

How Change Happens In Your Life

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Galatians: Free At Last Series

Galatians 5:16-25

I want to begin by sharing with you two stories about two churches that my family visited while we were on vacation some years back. As my kids were growing up, I always insisted that we visit a local church wherever we were on vacation. So we were camping in another state and there was a decent sized church near the campground. Sunday morning we all went off to church.

During the message the pastor began to preach a sermon in which the text that he used was barely connected to his remarks. I tried not to be critical of his preaching. But then somewhere around the 15-minute mark he looked out at the congregation and he said, “Jimmy Ray, if your daddy wasn’t here, I would take you out in the parking lot right now and beat you up.” Apparently, one of the teens was fooling around during the message and so the pastor decided to challenge him to a fist fight in the parking lot.

But that wasn’t the worst of it. A few minutes later something came over the pastor and he looked out at the congregation and said, “I don’t have to tell you about Pastor Jones at 1st Presbyterian Church.” That let loose a huge wave of encouragement from the congregation. People began yelling, “Don’t hold back! Don’t hold back!” And so the preacher unleashed an awful torrent of criticism about every single church in the community. “Pastor Jones is a big hypocrite.” “The people at First Methodist are nothing but adulterers. They’re fornicating in the pews.” “Don’t get me started about the Catholics.”

It was one of the ugliest things I had ever seen in a church. And immediately following this attack on every other church, he did an altar call in which he explained that Jesus died for our sins and if anyone wanted to be born again they should come forward. We walked out of the church shaking our heads thinking, “What was that?” Can you imagine people being subjected to that sort of preaching and formation every week? Being shaped in judgment and meanness? Challenging people to a fist-fight – is that what Christ came to produce?

I thought, “Well, that’s just one experience.” Unfortunately, a year or two later we visited another church in another state while we were on vacation. Actually, we went to a Vineyard church in the community, but there were only two cars in the parking lot. I said to my family, “Come on, let’s go in and we’ll at least double the crowd.” My kids said, “I don’t want to go in there.” I turned to Marlene for support and she said, “I don’t want to go in there either.” So, across the street from where the Vineyard was meeting, there were a whole bunch of young couples walking into an elementary school carrying their Bibles. I thought: well, that looks like a church, let’s go there. So we followed the crowd

into this elementary school. We sat down; they were actually playing Vineyard worship; it felt very comfortable.

The pastor got up and warmed up the crowd and then he said, “How many of you men are going to join us for the Promise Keepers Event coming up in the Fall?” About 15 men raised their hands. He said, “Will you stand up? I would like to pray a blessing on you men.” I thought: That’s nice. The pastor began his prayer of blessing this way: “Lord, please give the men who are still sitting no peace and no rest until they decide to join us at the Promise Keepers event.” I thought: This man is praying a curse down on me. I don’t receive that. How manipulative. Marlene said, “Shhh...someone might hear you!”

Well, he began his message and it was fine until, again, something came over him. The pastor looked out at his congregation and said, “Some of you have been wagging your tongues about my wife. You come up here and I will shove your tongue down your throat.” Can you imagine in a Christian church the pastor ever using a line like, “Come up here and I will shove your tongue down your throat?”

Well, the pastor closed his message by saying to the little congregation, “None of you can leave. We’re all going forward and repenting of our gossip and division.” So I leaned over to my son, Daniel, and my daughter, Sharon, and I said, “Come on, let’s get out of here.” Marlene, who is a rule-keeper, said, “The pastor said no one could leave.” I said, “I’m not listening to that guy; he’s crazy!”

Now, isn’t Christianity supposed to make a difference in people’s lives? I mean, shouldn’t it make us more loving, more generous, kinder, and less violent? At the very least, shouldn’t Christianity cause pastors to not threaten their congregations with bodily harm?

A few years ago a friend, who was attending another church, put it plainly when he asked me the question: “Rich, how come the people I know who go to our church never seem to change? They’re Christians, but they seem to struggle year after year with the same patterns of bitterness, anger and anxiety. They seem to have all of the same problems year after year in their marriages. How come the Christians I know never seem to change?”

