

You Can Change, Part 4: "Facing Our Emotions"

Sunday, February 2

Romans 6:12-14

Introductory Thought

Because our biggest sin is not depending on Christ, our biggest challenge will be to daily depend on his grace (uproot self-sufficiency).

Romans 6:11-14

11 So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.

- People have often interpreted this verse as merely taking a massive leap of faith. Or as depending wholly on willpower in order become the kind of person God wants us to be. Some people think of this verse merely as Paul's way of saying that when life gives you a lemon, make lemonade. But that is *not* what he is saying.
- Another translation for the word "consider" may help us to better grasp this verse, not to mention verses 12-14. The word is "calculate," as in "you must also *calculate* yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus."¹
- What on earth could Paul possibly mean by this? When we say "calculate" we are talking about taking inventory of what we have, or in this case, what we are. Think of reconciling your checking account each month. Reconciling your checking account is not to add or takeaway money. It is to figure out precisely how much money you have in it.
- Similarly, when we calculate ourselves as being dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus, we are not trying to change some reality about our lives because we don't measure up. We are reconciling our account with God's word.
- So what is the calculation for those who have put their faith in Jesus? That despite how dead we often *feel* and how messed up we, in fact are, we are new creatures. We are forgiven. We are loved and accepted by him. And we are under grace.

¹ Wright, N.T. Paul For Everyone. Romans: Part 1. Westminster John Knox Press. 105.

- We who believe mustn't any longer think of ourselves as debtors or dirty.

12 Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, to make you obey its passions.

- Yes, we who believe are clean, but sin's voice lingers in our heads. Through our own consciousness, it tells us things like, "I have to indulge myself. The only way I can relieve myself of this temptation is to give in to it." Or "I *have* to have a drink." Or "I have *no choice* but to submit to the power of people's thoughts about me." "I *have* to get that person back." "I *have* to keep thinking about what that person thinks about me." Or it may sound like, "I *can't* stop thinking about how badly that person's actions hurt me."
- Some people think these sinful impulses indict their faith as illegitimate. But we have to remind ourselves that our beliefs and behaviors have been steeping in us our whole lives. It takes time to unlearn dysfunction and to learn Christ's ways (aka discipleship).

13 Do not present your members to sin as instruments for unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments for righteousness.

- It is a great disservice to our beautiful New Covenant to quote this verse in isolation from the context of this chapter...as many people do. Paul is not saying, "Just don't sin." Rather, he is telling us - people whose identities are rooted in the gospel and people in whose bodies reside the Holy Spirit - he's telling a new kind of people to behave in a way that is consistent with their identities in Christ.
- To surrender my body parts to sin in order to be used as sin's body parts is one-and-the-same as saying that my body parts - my hands, feet, mouth, and even my emotions and thoughts - belong to another person and are mine no longer. It's placing my body parts (my life, my mind, my emotions, and my choices) at the disposal of another person, the person I once was. It's as though my body parts are gruesomely removed and attached to another person, a person who is not me and wholly unlike me. And this fraud seeks to use my body in an entirely different way than I, who am now redeemed, would use my body! This is what Paul is saying.

- Rather, I present my body to God. This is a **daily, consistent choice**. This, my friends, is what it means to **worship** God. I am a new kind of human who was formerly dead, but am now alive in Christ. As a result, my members belong to God. When the Scriptures talk about being filled with the Spirit, this is the primary implication: It is to submit my heart to Jesus such that the Holy Spirit takes possession of my members. He uses my feet to walk in the light. He uses my hands to act in righteousness and justice. He uses my eyes and ears to interpret what is happening around me, to filter my perceptions through the heart of the Father. He uses my mouth to speak life. He uses my emotions - both positive and negative - to drive me to my knees, to draw me unto my rock, the God of my salvation, medicating less and less with the idols of this world for momentary healing.

