



HOW TO BE HUMAN (AGAIN) | FIGHT

June 27, 2021

As we emerge from the pandemic and reenter society, we've been talking about how we've all got to learn how to be human again, and that has set up our current sermon series. Jesus not only shows us what a truly human life looks like, but the whole reason why Jesus lived, died, and rose again, was to make us fully human—like himself. Even now Jesus is on a mission to renew God's image in you, so that you might become your true self—the person that God has destined you to be. Another way to put it is to say that we're exploring the theological concept of sanctification or what you could call God's way of change.

Last week, I began by posing this question: Do you think that change is really possible? Is it possible for us to experience deep, lasting character change? Now we might say, well yes. We can make a few behavioral modifications, but can we really get below the surface? Can we make more than superficial changes or are we stuck, especially the older we get in deeply ingrained patterns of thought and behavior? Is change really possible? Yes, I believe it is by God's grace.

I want to follow up with asking a second question, which is: Why is it so hard? Why is change so hard? Why does it take so long? Why doesn't it come more naturally to us? We might look back over our shoulders and consider our past, and we can see, yes, perhaps we've made some progress over time, but it's been so slow, and it's been so painful. You might well wonder why that's the case. In some ways, the pandemic might have even increased the degree of difficulty. In some ways, the pandemic has served like a mirror in our lives. It shows us what we're really like. We might have thought that we were a certain kind of person, but now after the stresses and the strains of the last 15 months, you see who you really are. When you look in the mirror, you may not like what you see. All that can leave you feeling more than a bit defeated. *If this is what I'm really like, and if change is this hard, this slow, this painful, well then maybe I don't even want to try anymore.* Maybe you're tempted to just throw up your hands and give up. But if that's the case, I've got good news for you because what I want you to see today is that God's way of change is unique. If you understand how it works, well then it might just change your whole outlook on your life.

I'd like us to explore God's way of change more deeply today by considering the foundation for change, the fight for change, and the freedom of change by focusing on Colossians 3:5-14. Last week, we looked at verses one through four so now we'll continue with Paul's letter to the Colossians. So listen, as I read,

“Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. On account of these the wrath of God is coming. In these you too once walked, when you were living in them. But now you must put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in

knowledge after the image of its creator. Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all. Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony."

This is God's word. It's trustworthy, and it's true, and it's given to us in love.

The Foundation For Change

Well, let's begin with the foundation for change because if you don't get the foundation right then everything else is going to be off. You've heard me say over the last few weeks that God's way of change is unique, because God's way of change is not self-reliant activism, nor God-reliant passivity, but God-dependent effort. Another way to say that is that God's way of change is not moralistic legalism nor permissive license or libertinism, but something altogether different. So let me explain.

First of all God's way of change is not self-reliant activism. Many people today are focused on what you could call the project of the self. We're all about self improvement. There's all kinds of people that are pushing different philosophies or techniques or strategies in order to help you become a new and better you. Some of these may seem to be very Christian because they talk about God or they use the language of the Bible. Some of these strategies or techniques or philosophies may appear to be quite spiritual, because they give you rules to live by and practices that are rather rigorous or demanding. What they all have in common is a focus on yourself, and what you need to do by your own efforts in order to make yourself worthy. We've got to watch out for any form of spirituality that masquerades as Christian because it looks so mature, or because it makes so many impressive demands.

The Apostle Paul suggested that various forms of spirituality may give all appearances of godliness and yet deny its power. You see hard work and effort that does not spring from the gospel of grace will not sanctify you, it will strangle you. So Paul's telling us very clearly in his letter to the Colossians that God's way of change is not self-reliant activism, but it's not passivity either. That's the other error that we can fall into. What's the mantra that many people live by today? It's *be authentic*. Right? You have to be authentic in order to be your true self, and therefore, you should just do whatever comes naturally to you. That's how you're authentic. You have to do whatever comes spontaneously, so you shouldn't do anything that you don't feel like doing. You should only do what comes naturally or you should only do what God seems to move you to do. But if you're that passive, it's hard to see how that will not lead you to indulge your worst impulses. God's way of change is neither self-reliant activity nor God-reliant passivity, but something altogether different. You're not going to change by just sitting there. You're not going to experience change by just doing whatever comes naturally or spontaneously to you. No, you're supposed to do something. You're supposed to exert yourself, but the effort you put forth is the effort of relying on Jesus more. That's why this is not mere moralism. The effort you put forth is learning to rely on Jesus.

