally forgiven all the sins we'll ever commit. We're no longer under the law, we're free. Romans 7v4-6: So, my brothers, you also died to the law through the body of Christ, that you might belong to another, to him who was raised from the dead, in order that we might bear fruit to God. For when we were controlled by the sinful nature, the sinful passions aroused by the law were at work in our bodies, so that we bore fruit for death. But now, by dying to what once bound us, we have been released from the law so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit, and not in the old way of the written code.

We said that this freedom was radical. When Paul found out that believers in Corinth were sleeping with prostitutes, he reminded them of their freedom. Instead of laying down the law he gave them good reasons to change their behaviour. We also saw that freedom from the law is not optional, it's vital, Galatians 5v1-4: It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery. Mark my words! I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all. Again I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obligated to obey the whole law. You who are trying to be justified by law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace.

If we live under the law, in other words if we try hard by our own effort to keep the rules, the expectations and the “shoulds”, then Christ is of no value to us at all. We have been alienated from Christ and have fallen away from grace. The role of the law is to show us what a mess we are in and that we cannot sort ourselves out. The Christian life is absolutely not about trying harder to be good. So in summary:



+ +

We also said this freedom was a scary thing. It's unknown. It demands that we take responsibility for our lives instead of being passive and blaming everything else but ourselves. If we didn't have the threat of the rules, how would we keep the beast in the basement? If I throw off the rules and do whatever I like, I'd get locked up!

Romans 7v5-6: For when we were controlled by the sinful nature, the sinful passions aroused by the law were at work in our bodies, so that we bore fruit for death. But now, by dying to what once bound us, we have been released from the law so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit, and not in the old way of the written code.

DESIRE

In this article we're going to consider the alternative to the law, the new way of the Spirit. If trying hard to keep rules only makes matters worse, how do we become like Christ? The old way of the written code was the "shoulds". The new way of the spirit transforms our wants. The old way was duty, demand, threat, guilt, expectation and fear. The new way is freedom directed by love, goodness, hope, joy and faith.

There are two ways to change someone's life. One is to control them externally with rules using the promise of reward and the threat of punishment. The other way is to change them inwardly by changing what they want. If we want the right things, the rules become irrelevant. I do not need a rule telling me to eat more chocolate truffles. I'm already highly motivated to eat chocolate truffles. I love them. If we want the things of God more than anything else, then we'll do anything to get them. This is the way of holiness, that what God wants and what we want come together.

To talk about desire and holiness in the same sentence feels odd. So often it feels like the 'religious' people are telling us that to be holy we must squash our desires. Desire will make us do bad things. Desire will get a hold of us. Desire will ruin us. People who say this are normally running in fear from their own inner experience. We all know about the beast in the basement: those frightening, dark and depraved and yet enticing desires that run around inside us. I know I'm capable of fantasising the most awful things. I'd be utterly humiliated if people could see inside my head.

Freedom feels very risky. But the answer is not to run away from desire. To try and lock our desires in the basement of our lives makes us grey, lifeless and dull. It also means that when our desires do finally overcome our sense of duty they'll explode out even more disastrously in some spectacular failure or leak out as bitterness or depression or foster ugly, angry, judgemental self-righteousness.

The way of holiness is not to flee from desire but to let God transform our desires so that we want him more and more and sin less and less. The holy person is not grey, dull, empty and lifeless. The holy person is the most passionate person you'll meet. The person who has caught a glimpse of the real treasure is not easily seduced by the cheap imitations of the world that actually turn out to be hollow, deadly deceptions. This holy passion comes out graphically in the Psalms. Try Psalm 42 or 84:

As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When can I go and meet with God? Deep calls to deep in the roar of your waterfalls...
How lovely is your dwelling place, O LORD Almighty! My soul yearns, even faints, for the courts of the LORD; my heart and my flesh cry out for the living God.