14 For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace.

- I love the final verse of this section! Notice the certainty of this sentence. “Sin will have *no dominion* over you...” I love that guarantee! Since I am in Christ, sin has *no power* over me!
- But in anticipation of a misconception, allow me to say that this does *not* mean that regardless of what we do, sin will not win. Because you and I both know many Christians who are beaten up by sin every day. Maybe you’re one of them.
- The only way to answer this is to think a little more deeply about the Old Covenant and the New Covenant. What we Christians refer to as the Old Covenant was the sacred agreement between God and his chosen people, the Israelites, on how they would relate to one another. The type of covenant they had was called a **Suzerain/Vassal Treaty** in the ancient world.² The suzerain was the dominant power in a covenant and the inferior partner was called the vassal. In Israel’s case, God (Yahweh) was the suzerain and Israel was the vassal. In essence, the Suzerain determined the expectations of the relationship. Ancient nations often entered into these covenants in which the inferior or smaller nation would ally itself with a larger, more powerful nation. In exchange for military protection, the smaller nation would

² Richter, Sandra L. The Epic Of Eden. 73.

give a percentage of its gross national product to the larger, such as food or raw materials and even fight alongside the suzerain's armies whenever it was in a military conflict. An important distinction is that the suzerain had total authority over the vassal and determined the terms of the covenant.

- Israel's covenant with God was much the same. God expected that Israel serve him alone and carry out certain expectations, from how they practiced family to certain feasts they celebrated to the way they atoned for their sins through sacrifices in the temple system. Israel, on the other hand, knew that God would always provide and care for them as long as they were faithful to him. (In the ancient world, this loyalty was referred to as "covenant faithfulness."³). The terms of this covenant are outlined in the Books of the Law, the first 5 books in our Bibles.
- The New Covenant is the same type of covenant. God is the suzerain and we are his vassals. And though the stipulations of the covenant have changed, we are still his people. No, we're no longer commanded to observe certain feasts, make regular sacrifices at the temple, and obey certain dietary laws, but we are still commanded to obey him. To worship him. We don't make sacrifices because Jesus is our sacrifice. We don't celebrate seasonal feasts because they were all fulfilled by Jesus' ministry 2000-years ago. We don't observe certain dietary restrictions, because Jesus declared all things clean. But we still obey God. That has not changed. This is why Jesus could speak of "another commandment" he would give to his disciples in John 13. And this is why Jesus could assign us the task of making disciples all over the world in Matthew 28 and not contradict the Covenant of Grace. I make this point because many people wrongfully believe that with the coming of grace that obedience doesn't matter to God any more. This is simply not true!
- What has changed is that we who believe - those of us who are vassals under God's care in the New Covenant - have a Helper empowering us in our discipleship. The Holy Spirit. Each person who comes to Christ, thus entering into covenant with God, is sealed and indwelt by the Spirit who reveals to us our sins, he brings about sorrowful repentance, he leads us into the truth of God's word, and he convinces us of

³ Ibid. 75.

Scripture's authority over our lives. The Spirit softens our hearts, producing within us new desires and new affections for Christ and for the virtues Christ cherishes.

- So when Paul says with absolute certainty that sin will not have dominion over us since we are not under the law, but under grace, he is talking to intentional worshipers of Jesus - people who when they signed on as Christians embraced, from day one, that they were submitted to his will as his obedient followers. He is talking about people who, despite their imperfections and their many failures, understand that **Jesus IS Lord**. They get it that they have been bought by his blood and that he is fully in charge of their lives. They get it that everything they do, be it family life or the advancement of their careers, they are to imprint on Jesus. **Being under grace doesn't mean God has less control over our lives. It means he has total control.**
- As long as we depend on the Spirit, we will change.
- So when we say we are "under grace," we are saying that you are under the supervision of grace, not the law. Grace is guiding your obedience.
- Being under grace doesn't mean we've been transferred to some flowery, spiritual alternate dimension where we wait for it to do its thing. We seize grace and apply it to our lives.