Many Christians who are in church for years look at their lives and the lives of those around them and conclude that change is not possible. Maybe addictive behaviors, or being a gossip, or constantly feeling anxious or hopeless is just the way life is. Hey, we’re all sinners. Maybe this side of heaven, most Christians, including many pastors and elders in the church, will always be grouchy and irritable and petty – judgmental and unforgiving. We rationalize what we see in our lives and what we see around us in the church and we say: Well, after all, we’re just human. You can’t expect perfection. Doesn’t the Bible itself teach us that the heart of man is desperately wicked and that sin will continue in us until we die? Maybe there are a few extraordinary people who learn how to be loving and kind and free from major addictive behaviors. Maybe there are a

few people, we'll call them saints, who aren't perpetually irritable and petty and self-pitying and nasty and lustful like most Christians. But real change is for the special change – for the Mother Teresas' and not for folks like us.

Well, when we talk about change we are really getting very close to the central question of faith which is what makes you a Christian in the first place? Being a Christian is not just adopting a new point of view. Being a Christian is not just adopting a new belief system, or a new philosophy of life, a new vantage point. What makes a person a Christian is two things. Number one: That the person has come to the end of themselves, the end of self-reliance and they are trusting utterly and completely in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ to make them acceptable before God. A Christian is someone, first of all, who is looking away from themselves, away from their own achievements, their own goodness, to cast themselves entirely upon Jesus Christ to save them.

Now, that's called in theological terms, the "objective" work of Christ. We're looking outside ourselves; we're looking to the Savior to make us right with God. But the objective work of Christ, what Christ did entirely outside of us in dying for our sins on the cross and one day raising us from the dead, is not all that being a Christian is. There is also the "subjective" work of Christ.

The subjective work of Christ is what Christ does inside of us by his Holy Spirit in changing us. It is the expectation of every New Testament writer that if you are a Christian, you are being changed, you are being transformed; you are accepted as you are, but you don't remain as you are; as you change you are no longer living at a really low level of pettiness, anger, gossip, lust and jealousy. It is the expectation of every New Testament writer that if you are a Christian the Spirit of God is at work in you making you more loving, more kind, more patient, and more faithful and more full of self-control.

Well, if this is the expectation of the New Testament writers, then why don't we see this in our own lives and why don't we see this in churches that we visit all over the country? Why do we settle for so little?

How does change happen in your life? That's what I want to talk about today. Let's pray.

Galatians 5:16-25

16 So I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature. 17 For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. 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 sinful nature 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, patience, 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 sinful nature with its passions and desires. 25 Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.

We look at ourselves and if we're at all honest, we say, "We don't look very much like Jesus at all." I mean, if you saw us at our worst moments, we are a total embarrassment to ourselves, to everything we profess to believe. Just to use one illustration, some of you old-timers might remember this story - but some years ago my wife and daughter were in the middle of a huge argument. The windows were open in the house and I began shouting "Be quiet!" The neighbors can hear you.

Our dog got real excited and began peeing all over the foyer. That made me even more upset. I threw a leash on the dog and began dragging the dog out of the house. He was fighting me every step of the way, peeing all the way. I pulled him out into the yard and he tangled me up in his leash which made me more upset.

So here I am tangled up with this dog that is peeing all over my shoes. And I just lost it. I kicked the dog in my front yard. And then I looked up and there was my neighbor at her front door watching me. "Oh, there's Pastor Rich out on the front lawn screaming and kicking his dog."

What was my problem? What is your problem in your out-of-control moments, or in your out-of-control days?

What is the problem?

From verses 16 - 25 Paul speaks about the sinful nature five times:

Galatians 5:16-17; 19, 24

16 So I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature. 17 For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you are not to do whatever you want. 19 The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; 24 Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires.

Literally, the word that Paul uses is better translated "flesh." The problem is our flesh.

The problem is the flesh

Now, when Paul is speaking about the flesh, he is not talking about our bodies, our physical bodies. Paul wasn't some Greek philosopher, some dualist, who was opposed to the human body. He didn't think the human body was our problem. He said the flesh was our problem. In fact, we're going to see that many of the expressions of the flesh

have very little to do with bodily sins. They're things like witchcraft, anger, selfish ambition, dissensions and factions.

If the flesh is your problem and my problem, what is the flesh?

A few weeks ago I gave you a quote from William Barclay, an old Bible scholar. I mentioned then, and I will mention again to please forgive the lack of gender inclusiveness. This was written 50 years ago before folks had much sensitivity to excluding women.