Holy people are desperate people. But people who are desperate for God will be satisfied. There's little that God treasures in his children more than a passion for him. So the alternative to the law is to want God. It is possible to want God, and to want him so badly that you're willing to forego any lesser desire that would keep you from the true treasure. This is the passionate, full, abundant and overflowing life that Jesus meant for us. The problem with the hedonist and the materialist isn't their desire but that they sell out so cheaply to the world and settle for such paltry pleasure.

Thomas Merton brilliantly describes the man whose sold out to the world: The simplest definition of freedom is this: it means the ability to do the will of God. To be able to resist His will is not to be free. In sin there is no true freedom.

+ +

Surrounding sin there are certain goods – in sins of the flesh there are, for instance, pleasures of the flesh. But it is not these pleasures that are evil. They are good, and they are willed by God and even when someone takes those pleasures in a way that is not God's will, God still wills that those pleasures should be felt. But though the pleasures in themselves are good, the direction of the will to them under circumstances that are against the will of God, becomes evil. And because the direction of the will is evil it cannot reach the mark which the will intends. Therefore it defeats itself. And therefore there is ultimately no happiness in any act of sin.

You fool! You have really done what you did not want to do! God has left you with the pleasure, because the pleasure also was his will: but you've neglected the happiness he wanted to give you along with the pleasure, or perhaps the greater happiness he intended for you without the pleasure and beyond it and above it! You have eaten the rind and thrown away the orange. You have kept the paper that was nothing but a wrapping and you have thrown away the case and the ring and the diamond. And now the pleasure – which has to end – is finished, you have nothing of the happiness that would have enriched you forever. If you had taken (or forsaken) the pleasure in the way God willed for the sake of your happiness, you would still possess the pleasure in your happiness, and it would be with you always and follow you everywhere in God's will. For it is impossible for a sane man to seriously regret an act that was consciously performed in union with God's will.

The Holy person is the person whose thoughts are shaped by God's thoughts, whose desires are shaped by God's desires, whose character is modelled on God's character, whose actions express God's intentions. So to become holy, we need God to transform our desires. We'll look at 6 ways he does this: revelation, love, conversion, a new heart, a transformed mind, a retrained body and a new power source.

REVELATION, LOVE AND CONVERSION

First one: revelation. Have you noticed in the gospel Jesus heals a lot of blind people? There's a good reason for that. Until we meet Jesus, we're all blind. In John 9, Jesus heals a blind man who then sees Jesus and worships him. Meanwhile, the religious onlookers don't want Jesus to be Lord and so refuse to see what the miracle proves. Jesus points out that true blindness isn't an inability to see physical reality but a refusal to see spiritual reality.

By contrast, when Jesus opens our spiritual eyes, everything looks different. In the first article we mentioned Matthew 13v44: The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field.

John Piper explains the parable like this: "Once we had no delight in God, and Christ was just a vague historical figure. What we enjoyed was food and friendships and productivity and investments and vacations and hobbies and games and reading and shopping and sex and sport and art and TV and travel ... but not God. He was an idea - even a good one - and a topic for discussion; but he was not a treasure of delight.

Then something miraculous happened. It was like the opening of the eyes of the blind during the golden dawn. First the stunned silence before the unspeakable beauty of holiness. Then a shock and a terror that we had actually loved the darkness. Then the settling stillness of joy that is at the soul's end. The quest is over. We would give anything if we might be granted to live in the presence of this glory forever and ever."

When Jesus opens our eyes to see the wonder of who he is and what he is calling us into, everything else looks cheap in comparison. As Paul says in Philippians 3v7-8: But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ...

The original Greek word which the NIV translates as rubbish is *Skubalon*. The King James is much closer by translating it as dung. When we really see what Jesus is inviting us into, the best of the world seems as dung in comparison. So the first way that Jesus transforms our desires is to open our eyes to see things as they really are.

The most wonderful thing we come to see is his love. This is the second way that God transforms us. I John 4v9-10, 19 sets it out like this: This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins... We love because he first loved us.