Application

- But before we can talk about turning over a new leaf to walk out change, we must first ask the question of why America's churches are brimming with people who don't depend on the Spirit, why we don't access the resources of heaven in order to change.
- In short, I believe our emotions are largely to blame.
- Now our emotions are a complex issue and I feel I need to make a couple of qualifications before proceeding:
 1. First, and as I already said, our emotions are incredibly complex. One of my favorite Christmas gifts was the immersive novel called, S, by filmmaker J.J. Abrams. In it, I recently came across a statement that jumped off the page at me.

“The story you walk into,” it said, “is always more complex than it first appears.”⁴ Indeed, when we discuss our emotions, get ready to go down the rabbit hole. It’s going to have more twists and turns than a roller coaster, which necessarily means I cannot fully address this subject in one message.

2. Second, I am no expert in the field of psychology or emotional health, so take what I’m about to say with a grain of salt. I will say that almost two decades of ministry, coupled with two decades of facing my own emotional pain, has been enlightening, to say the least, and I think that I have a few things to say that can get us headed in the right direction in our pursuit of change:
 - We all have the emotions of fear, anxiety, worry, anger, bitterness, and the like. But for many of us, these emotions have mutated in a context of great pain. An abusive family member. A devastating loss. Gut-wrenching grief. Desperate loneliness. Scarring rejection. A life or season of life in which the mounting losses are growing more and more unbearable. The prospect of hope is being swallowed by years, maybe decades, of disappointment.
 - I’ve shared with you on several occasions the most painful time of my life, my junior high years. It was in my 6th and 7th grade years that I experienced bullying and rejection that ate me alive from the inside out. It was a period in which I had no allies and no one who knew how to empathize with me. The aloneness was unbearable at times. It was in this context that I searched desperately for relief. And I found a measure of it in sports, fantasy, food, and social-atonement.
 - In regards to sports, I consumed it non-stop. I watched every single Chicago Bulls game. I was glued to every move that Michael Jordan made on the basketball court. He was living a life that I worshiped. Superhuman abilities. Prestige. Dominance. Power. The ability to overcome any obstacle. I wanted that. I was beaten into submission by the ridicule I faced at school, so to live vicariously through Michael Jordan’s abilities helped to fill the hole that was growing in my heart. I was a sports junkie. Not because I was “just a sports junkie,” but because I was in pain.

⁴ Doug Dorst and J.J. Abrams, S, 352.

- I also found relief in the world of lust-filled fantasy and lust. My fantasy life switched gears at some point in my early junior high years, as it does for all children. In my elementary years, I daydreamed every moment of every day about GI Joe and Transformers and Star Wars. But my interest in these things began to naturally wain. Simultaneously, I became more and more infatuated with an unexpected, but exhilarating new fantasy: girls. Add the ingredients of deep rejection and some exposure to the “stash” that belonged to my friends’ fathers and an addiction was established. This addiction was grew rapidly and powerfully in the petri dish of deep rejection that I faced over the next several years.
- Another habit that I picked up was eating. Food made me happy. And in those days when I was so wounded, I ran to anything that made me happy. For me, my go-to was sweets. I became a glutton in that area. I couldn’t stop. Why? Because I wasn’t only feeding my appetite. I was feeding my pain.
- Then there was social-atonement. Not in the eyes of God, but my peers and classmates. Every day I walked through the halls of my school, I experienced feelings of acute isolation. I was alone. Nobody wanted me. Nobody needed me to be with them. Nobody ever thought to invite me to an event. I was a ghost. Those feelings were intolerable. To be socially emasculated. So I began to perform. I had to have the most stylish clothes and back then my family didn’t have the money for that, so I grew to resent my parents. Not because of what *they* did to me, but because of what my classmates did to me. Every day, school was an altar for me. But not a holy altar; a pagan one. One built for me and to me. Every day, every decision that I made was to glorify myself. To re-establish myself in the eyes of my peers as acceptable, as having value, as being fun, attractive, and wanted. My ultimate goal was the refining of my reputation. Another ugly habit that I picked up was a virulent and nasty tongue. Subconsciously, I had determined back in junior high that I would hurt you before you hurt me. I couldn’t bear the sting of humiliation any longer. So I used a God-given gift that was intended to proclaim the gospel, my mouth, for the destruction of others. I became quite good at skewering others with my words. And it helped...somewhat. In the heat of the moment, I felt as dominant and unbeatable as Michael Jordan. But in my heart, I ached for the person that I

wounded. I was repulsed that I had become the thing that brought me so much pain. The shame was palpable. This, of course, led to more and more medication to take my mind off how much I despised myself. Sports, fantasy, food, social atonement. Over and over again.