The flesh is what man has made himself in contrast with man as God made him. The flesh is man as he has allowed himself to become in contrast to man as God meant him to be. The flesh stands for the total effect upon man of his own sin and of the sins of his fathers and of the sin of all men who have gone before him. The flesh is human nature as it has become through sin...the flesh stands for human nature weakened, vitiated, tainted by sin. The flesh is man as he is apart from Jesus Christ and his Spirit.

In other words, the flesh is what we human beings are like when we try to operate independently of God. The flesh is what you are like when you go off on your own and say, "See you, God. I will take it from here." Whenever you are relying on yourself, looking to yourself – your own wisdom, your own insight, your own strength, setting up your own goals without reference to God at all, whenever you are pursuing your own agenda and your own will rather than asking God for his agenda and his will, you are operating in the flesh. The flesh very simply is human life apart from God. God is simply not on your radar screen. You are not asking him about his will regarding your dating. You are not seeking God regarding your marriage or your money or the way you are handling a conflict. You've pushed his will to the side and you are just pursuing your own will.

Paul says the reason we live at such a low level is not just the flesh, life independent of God, but he uses a phrase here in verse 16:

Galatians 5:16

So I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature.

He says the problem is the desires of the sinful nature. And in verse 17:

Galatians 5:17

For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you are not to do whatever you want.

Now, in the old King James Version spoke about the lusts of the flesh. The New International Version and the Today's International Version translate it "the desires of

the sinful nature.” The Greek word is *epithumia*. Translators struggle to come up with a good English equivalent for *epithumia*. Lust doesn’t really work in contemporary language because lust for 21st century people almost always has to do with sexual desire. Paul is not simply confining his thoughts about our problem to sexual desire. Desire is a little bit weak. A good translation of *epithumia* would be “over-desire.”

The problem is the over-desire of the flesh

The reason why we live at such a low level, why we look around that the church and you look at your own life, and you say, “I’m so petty; I’m so over-sensitive to everyone’s criticism; I’m so angry; I gossip, I bend the truth, I hold grudges.” It’s not just the way I’ve been raised or our culture or what happened to me in the past. The Apostle Paul said the problem is much closer to home. It’s in you and it’s in me. It is the over-desire of the flesh; this overwhelming compulsive bent towards independence from God. *Epithumia*, the over-desire of the flesh, is the New Testament equivalent for the Old Testament sin of idolatry.

And, by the way, this word is used everywhere. We see it in Ephesians 2:3:

Ephesians 2:3

All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath.

We see it in Ephesians 4:22:

Ephesians 4:22

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;

We see it in 1 Peter 2:11:

1 Peter 2:11

Dear friends, I urge you, as foreigners and exiles, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul.

The reason why it is very helpful for us to talk about over-desire of the flesh, or inordinate desire, or a compulsive overwhelming craving – the reason why it is helpful to speak about over-desire is that the problem that we have is not necessarily that we desire the wrong things. It is not necessarily that you desire to smoke crack, or that you desire to have sex with someone who is not your spouse. The problem is that we can over-desire a good thing. You see a mom who can’t have any peace unless every one of her children is happy and well-adjusted; a mom who is tossing and turning at night and is filled with anxiety regarding one of her kids and says to herself, “I can not have any joy in life; I can not experience the peace of Christ because one of my children is struggling.” That mom is manifesting *epithumia* – the over-desire of the flesh.

I say that in order to be okay, I must have something other than Jesus Christ.

I think of a woman who is a sexual addict. She can't say "no" to guys. She just moves from one guy to another for years. We don't talk enough about sexual addiction in women in the same way we talk about it in men. But almost always in women what you see when you see sexual addiction there is an over-desire – *epithumia*, a craving, a compulsive desire for affirmation, for affection and for attention.

Now, there is nothing wrong with wanting affirmation. There is nothing wrong with wanting affection. And there is nothing wrong with wanting attention any more than there is anything wrong with a mom wanting her kids to be happy and well-adjusted. But when an over-desire for affirmation, attention or affection is driving you, when that is your craving, you become compulsive about it, then the way that it gets expressed in some women's lives is through sexual addiction. You end up in bed with another person and then you go into a cycle, perhaps, of shame and self-reproach in which you tear yourself down as you consider what your life has become. And then you go right back into the cycle of needing affirmation, attention and affection and you go after another guy.

We were made for God. You cannot desire God too much. But when we substitute something in creation for our creator, we find ourselves subject to the over-desire of the flesh.

Now, how do you know if over-desire is a problem in your life?

How do you know if over-desire is a problem in your life?