+ Love changes us. I have a friend who used to be a total lad. He was into clubbing and sleeping around. Then he became a Christian. Then he fell in love with a Christian girl who was into horses and dancing. Clubbing and sleeping around went out the window. My 'lad' friend could be found riding horses and learning ballroom dancing. +

God doesn't just love us, he likes us. He wants to be with us. He wants to be with us so badly that he's prepared to become a man, to be horrifically tortured and executed and to experience hell when we treated him with contempt so that we can be forgiven and brought back to him. When we start to grasp something of this love, it calls love out of us. We're changed. So we're changed by God's revelation and his love. The third way is by our conversion.

Becoming a Christian is not about learning to say "Jesus died on a cross to pay for my forgiveness" and trying to be nice to people. It's about seeing that sin isn't great fun. It sucks. It destroys us. It fits us for hell. When we see this we repent and turn away from it. It's about recognising that we're fickle and finite but God is true, good and infinite. In light of this we'd be an idiot to rely on ourselves and our own resources. Much better to trust God, to follow him and to depend on him. This is faith. As we turn to God and trust him he gives us new spiritual life. This is what it means to be born again. We turn to God and trust his wisdom and goodness more than our own. We believe his explanation of reality. If we really believe him, this changes the way we think about everything which in turn changes what we want. Perhaps we used to think getting rich would make us happy. God helped us to see that chasing money would just make us greedy and insecure and actually unhappy. Suddenly it didn't look so attractive any more. We started to see that selfless love was a better plan.

So we've seen that we're transformed by God opening our eyes, by loving us and by our conversion. We'll now think briefly about 3 ways he changes the different parts of our life: Giving us a new heart, transforming our mind and retraining our body.

HEART, MIND AND BODY

When we're born again we get a new heart. We certainly need one, Jeremiah 17v9: The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?

God doesn't give us heart surgery but a transplant, Ezekiel 36v26-27: I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.

By giving us a new heart and a new spirit he transforms us inwardly so we begin to want to do the godly thing. Jeremiah 31v31-34 looks forward to Jesus sending his Spirit: "The time is coming," declares the LORD, "when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them," declares the LORD. "This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time," declares the LORD. "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will a man teach his neighbour, or a man his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest," declares the LORD. "For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more."

So we know God and we have a heart knowledge of right or wrong. But God writing the law on our hearts didn't grab me as a good thing at first. Surely, I thought, that will just bury the law problem deeper inside. But that isn't what this passage of Jeremiah is saying. God is not giving us a new set of inner laws. God is giving us an inward desire to do the right thing. Our old nature was set on sin. Our new heart is set on God and his righteousness. Through our new birth, God gives us a heart to come after him. That's the new heart that God gives us, we want to go God's way. But whilst we get a new heart, we don't get a new mind. This is a good thing. If God changed everything at once without reference to us, what of us would be left? It would effectively be replacing us with someone else. Self-destruction is not the way of Jesus, it's Buddhism. God doesn't destroy us, he transforms us.

Until the time of our new birth we've lived in the kingdom of darkness where the Devil reigns. Because of that, our mind has been educated and trained to think and understand reality in some very unhelpful ways. Our

+ +

thoughts are a tangled mess of deeply entrenched truths, half truths and downright lies. You only have to look at the fact that most of the Christians in this country are trying to become holy through the law to see that.

Have you ever thought that God was harsh or unfair or doesn't really understand you? That's because somehow you've been sold a lie. And that lie affects how you relate to him. And how you relate to him affects how you relate to everything else. Because our thoughts are so mixed up, we need to have our thinking transformed, Romans 12v2: Do not conform any longer 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.

First we must decide that we're not going to drift along with the world any more. If we've been born again, we won't want to. The next step is to bring together our every day life with God and his word. This doesn't mean just studying the Bible. It's about letting God's word teach us how to live and then living by what he says to us. As God's word transforms our thinking, our life will change. Reading God's word is like giving your mind a shower in the pure water of God's thoughts. I know people who don't shower regularly. It's not good.

