

BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS

Growth and Change Part 1



1 INTRODUCTION

“I hate who I am.”

“I don’t want to be this way anymore.”

“If I could stop doing the things I hate.”

“If only I could change.”

Maybe you have muttered one of these phrases (or one like it) in your life. If so, you are in good company. The desire to change and grow is within all of us, and yet the power to actually change is so allusive. Life change in people is very rare.

But, as believers in Jesus, we are called to change and grow.

READ Ephesians 4:17-24

🔍 How does Paul challenge the believers in verse 17?

🔍 What are we to do according to verse 22?

🔍 What are we to do according to verse 24?

There are other places in the Bible that challenge us to change and to put off how we are living. We are to put on a new way. But the truth is that life-change is hard.

Lets look at a couple of reasons why.

A. WE ARE CREATURES OF HABIT

Here’s an interesting verse to consider.

Jeremiah 13:23

“Can the Ethiopian change his skin or the leopard his spots? Then also you can do good who are accustomed to do evil.”

Better translated “How can you do good when you are accustomed to doing evil?”

We do evil and then we form habits that are evil. God made us to be creatures of habit.

Think for a moment about getting dressed this morning. When you put on your shirt, which arm did you put in first? If you are normal, you had to stop and think about it for a moment. Because this morning, you didn't stop to think. You just put in the same arm that you always put in first. Why? You are a creature of habit by God's design.

How did you brush your teeth? You probably just did what you always do. Same motion, same direction, same method. You have formed a teeth brushing habit.

Can you imagine how life would be if we were not creatures of habit? How tedious would it be to have to think through getting dressed every morning? How how to walk? The list could go on.

But since A) we are all sinners and B) we are creatures of habit, then it's only logical that some of our life habits are also sinful.

Think about how you talk in a marriage. Have you ever said to your spouse something like "You never listen to me!" or "You always take your mother's side!"

We all use these 100% words (always, never) but when we do, we are lying. Your spouse does indeed listen to your sometimes. So using the word "never" is a lie.

Think about a parent and a child. If the parent says, "Your room is always a mess!" the child might rightly say, "Well, it was clean last Monday!" Even if on Tuesday his room is a wreck again, the "always" is not true.

So why do we say things like that? One reason is that we learned to talk that way someplace, and now it's habit. And habits are really hard to change.

B. WE GO ABOUT LIFE CHANGE IN THE WRONG WAY

For many years in the church, we have been taught to just start doing right and stop doing wrong. And we have used motivations like duty and guilt to get people to act right.

We take the "just stop it!" approach.

"You need to stop watching the garbage on TV! Just stop it!" or "God wants you read the Bible everyday. Just stop being lazy and pick up your Bible!"

Somewhere we get the idea that it's up to us to pick ourselves up by the boot-straps. But is this the way the Bible teaches us to grow and change? Let's focus on this very helpful passage.

READ Jeremiah 17:5-9

The picture we see here is one we see in lots of other places in the Bible.

Psalms 1:3-4

"He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers. The wicked are not so, but are like chaff that the wind drives away."

John 15:5

“I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.”

Matthew 7:16-20

“You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorn bushes, or figs from thistles? So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus you will recognize them by their fruits.”

Galatians 5:22-23

“But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.”

It is seen all over the Bible and is a very common biblical picture. But what we have in Jeremiah 17 is a great bird’s eye view of our habits. In their book, “How People Change,” Timothy Lane and Paul Tripp describe this verse as the view from 50,000 feet.

If you were driving around downtown Chicago, it can get confusing quickly. Knowing where to turn and when to turn to get to the place you want to go is near impossible if all you have is what you see while on the ground. But with a map (or GPS), you get the view from 50,000 feet. You get the big picture.

In life, it’s hard to know why I do the things I do. Why can’t I just stop doing wrong and just start doing right? Why did I make that choice? Why did I sin again? When we are looking at the ground level of life, so to speak, it’s hard to know what’s really going on. But in Jeremiah 17, we get a better, more comprehensive view.