Let's read verses 19-21:

Galatians 5:19-21

19 The acts of the sinful nature 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.

They're manifest. It is not hard to discern what the source of certain attitudes and behaviors is. We know that when we see one of these 15 items showing up in our lives, or showing up in the life of someone else, the source of that thing is not God. It is the over-desire of the flesh. Paul says it is obvious, if you struggle with the over-desire of the flesh. There are certain things that God never inspires. There are things he says that are at war with his Spirit. They're totally opposed to him.

Now, this list of 15 items is not an exhausted list of the over-desires of the flesh. Paul tells us that in verse 21 when he says "and the like."

Galatians 5:21

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.

These items are just illustrative of where your flesh over-desires.

Well, folks have tried to organize these 15 items into categories. You could break them up into four realms:

The realm of sex:

Galatians 5:19

The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery;

The realm of worship:

Galatians 5:20

idolatry and witchcraft;

The realm of community:

Galatians 5:20-21

20...hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions
21and envy;

The realm of partying:

Galatians 5:20-21

...drunkenness, orgies, and the like.

So you could break the 15 words up into four categories, or you could just have two lists: one list of seven words contains the sins of the irreligious and then there are eight sins of the religious. But let's just take a look at a few of the items here.

How do you know if over-desire is a problem in your life? Well, you may have a problem with sex. Remember, the issue of over-desire is not that you desire something that is necessarily wrong.

Sex is good, but not at the cost of your relationship with God

The Apostle Paul writes:

Galatians 5:19

The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery;

Literally, he talks about a wide variety of sexual practices that society may accept – premarital sex, extra-marital sex, homosexual sex. Society may say: that’s okay as long as you are committed; as long as you can keep it within bounds; as long as you declare your love for each other. And then he talks about impurity – literally uncleanness, dirty contact. And finally, he mentions debauchery which is sex that violates even society’s low standards. Sex without restraint; breaking through every barrier.

Now, it is really clear that we live in a culture that has institutionalized sexual idolatry and sexual over-desire. It has been institutionalized. We have a multi-billion dollar advertising industry that attempts to create sexual over-desire in your life. We live in a hyper sexually stimulated environment. Every commercial, every movie, every magazine is loaded with sexual innuendos and a total infatuation with sexual lust.

So, how do we figure out in this kind of culture what a Christian looks like? Do we just go with the flow? Do we compare ourselves with our non-Christian roommates, or non-Christian friends and say, “Well, I’m not doing what this other person does which is a whole lot worse.” Do we simply rationalize our behavior and say, “Well, you know, we love each other, or at least we really like each other. We’re not sleeping around with a whole bunch of people, so it is okay here.”

How do I figure out if in my sexual life I am operating in the over-desire of my flesh – that is I am acting independently of God; I’m following my own wisdom, my own insights, and my own desires without any reference to God even though I claim a relationship with God, even though I claim to be a follower of Christ, nevertheless I am completely independent of God in this area.

What does God say about sex?

Well, of course, God says that sex is good. He thought of it. But God says you never give your body to someone else unless you are willing to give them your entire self in total commitment. The context for all sex in the Bible is total commitment. You don’t give yourself to someone else unless you are ready to make a total commitment to that person. And you never receive sex without receiving this whole other person. You see, you don’t simply select out sex like a product on the shelf. You have to put sex in the context of whole person commitment.

What does that mean?

It means you have to be married. Because if you are not married, you are not sharing your whole self with another human being. No matter how much you say you love them and how committed you are, if you are not married you are not sharing your whole self. If you aren’t married, you aren’t sharing all of your money with another person. If you

aren't married, you aren't sharing all of your space with another person. If you aren't married, you aren't sharing all of your time with another person. If you aren't married, you are not receiving this whole other person. If you aren't married you are receiving all of this other person's problems – every problem they have. You aren't taking on all of their debt, all of their school loans, all of their family problems, all of their past, all of their flaws.

If you haven't sworn total commitment to this other person, if you have received total commitment, then you are simply saying, "I want sex; I want the pleasure, I want the affection, I want the attention, I want the release, I want the enjoyment, but I don't want all of you." You are looking at sex the way consumers look at products on a shelf, sex as groceries.

Paul says that sex is so much more than groceries on a shelf; so much more than the opportunity to eat a meal and wipe your mouth. Sex is the physical and emotional expression of totally giving yourself to another human being and totally receiving that other human being.