- Here's the kicker: When I truly came to Christ following my high school years, I became a new person. A new creation. A "new kind of humanity," as I mentioned last week. But deep into my adult life, some of these habits lingered. I couldn't figure out why I couldn't break free from lust. As Jeremy mentioned at the end of last week's service, my deliverance from this sin was a supernatural one, but one that still requires my utmost attention each day. To this day, I still struggle with the way I approach food. My close friends know all too well the many, many times I have declared my freedom from a high-calorie, high-sugar diet only to fall on my face within days.
- I remember laughing at people who were wiser than me, people I knew over the years who would tell me that my problem with lust wasn't about girls, but about something deeper - my wounds." I thought that was preposterous. And I'd scoff at them in my finely honed 22-whole-years-of-wisdom, "No it's not! Girls are hot and I like looking at them! It's that simple!" But the more years God gave me, the more I began to wonder why it was that some people weren't as nearly as bound as I was. Why was it that I couldn't seem to break free and some have? That's when it hit me. **My greatest dysfunctions were nurtured during my greatest defeats.** My greatest dysfunctions are more than pick-me-ups. They are narcotics that help me to assuage my pain. And this is why I continued to run to them even when I was devotedly following Christ. I still believed, deep down, that when I was hurting I needed them. I needed to veg in front of the TV all weekend, consuming sports to the neglect of my family because it helped me to forget my Monday-through-Friday woes. I fantasized because those thoughts crowded my thinking, jockeying to the forefront of my mind, which helped me forget what I hated about myself. Fantasy bought me a little more time to avoid dealing with myself, facing myself, coming to terms and changing who I really was. Eating provided an immediate victory. Feelings of happiness could be triggered at my beckon call. This was easier than learning to

find deep and abiding strength in God - the kind that isn't controlled by me, but comes progressively, according to his will, by submitting to him, waiting on him, seeking after him. In a very real sense, harmful behaviors gave me control. Because I didn't feel ready to give God full control. All the while I was leading in churches and preaching sermons. Crazy, isn't it?

- So when you catch yourself saying something like, "I don't know why I can't stop doing this?" Or, "I have been asking God for years to take this sin away, but nothing happens," then you know the problem is a lot deeper. It's emotional. It's more than a bad habit. It's a functional savior. **Your behavior is an outgrowth of the dominant story of your life.** Good or bad. Harmful or helpful. My dominant story was my bullying-filled junior high years. That fashioned me into what I became. Those years formed my identity.
- When you struggle changing a behavior, your problem is not behavioral; it's emotional. And your emotions are finely tuned or hijacked by your story.
- This is why we need new stories; new identities.

Closing Challenge

- Here's the takeaway: **What is the story behind your habit or dark emotions?**
- And as you consider that over the coming week (and beyond), don't be afraid to look deeply at yourself. Examine your story. It may be painful, but if you are a believer, the Holy Spirit is with you, guiding you. Trust his supervision.
- And if you're story is too painful to face alone, we are here for you. I can meet with you. Another pastor can meet with you. One of our small group or missional community leaders can meet with you and we can talk it through together.
- Just don't be afraid of your story. Going back to visit it again and ponder its affects on you takes away its power over you. It disarms it. (I'm convinced this is one reason why the Scriptures tell us to confess our sins to one another. It's not to save us, but to bring about healing.)
- Remember, you are under grace! You are not subdued by your broken emotions any longer!