2 UNDERSTAND THE PICTURE

READ Jeremiah 17:5-10

🔪 What are the two kinds of trees talked about in this text?

🔪 What are some of the characteristics of the barren tree?

✎ What are some of the characteristics of the fruitful tree?

✎ Summarize verse 9 in your own words.

Read on to take a closer look at all the elements in this picture.

A. THE BARREN TREE

READ vs. 5-6

This is me when I'm living in sin. I'm a thorny bush and the thorns are my sinful actions.

The New Testament calls this "living according to the flesh." In fact, consider this from Galatians 5, before Paul shares the fruit of the Spirit:

Galatians 5:19-21

"Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these."

This is living in the flesh.

✎ Do you ever have times when you are living in the flesh?

✎ What are some of the things you do when you living in the flesh?

We are all the barren tree at times, and we often find ourselves living in the flesh.

B. THE FRUITFUL TREE

READ vs. 8

In these verses, we have the barren tree but we also have the fruitful tree. This is living in the spirit.

Consider Galatians 5:22-23

“But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.”

Are there times in our lives when we are living in love, joy, peace, and patience.

Yes, there are times when we live life in such a way that we find ourselves exhibiting the fruit of the spirit.

🗒 Do you ever have times when you are living in the Spirit?

🗒 What are some of the things you do when you living in the Spirit?

🗒 How can you live in the Spirit more?

So, we see that at times, we are the barren tree, living in the flesh and acting sinfully. And at times, we are the fruitful tree, living in the Spirit and acting in godly ways.

A couple questions to think about:

- What makes the difference?
- How do I live more as the fruitful tree and less like the barren tree?
- How do I change?

C. WHAT CHANGE IS NOT

Let me start by addressing a big misconception. Change is not in our circumstances.

We think and say things like, “I’m sorry I yelled, but I was tired.”

“Work is just so frustrating, that’s why I’m short-tempered at home.” We believe that if we could just move, life would get better. What about, “If I wasn’t sick, then I wouldn’t be so grumpy.” Or, “If that guy at work hadn’t said what he said then I wouldn’t have said what I said.”

The list could go on and on. We like to take the blame off ourselves and blame the circumstances.

But notice something really interesting in the text.

READ vs. 6

☒ Where is the thorny tree?

☒ Where is the fruitful tree?

READ vs. 8

Notice the phrase “does not fear when heat comes”

So, where is the fruitful tree? They are both in the heat. It’s not the circumstances. Think about it this way.

Let’s say you are late to a meeting and there is a traffic jam. You get angry, you say a few choice words, and you pound the steering wheel. Why are you frustrated? The easy answer is, “I’m in a traffic jam!”

But then, you look over to the car next to you and you see a young girl. She’s singing, dancing, and putting on her make up. She’s as happy as can be! She’s not frustrated even though she is in the exact same traffic jam as you.

So the problem isn’t fixed by changing the circumstances. The text reveals where the real change needs to take place.

3 SEE THE HEART

There is a key word all through the text. And it's revealing to us why we do what we do. Why am I sometimes the fruitful tree, but other times, I'm thorny?

Look again at verse 5.

Where is the heart a thorny bush? It's away from the Lord and it's on man. He makes his flesh his strength. His heart is on himself.

In fact, reread Jeremiah 17:9. It's the heart that is the problem!

Which brings us to an important statement: Life change means heart change. This is all over the Bible.

READ Luke 6:43-45

➤ Where does the good treasure in a good person come from?

➤ Where does the evil treasure in an evil person come from?

➤ From where does our mouth speak?

This is why, in Matthew 22:37, Jesus says the greatest commandment is:

"And he said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind."

God wants your heart. He wants all of it.

Proverbs 4:23 says

"Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life."

If we know this to be true, then how foolish is it to try to change people's behavior without changing their heart? This is why the "Just stop it" method does not work. Trying to change behavior without changing the heart is like trying to change the fruit of a tree without changing its root.