But Paul does just talk about sex. He talks about idolatry and witchcraft in verse 20:

Galatians 5:20

idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions

...as expressions of the over-desire of the flesh. Where might we fall into witchcraft? You say, "That's so archaic, so far from my Christian life. I never go into an occult shop; I have no interest in getting my palm read." But there is an increasing amount of witchcraft in people's pursuit of health.

Health is good, but not at the cost of your relationship with God

Many health therapies – whether a person is pursuing physical health or emotional or mental health involve really questionable spiritual practices. And while Christians would never go into a palm reader, or participate in a séance, they may, in an over-desire for health, in an over-desire to be free from pain whether it is physical or emotional, submit themselves to a therapist who is involved in practices that are not a whole lot different than what Paul is referring to as witchcraft or the occult.

Certain kinds of therapeutic touch - not all, there are certainly healthy forms of massage and therapeutic touch – but certain kinds of therapeutic touch as taught in nursing schools really has a strong spiritual element to it. It is designed to release spiritual energy into your body. Before I would seek any alternative medical practice, especially ones involving spiritual practices – energy flows, altered states of consciousness, I would use great discernment. Read up on alternative therapy.

There is a wonderful book titled *Alternative Medicines* by Donal O'Mathuna and Walt Larimore MD. These two men have spent a lot of time looking at alternative therapies. Health is good, but not at the cost of your relationship with God.

Ambition is good, but not at the cost of your relationship with God

The Apostle Paul speaks about selfish ambition in verses 20 – 21:

Galatians 5:20-21

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.

...in a list of eight words that really focuses on community destroying behaviors – things that will kill a church if they're present in the church. Hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy. If you are in a church and it begins to be divided into various factions – one side supports the new building project, the other side opposes it; one side supports the pastor, the other side opposes him; if you are in a church where there is jealousy or back-biting, lots of gossip; or you are in a company that is characterized by these things, these are company destroying behaviors. They are family destroying behaviors. They are church destroying behaviors.

What is selfish ambition? How do I know when there is an over-desire of my flesh in the area of my ambition? That my ambition is not coming from God, it is coming from me living independently of God?

There is godly ambition. A passion to be used by God; a desire to make your life count for something. It is entirely right and appropriate to say, "God, will you use me as an instrument of your kingdom today? Make me a bearer of your peace. Use my mouth to encourage people and not to tear them down. Make me a blessing. Empower me to heal the sick. Guide me into things that would most glorify you."

What is selfish ambition? A couple of thoughts: I think selfish ambition in a church member is often marked by tunnel vision in which an individual is overly concerned about their particular ministry. They love their part of the kingdom more than they love the whole kingdom. They love their ministry in the church more than they love the whole church.

Do you know that God love the whole church and not just your part in it? And what I've seen in terms of church destroying behavior is sometimes people are so zealous about their particular ministry that they fall out of love with the whole rest of the church. World missions is great, but world missions is not the whole church. Pro-Life Ministry is great, but pro-life ministry is not the whole church. Neither is children's ministry; neither is healing prayer; neither is teaching or counseling or recovery or social justice. Selfish ambition always focuses on one's narrow passion instead of the whole body.

Do you love the whole church, or just your part of the whole?

Selfish ambition is also always concerned about roles and titles. Some of the conflicts that I've seen over the years in church have to do with someone who has been denied a role, or who has had their role changed. They were asked to step down or to make room for a different person, who was judged to be more gifted than them, or different than them. The way that we relate to a change in our role, the way we relate to a change in our title in a church can tell a lot about whether your ambition is godly, or whether your ambition is selfish.

See, godly ambition says no one can keep me from serving God in an area where I want to serve God. If you can't be the Sunday School coordinator, that doesn't mean you can't minister to children. No body can humanly keep you from doing ministry. We've got couples in our church who have reached out to neighborhood kids for years in their particular area of town. It didn't depend on them having a role, or being appointed by the church. No body can keep you from doing ministry.

No body can stop you from worshipping God, or gathering together with a few other people to worship God, even if you are no longer the worship leader.

Well, these things are at war with what the Holy Spirit wants.

Galatians 5:17

For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you are not to do whatever you want.

How do we change?