The Fight For Change

True change comes not by relying on yourself, but relying on the Spirit of Jesus at work within you not in order to win God's love, but rather, because you already have it. That's the foundation for change. If you don't start there, then everything else will be off. We see that right here in verse 12. Notice, Paul is writing to Christians. He's writing to people who have put their faith in Jesus and notice how he refers to them and to us by extension. He calls us God's chosen ones—holy and beloved. You see that, if you are in Christ, by faith, then it means that you are already chosen. It means that you are already holy, it means that you are already God's beloved. God has already set you apart. He's already devoted you to himself. He's already made you the object of his holy love. God does not love you to the extent that you are like Jesus. God loves you to the extent that you are in Jesus. That's 100%. If you are in Jesus by faith and you're in him 100% and there's nothing that you can do to make God love you more. There's nothing that you can do to make God love you less, he already loves you perfectly. His love for you is fixed. Nothing can ever change that. So the message of the gospel is not *live this way, and God will love you*, but rather, *God already loves you in and through Jesus Christ now, live this way*. That, of course, changes everything.

So let me give you a little secret to reading the Bible. Here's a tip: When reading through the Bible, the imperatives are always based on the indicatives. The imperatives, the commands, the things that you're supposed to do, are always based on the indicatives, the statements of who you are as a result of God's grace in your life. The moment you put your faith in Jesus, you are a new creation. You receive a whole new identity. You are not the same person anymore, and so the commands in the Bible are never telling you to try to become something that you're not, but rather, to be who you already are. Be who you already are by God's grace. Live out this new identity that you have received. Paul is simply reminding us here of who we are, who we are as Christians, and how we're supposed to live out that identity. That's the starting point. If you don't get that right, then everything else will be off. Your spirituality may give the appearance of godliness, but it will in fact deny its power, if it is not built on this foundation. But that's not to suggest that change is easy. No, you've got to fight for it. You have to fight for it, and that's why the Christian life is so hard.

Now, the moment that you put your faith in Jesus, you are engaged in a conflict. You're brought into a conflict between what the Bible calls the sarx and the spirits. Now that word sarx in Greek is usually translated as flesh, but I prefer to leave it untranslated because the sarx is not referring to the muscular tissue that covers your bones and the sarx is not merely your bodily appetites or desires. No, the sarx is your old self, your old self tainted and twisted by sin. When you're a Christian, when you put your faith in Jesus, Jesus frees you from the power of sin, but not yet the presence of sin. When you put your faith in Jesus, Jesus frees you from the power of sin, you're no longer under its dominion, but you have not yet been freed from the presence of sin that still continues to exert an influence on your life. So another way to think of it would be to say that your old self has been dethroned, but it has not yet been destroyed. Although one day it will be. But for that reason, that old self continues to rear its ugly head. It continues to exert its influence. It continues to distract you from living out the new identity that you have received in Jesus. Now everyone

experiences inner conflict. We all go through periods in our lives where we experience competing desires within us, but before you become a Christian, that's just a conflict happening within you. But the Christian experience is something even more radical. It's not just conflict within you, not just a battle within yourself, but it's actually a battle between the sarx and the Spirit of God—the Spirit of God that is now at work within you. The battle is even more intense, which actually is a kind of encouragement in a strange sort of way because if you're trying to live the Christian life, and you find that it's hard, that it hurts, well then that's actually the sign that it's working. It's a little bit like working out or lifting weights; if you're sore afterwards, it means that it's working. You are engaged in a conflict. It's the ultimate conflict between the sarx and the Spirit. But see, here's the good news. You are not left to fight this battle on your own. No, you have a superpower at your disposal. You have the very spirit of God, the very same Spirit that raised Jesus from the dead is at work in your life, to put to death the old self and to raise you up to be the new self. The key to transformation and change is not relying on yourself, your own power, or your own resources, but relying on the spirit that is active within you. That is why Paul says in Galatians 5:16, for example, walk by the Spirit. Walk by the Spirit. Rely on the Spirit, walk by the Spirit and you will not gratify the desires of the sarx. You will not walk by the Spirit and you will not gratify the desires of the sarx.