Paul Tripp illustrated this principle with a parable of his own.

He had an apple tree in his back yard that year in and year out produced dry, wrinkled, brown, pulpy apples. After several seasons, his wife suggested that they should cut down the tree if they can't get good fruit from it. So, Paul had an idea of what to do. He return home with branch cutters, a heavy-duty staple gun, a ladder, and two bushels of apples. He then cut off all the pulpy, wrinkled, brown apples and stapled the shiny red apples to every branch of the tree. From a distance, the tree looked like it was full of a beautiful harvest. For a while, it seemed like the real thing, but eventually it proved to be a temporary and cosmetic fix.

"If a tree produces bad apples year after year, there is something drastically wrong with its system, down to its very roots. I won't solve the problem by stapling new apples onto the branches. The apples will rot because they are not attached to a life-giving root system. And next spring, I will have the same problem again. I will not see a new crop of healthy apples because my solution has not gone to the heart of the problem. If the tree's roots remain unchanged, it will never produce good apples."

Let's drill this down a bit. When you think about the heart, think about heart desires. Ask yourself, "What do I want?"

Here's a helpful phrase to summarize: ***"I do what I do because I want what I want."***

- *What do many teens want?*

If a teen went to a new school and all the "cool" kids were wearing those helicopter hats, how long would it take for your teen to ask you to buy one for him? Now, why would anyone want to wear one of those silly hats? Because everyone else wears one. And if I wear one, I will be accepted.

What do teens want? They want acceptance.

Notice that the heart desire drove the action.

- *What do many men want?*

Bob worked long hours to get ahead. He would often sacrifice time with his family to take another sales call or to attend that new conference. He knew that with hard work comes a sense of accomplishment. He could climb the ladder and people would notice! His life would mean something. So he worked all the time.

What do men want? They want significance.

Notice that the drive for significance, the heart desire, moved him to action.

Do you see this in these illustrations?

- The heart, focused on its own desires, will produce bad fruit and thorns.
- The heart, focused on God and His desires, will produce good fruit.

So, how do we change, then? How do we fix the root? Read on.

4 FIND THE CHANGE

READ Jeremiah 17:14

After he considered the wretched state of his heart and the impact it had on life, Jeremiah set to make it right.

He didn't say, "I'm going to be better Lord, watch and see!" He didn't say, "My wife needs me to do better. My kids need me to do better. I'm going to do it."

No. That's just more self-focus. He knew what we all know: We can't save ourselves. So, he cried out to God for salvation.

READ vs. 14

Now, we know the end of the story don't we?

🔪 How was this prayer of Jeremiah's ultimately fulfilled?

No doubt, it was fulfilled on the cross. God sent Jesus to die for our sins and rise again buying our salvation once for all.

How do I change my heart from my desires and focus again on God? I go to the cross.

Think about this. What did we say that teens want? Acceptance.

How much did God show His acceptance of us? He showed it ultimately by sending His Son to die so that we would be accepted. He rejected Jesus to accept us.

What do men want? Significance. If God choose you before the foundation of the world (Eph. 1) and loved you so much that He gave His Son in your place, what more significance do you need?

Do you see it? You want significance and acceptance? He died for YOU!

You want pleasure? Think about all the guilt and shame of your sin. Then think about it being wiped away on the cross.

If you want heart change, you need to drag your heart back to the cross.

So here's another important statement:

Our hearts are changed through the ongoing work of the gospel.

In the next booklet, we will work out how this happens in more detail. But for now, here a few questions.

4 LIFE CHANGE

- What are some of your heart desires?

- Finish the statement; “If only _____ then I would feel more happy?”

- What does your answer say about what you want out of life?

DIGGING DEEPER:

How People Change, by Lane and Tripp
Instruments in the Redeemer’s Hands by Paul Tripp
Living the Cross Centered Life by C.J. Mahaney