We've been talking about through this letter about Christ coming to set us free and to deliver us from this present evil age. To free us from having to follow Jewish customs like circumcision and food cleanliness laws; to free us from the curse of the law; to free us from having distinctions made in our church based on races, our ethnic background, our gender, or our economic situation; to free us from idols and to free us, in the words of the great Bible teacher, John Stott, from our "puny little selves," – well, how does that happen? Change is not automatic. If it was, our churches in America would not be filled with angry, irritable, petty, jealous, unforgiving, lustful people.

Change is not automatic. It is not: I'm saved; I've put my trust in Christ and now I'm automatically going to be transformed. You've certainly have seen that in your life if you are a Christian for more than five minutes. Time doesn't change you. Just marking time; I've been a Christian now for five years; I've advanced. How do we change?

Begin with a vision

Let me give you a simple example. Let's say you realize you are overweight and that you need to lose 35 pounds. How are you going to lose 35 pounds that you've been carrying around for years? It is not going to happen by feeling sorry about being overweight. You are not going to lose those pounds by feeling guilty about being overweight. You are not going to lose it by beating yourself up or by staring at yourself in the mirror and feeling ashamed of yourself. Yet, this is the way we usually think change happens for a Christian. Well I will change by feeling really bad about myself, or sorry or guilty about my behavior.

No. Change begins with a vision. If you want to lose weight, you have to find a vision. Maybe you have a dear friend who has lost a bunch of weight and he or she looks so much better. Their clothes fit better. For the first time in years he's bicycling to work, or she is going to a gym. You say, "I want to be like that." Well, that's your vision. What would it be like for me to be thinner? What would it be like if my pants were 6 inches smaller around the waist? Or if your dress size went down 8 sizes. What if you enjoyed looking at yourself in the mirror, or if you had more energy or lowered your blood pressure? What if you were able to keep up with your kids or grandkids?

You catch a vision for change.

A few years ago I did a message for the New Year and I said, "What would you like to happen in this next year? What change would you like to see in your life?" I wasn't just talking about spiritual change, or internal change, but what would you like to see change in this next year? I encouraged people to write it down on a piece of paper and put it up on the stage and pray that God would do that for them. The thing that I wrote down on the piece of paper was that I would like to learn how to play the piano.

I was raised in one of those families that was entirely bereft of music. No body played a musical instrument. My dad used to say, "Well, we're just not musical." How would you know? What does that even mean?

So I grew up without music lessons. And I just thought, "Well, I'm just not very musical." And I wasn't. So for the last five years I've increasingly had the feeling that I do not want to die without learning how to play a musical instrument. It took me a couple of years after I wrote that on the sheet of paper to get up my courage to ask one of the music teachers in this church, Craig Allen, if he would give me piano lessons. I'm 54 years old and I've been learning to play the piano over the last year.

Now, I'm absolutely dreadful. Craig gave me this Mozart piece recently to learn how to play. I went back and I said, "Do you know this week by Mozart's grave people were noticing dust and dirt being kicked up as he is spinning underground listening to me play his music. No one in the history of the world has ever played Mozart the way I play it."

But I have a vision. And the vision is of me in five years being able to sit down and play hymns and worship songs on the piano and really enjoy it.

What is the vision for the Christian? Paul mentions it in verse 21:

Galatians 5:21

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.

The kingdom is coming. Heaven is going to come down and join with earth and everything is going to be made new. In Christ's coming, the first rays of that future kingdom began breaking into this world. And we Christians can already see; we are already experiencing the first rays of the dawn. We know that a new day is coming.

So the way that you change is to live in anticipation of the future. What do you see coming towards you? What do you anticipate? A Christian is a person who lives in light of the future. A Christian is a person who anticipates the future kingdom breaking in.

You know, in sports great athletes are people who anticipate. A great short-stop is not necessarily a short-stop that you see diving acrobatically at a ball hit beyond him. A great short-stop is a person who is already moving before the ball is hit because they know what the pitcher is going to throw; because they know how this batter normally hits and they are already moving before the crack of the bat and they are there to field the ball without effort. A great linebacker is moving before the ball is snapped. They're plugging the hole. They know where the running back is going.

Wayne Gretzky, the greatest hockey player in history, was once asked what made him so great. He said, "Well, most hockey players skate to where the puck is. I skate to where the puck is going to be."

You see, we at Vineyard Columbus are a kingdom-centered church. We are a church that lives in light of the future. So we know that when heaven and earth come together people are going to be completely healed. There's not going to be any more sickness. We see the first rays of dawn breaking over the horizon and so we say that we want some of that future kingdom right now. That's why we at Vineyard Columbus pray for the sick because we know that healing is part of the coming kingdom. We are anticipating the coming of the kingdom right now in our midst.