Now, you've probably heard me tell you about the story of Augustine, the early Christian leader who was very candid in his spiritual autobiography, "The Confessions," about his struggles with sexual temptation in particular, as a younger man. There's a particular moment in the confessions when he describes how he became a Christian, how he eventually gave his life to Christ. He was living in Milan at the time, and he felt like his life was going nowhere. He was somewhat disillusioned. He tried many different philosophies. He was experiencing at this point, something like a spiritual awakening. He felt the tug to put his faith in Jesus, but he just didn't think that he could do it. He didn't think that he had the strength or the power to leave his old life behind. One day he goes out into the garden outside of his home and he sits underneath a fig tree and he's overwhelmed. He begins to cry. He's weeping about his condition. He has this desire to become a Christian, but he doesn't think he can do it. While he's sitting there crying underneath this fig tree, he hears a child's voice somewhere from beyond the walls. That child is singing or chanting words, but he doesn't recognize these words from a song or a game. He doesn't know exactly what they mean, but the child keeps saying over and over again *take up and read, take up and read*. So he takes this as a sign. Maybe God's trying to communicate with me, and he wants me to take up and read the Scripture so I'm going to read whatever verse my eye first falls on. He picks up a Bible, and he starts reading and what does he start reading? Romans 13:14, "But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires." And with that, in that moment, Augustine said that suddenly it was as if a light of certainty shone in his heart, and all of a sudden the gloom of darkness vanished. Now, many people would probably say, well the way I became a Christian was by reading John 3:16, "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son that whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have eternal life." But for Augustine, no, it was Romans 13, "Put on the Lord Jesus Christ." Put him on, and make no provision for the flesh or the sarx to satisfy its desires.

Jesus never said becoming our true selves would be easy. No, he set us free in order to enter the fight. What does that look like in practice? Here in Colossians, Paul uses the metaphor of taking off and putting on clothing. In the same way that there's different types of clothing that are appropriate for certain roles or occasions, so there are certain practices, certain lifestyles that are appropriate, that are befitting, for the life of a Christian and others that are not. That's what we have to do. We have to actively think about what we will take off and what we will put on.

One of the first weddings that I ever performed was for my best friend growing up who had a hilarious sense of humor. As a gag gift for all of the groomsmen, including the minister, he gave each of us a red Speedo bathing suit, with our nickname written on the back side, in silver. So I received a red Speedo bathing suit with the word thunder written across the back because my nickname in high school was thundertouch, a name I earned from my Young Life leader, because I had a tendency to inadvertently break things. I don't know how many dishes, glasses or holes I broke or destroyed. Whatever I touched, I broke. Now, maybe that bathing suit, maybe, would be appropriate to wear to the beach—you'll be happy to know I've never actually even put it on—but it certainly would not be appropriate to wear to a wedding. I think the mother of the bride was very worried that we were going to wear it at least to the rehearsal. It would be shocking and offensive to wear a bathing suit, especially as the minister, to a wedding. Paul is saying much the same thing. If you know who you are as a Christian, then it is shocking and offensive to wear certain lifestyles and practices as a Christian. So in effect, he's telling us to remember who you are and live your life that way, but clothes don't just pop out of the drawer and put themselves on. No, you have to think. You have to think about what you're going to wear.

First of all, Paul tells us what we need to take off. He uses a rather strong word here. He says put to death what is earthly in you. In the King James Version that's translated as *mortify*. You have to mortify what is earthly in you. Put to death your sin. To mortify your sin means to ruthlessly reject all those things that do not fit with your identity as a Christian. It means to live a life of daily repentance. You're continually turning away from all that you know is wrong, which does not fit. Rather than dabbling with old habits or ways of life or letting them run their course or assuming that you could gradually get rid of them, Paul says no, you must kill them. You must kill them off—put to death—what is earthly in you.

He gives us two lists of practices that we need to take off. The first has to do with sexual sins. The second has to do with sins of anger and of speech. It's interesting to me, those are two categories that New Yorkers in particular seem to struggle with the most. First he tells us to take off sexual sins, verse five, "Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry." Now, the first term that he uses there, sexual immorality, is actually one word in the Greek. It's a catch all word that refers to any and all any and all sexual intimacy that takes place outside of the context of the covenant of marriage between one man and one woman. Now, Paul takes some time talking about sex, and so it's appropriate that we do as well, because I think there's a lot of confusion in our day when it comes to sex. Many people either treat sex as nothing or they treat it as everything. Some people treat it as nothing. They say, *we human beings, we're, we're*

just animals, and so sex is nothing. It doesn't matter what you do, who you do it with, or when, because it's just a way of getting our physical needs met. It's nothing. Then there's others who treat sex as everything. They would say, *no, no, sex is central to my identity. This is how I express myself, and this is the closest I can ever come to a transcendent experience.* So we treat it as either nothing or everything, but the Bible treats sex in a very nuanced kind of way—not as nothing or everything. Sex is considered a good gift. It's a good gift of God, but it's not ultimate. It's good, but it's not ultimate, and that is why it needs to be channeled in the proper way. It needs to be reserved for that permanent, exclusive covenant of marriage, because sex is a nonverbal way of communicating to another person *I belong permanently, and exclusively to you.* I belong permanently and exclusively to you, and so when you remove sex from the context of the permanent exclusive bond of marriage then you turn sex into a lie because now you're communicating something with your body that is not actually true in your life.