Here's an example of a lie that the devil traps us with, described by Thomas Merton: "The theology of the devil starts out with the principle: "Pleasure is sin". Then he goes on to work it the other way "All sin is pleasure". After that he points out pleasure is practically unavoidable and that we have a natural tendency to do things that please us, from which he reasons that all our natural tendencies are evil and that our nature is evil in itself. And he leads us to the conclusion that no-one can possibly avoid sin since pleasure is inescapable. After that, to make sure that no-one will try and escape or avoid sin, he adds that what is unavoidable cannot be a sin. The whole concept of sin is thrown out the window as irrelevant, and people decide that there is nothing left except to live for pleasure, and in that way pleasures that are naturally good become evil by de-ordination and lives are thrown away in unhappiness and sin."

When we see things like that the world starts to make more sense and our desire to escape its spell is strengthened. Thus our passion for God grows and our lust for the world shrinks. As we learn from God through both his word and the stuff of our life, he changes how we think. As our thinking changes, so our life changes.

We have a new heart. We are having our mind renewed. Our heart and mind are beginning to work together. However, we have an old body. We'll get a new one but not until Jesus returns to renew the whole of creation. In the meantime, this old body has been thoroughly conditioned by the world. It needs to be retrained. We've developed all manner of physical and sensual habits that don't help our new life. Many sins are things so familiar that they're an almost automatic responses. Our body rules over us. We feel lonely and instinctively turn to fantasy or sensuality or food for comfort. We feel overwhelmed and so we become tense and anxious. We feel wronged and lash out. We become afraid of what we might hear if there was silence and so we can't even walk down the street without an ipod. We wonder why we feel so harried and have trouble sleeping. We wonder why food loses its taste and sex loses its wonder and music loses its power to soothe and inspire.

The spiritual disciplines help us break habits and attachments that are ungodly, retraining our body and bringing it into submission to ourselves and to God. Our body can then work with our heart and mind and not against them, Titus 2v11-14: For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us to say "No" to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope, the glorious appearing of our great God and Saviour, Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good.

Grace sets us free from the rules, but it doesn't abandon us to be eaten by sin. It teaches us to rule over ourselves so that our heart, our mind and our body are working together under God as he intended they should. Then we are free to find the truly satisfying life for which we were created.

DARE I EMBRACE FREEDOM?

In the first article I went to great lengths to spell out that God has set us free, not just from sin and guilt, but also from the law. The reason this freedom is so scary and so little grasped by God's people is that we're afraid of it. And the reason we're afraid of freedom is that we're afraid of ourselves. We think we know ourselves and

we don't like what we see. We think the beast in the basement is the deepest thing about ourselves. Above all we are afraid of being exposed, humiliated and rejected. So we bury the hurt and the fear and the shame and the disgust. But with freedom from the law and particularly the question "what do you want" our heart is exposed. Where can we hide?

The good news is that we don't have to hide. If we've been born again we're not who we were. The beast in the basement may still growl, but there's a deeper and truer us than whatever our bodily passions whisper to us. We're a new creation in Christ. We don't need to be a slave again to fear and sin and the law. And if we're not yet born again, we can be very simply by opening up our heart to God, turning from our old life and asking him to forgive us and give us new life.

Power

God has given us new life, a new heart and a new spirit. As our mind is renewed and our body is retrained, all the different parts of our personhood begin to pull in the same direction. God has set us free to go where we want and it turns out that the deepest thing we want is God. In other words, we've discovered we've been converted. However, it's one thing to want the right thing. It's another to actually do it. If we remind look back at the diagram we used earlier we can still see a problem:



We've been taken out of Adam and put in Christ by being born again. We're no longer under the law so sin has lost its power to push us around. But there's still the problem of the flesh. We need a new power source to make everything work. That power source is the no less than Christ himself living his life through us by his Spirit. How this works moment by moment is the Spirit Filled Life:



If you want to learn more about how the Spirit Filled Life works check out the article on Living in God's Power or "The life" booklet.