Why do we practice gender equality in our church? Because we anticipate the coming kingdom men and women are going to be entirely equal. Men will not rule over women in the kingdom of God. So we are anticipating that day and putting certain things into practice right now.

Why do we welcome immigrants in our midst? Why am I a huge advocate of Comprehensive Immigration Reform? Because I'm anticipating that in the coming kingdom of God, every tongue, tribe and nation are going to be worshipping with complete equality, complete freedom and we want to taste some of that now.

See, there are certain roads that will lead toward the future that God is bringing. And there are certain roads that will not. Continually wanting to go back to Egypt where you lived as a slave, defeated, angry, unclean and impure, filled with selfish ambition, will not lead to the Promised Land.

But vision is not enough to change you. Even if you see the future clearly, your vision is to lose 35 pounds, your vision is to play the piano well, your vision is to learn to speak German, or to stop being anxious, to live as a peaceful person there are certain means to achieving that vision.

Employ certain means

What are those means? Let me offer one this week. The Apostle Paul says in verse 24:

Galatians 5:24

Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires.

Note that in verse 24 those who belong to Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and over-desires. That means everyone who belongs to Jesus has to do this. All must do it. It doesn't matter if you are raised in a wonderful church-going family that's loving and affirming of you and you are, by disposition, a really nice person – you must crucify your flesh. If you think that you do not have to crucify your flesh, then you've been taken captive by the greatest enemy of your soul which is pride. All of us have to crucify the flesh.

What does that mean? Certainly, it means to say “no” to your flesh. Or to use different language, Paul says in Colossians 3:5:

Colossians 3:5

Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry.

...put to death. Jesus says something similar in the Sermon on the Mount when he says in Matthew 5:29-30:

Matthew 5:29–30

29 If your right eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. 30 And if your right hand causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell.

Certainly, crucifying means to cut something out of your life. Get rid of what's weighing you down. If it is a relationship that's dragging you away from Christ, then cut that relationship. If it is a place, then I need to avoid it. If it is a behavior, then I need to go

into recovery. If it is a thought process, then I've got to take control of my thoughts. Certainly, part of crucifying the flesh is cut things off, to put them to death, to say not.

But there is more to crucifying the flesh than that. Why does Paul say to crucify the flesh? Why doesn't Paul just say put it to death; kill it? It is because when we hear the word "crucify" we are immediately reminded of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. When we hear the word "crucify" our thoughts are drawn to the cross. And at the cross I see a Savior who died for me and who loves me in order to make me okay with God. That's the messages of the book of Galatians.

Now, if I stare at the cross and I say, "There I see my perfect Savior bearing my sins and dying for me that I can be okay with God," then I don't need this other thing to make me okay. Moms and dads, you don't have to have your children all be happy and well-adjusted in order for you to be okay. You are okay because God said you are okay as a result of your Savior loving and dying for you.

Single people, you do not have to be married to be okay. You don't have to have an over-desire for marriage in order to be okay. You are okay because God has declared you to be okay through the death of your Savior Jesus Christ who loves you.

Women, you do not have to get in bed with a man in order to be okay. You don't need a man's attention, affirmation, or affection to be okay. You have been declared okay by God because you have a Savior who loves you and who died for you.

So, if you trace your over-desire back to its roots, you will discover that underneath over-desire is a need to feel okay. And Paul says to crucify that. Take it to the cross where you will meet your Savior who declares that you are already okay through his death for you.

Let's pray.

How Change Happens In Your Life

Rich Nathan
May 16, 2010
Galatians: Free At Last Series
Galatians 5:16-25

I. What is the problem?

- A. The problem is the flesh (Galatians 5:16, 17, 29, 24)
- B. The problem is the over-desire of the flesh (Galatians 5:16, 17, 24)

II. How do you know if over-desire is a problem in your life? (Galatians 5:19-21)

- A. Sex is good, but not at the cost of your relationship with God
- B. Health is good, but not at the cost of your relationship with God
- C. Ambition is good, but not at the cost of your relationship with God

III. How do we change?

- A. Begin with a vision (Galatians 5:21)
- B. Employ certain means (Galatians 5:24)
 - 1. Negatively: Crucify the flesh (Galatians 5:24)
 - 2. Positively: Walk in the Spirit (Galatians 5:16)