Now, I'm not naive. I'm well aware that there are many couples listening to my voice right now who are living together and sleeping together, and you might say, *well, this is New York. What do you expect?* Well, I expect you to stop. I expect you to stop because this doesn't fit with your Christian identity. This is Christian ethics 101. This is not advanced stuff. This is basic to Christian discipleship. It's only within very, very recent years, that anyone would ever question it. No, for 2000 years, this has been settled Christian practice and so I expect you to stop or maybe it's time to get married. I'm happy to talk to you about either one. I'm also well aware that there are many people listening to my voice right now who struggle with pornography, another form of sexual intimacy that has been removed from the context of marriage. You might say, *well, we've been living through a period of 15 months of isolation, what do you expect?* I expect you to stop. But if you can't stop, I would encourage you to come speak to me because there's no judgement. When Jesus frees us and forgives us, he removes the guilt and the shame. There's no shame. There's no condemnation, but come talk to me so that we can get you the help that you need. Paul's serious, and he takes sex seriously, but I appreciate his balance because he talks about sex, but he doesn't harp upon it. It's not the unforgivable sin. It's a sin, an area of sin, but it's not the only one.

Then he goes on to talk about putting away anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk, Do not lie to one another. He's focused on not just the actions of the body, but also the attitudes of the mind and the words that we speak with our mouths. He goes on to say, "seeing that you have put off the old self," see that, you've put off the old self with its practices and you put on the new self, which is, here it is again, "being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator." He doesn't just focus on the negative—what we need to take off; he also focuses on the positive—what we need to put on. "Put on then as God's chosen ones holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness and patience, bearing with one another, and if one has a complaint against another forgiving each other, as the Lord has forgiven you. So you also must forgive. Above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony." You'll notice the theme here is that Paul is primarily concerned with the ways in which we live together in community. If you

have been rescued by God's grace, well then you have to use your words, your body, your life, not to indulge the self, not to indulge the sarx, but rather to serve others. He's inviting us into a fight, but this is the only way to true freedom.

The Freedom Of Change

The real question is, how do we do this? Where do we find clothes like these? Well, these clothes have often been referred to as the *garments of grace* because these clothes are not something that you can manufacture. They're not something that you can buy. They're not something that you can earn. You can only receive them. Most people understand that the way in which you become a Christian is by relying on Jesus rather than yourself. But we make the mistake of thinking that the way in which you grow as a Christian is by relying on yourself, and your own hard work and effort, but no. The way in which we become a Christian, and the way in which we grow as a Christian is the same. It's by deepening our dependence and trust upon Jesus.

When people fail, when they make mistakes, when they experience a moral lapse, when they commit a sin, they usually think of that as some kind of failure of willpower, which they can then correct through greater self control. So we tell ourselves, well this is wrong. We're going to be found out. There's going to be consequences to this. I've got to do more. I've got to try harder. I've got to stop. But all the great theologians, from Paul to Augustine and down to the present day, know that the key to true lasting change is not the result of a greater exertion of our own will, but rather experiencing a sense on our hearts of God's love for us that would lead us to ask, *well, why would I want to do this thing? Why would I want to live this way, in light of all that Jesus has done for me.* You see, rather than wailing on our will, we have to work on our hearts. We can't rely on ourselves, we have to rely on the Spirit's power, because the Holy Spirit's job is to flood our hearts with the knowledge of God's love for us, and that's what drains the power of sin in our life. That's what kills it off. You can't just drive out the sin or else it'll come right back. No, you have to replace it. You have to replace it with a love that's even greater. The reason why you sin is because you love it. You have to learn to love something more. So you don't wail on your will, you work on your heart using all the means that God gives so that you have a sense on your heart of the depth of God's love for you because you can't kill your sin by yourself. Only the Spirit can do that. That's the only way to true freedom.

So let me illustrate this with a story from C.S. Lewis's allegory, "The Great Divorce." In this little tale, Lewis imagines a group of people who travel from the home that they live in in hell, to the outskirts of heaven. There they're greeted by people who they might have known in their former life, who entreat them to stay in heaven, to come up out of the foothills and into the mountains into the high places into heaven itself. On one occasion, the narrator sees a person who in fact, is a ghost because all the people visiting from hell are just a mere shadow of who they once were. They're just ghosts, they have no form and no substance. The narrator sees this ghost and on its shoulder is a red lizard. This red lizard represents the old self. It represents indwelling sin. The lizard is whipping its tail around. It's whispering in the man's ear. Finally, the man gives up, and he starts walking away from the mountains of heaven and he decides that he's just gonna go home. Just then a flaming spirit appears, an angel, and asks him why he's leaving. If you want to catch the allegory, the ghost is you, the lizard is your

indwelling sin, your old self, and the angel is the Holy Spirit.

So the angel says to the ghost, “Are you off?”

“Yes. I’m off,” said the ghost. “Thanks for all your hospitality, but it’s no good. You see, I told this little chap, and there he indicated to the lizard, that he would have to be quiet if he came with me, which he insisted on doing.”

“Of course, his stuff won’t do here.”

“I realized that, but he won’t stop, so I’m just gonna have to go home.”

“Well, would you like me to make him quiet?” said the flaming spirit.

“Of course I would,” said the ghost.

“Well, then I will kill him,” said the angel, taking a step forward.

“Oh, look out. You’re burning me! Keep away!” said the ghost, retreating from the flaming spirit.

“Well, don’t you want them killed?”

“Well, you didn’t say anything about killing him? I hardly meant to bother you with anything so drastic is that?”

“Well, it’s the only way,” said the angel who’s burning hands were now very close to the lizard.

“Shall I kill it?”

Well, that’s a further question. I’m quite open to consider it, but it’s a new point, isn’t it? I mean, for the moment, I was only thinking about silencing it because up here, well, it’s so damned embarrassing.”

“May I kill it?”

“Well, there’s time to discuss that later.”

“There is no time. May I kill it?”

“Please, please. I never meant to be such a nuisance. Please, really don’t bother. Look, look, it’s gone to sleep. But he went to sleep. It went to sleep of its own accord. I’m sure it’s gonna be all right now. Thanks ever so much.”

“May I kill it?”

“Honestly, I don’t think there’s the slightest necessity for that. I’m sure I shall be

able to keep it in order now. I think the gradual process would be far better than killing it.”

“The gradual process is of no use at all.”

Then as the angel approaches as the ghost cries out, “Get back, you’re burning me? How can I tell you to kill it? you’d kill me if you did.”

“It is not so.”

“Why? you’re hurting me now.”

“I never said it wouldn’t hurt you. I said it wouldn’t kill you.”

Finally the ghost concedes and tells the angel to go on and get it over with. So the angel closes its grip on the lizard, twists it and then casts it aside. Then something surprising happens. The ghost suddenly is transformed into a real man. Though he was merely a shadow of his former self, no form or substance now that the indwelling sin has been destroyed, he becomes fully human himself.

Then, something even more surprising happens because that lizard does not merely die. No, it also is transformed, and it becomes the most beautiful stallion that the man has ever seen. Then he mounts this horse and then together they speed away into the mountains of heaven. Then the guide, who is taking the narrator through this tour, asks the narrator,

“Do you understand all this, my son?” said the teacher?

“I don’t know about all, sir,” said I. “Am I right in thinking the Lizard really turned into the horse?”

“Yes, but he was killed first. You will not forget that part of it.”

“Well, I’ll try not to, but does it mean that everything that is in us can go on to the mountain?”

“Nothing, not even the best of the noblest can go on, as it now is. But nothing, not even what is lowest and most bestial will not be raised again if it submits to death.”

As Jesus himself said, give up yourself, and you will find your true self. Lose your life and you will save it. Nothing in you that has not died will ever be raised again from the dead. The death of sin is the only way to the freedom of life. Jesus never said that becoming our true selves would be painless and easy, but he sets us free in order to enter into the fight. He gives us the resources to fight knowing that the victory is ours, not in ourselves, but in him.

Let me pray for us.

Father God, we recognize that we are not yet our true selves. So we pray that you would help us to see those aspects of our life that we need to take off and those new characteristics, attitudes, practices, behaviors, lifestyles that we need to put on in order to live out our true identity. Help us to see that you're not asking us to become something that we're not, but rather to be who we already are by your grace. So help us to remember who we are, a new creation, because of what Jesus has done for us. We ask this in Jesus' name and for his sake. Amen.