

LAWS FOR SPIRITUAL GROWTH

Part 4: I must think right

If you have been following the political scene, you know both candidates are promising change. Turn on the t.v. and you see shows about change. "Extreme Makeovers" that turn "ugly ducklings" into "The Swan." After only three months, six surgeries, and countless hours of coaching, regular men and women are turned into supermodels. In less than an hour we get to see the entire transformation And then there is "The Biggest Loser" where overweight people compete against one another to see who can lose the most weight.

Stories of transformation are not new. For centuries, frogs have turned into handsome princes and pumpkins into carriages. We like to see our lives changing for the best, and that is what the Christian life promises.

One of the first verses I learned as a new Christian was

2 Cor 5:17, "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!"

I also like

2 Cor 3:18, "And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit."

One of the miracles that Christianity brings is that of change. God says you don't have to continue to be who you have been. I will make you different." We see that illustrated in the scripture with people like Peter and Paul whose lives were radically transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit. So, how does this change take place? What do we do on our end to make it happen? That is what we have been discussing in our series on laws of spiritual growth. The first law is the fact that god is god and we're not. The second law is that the inside is more important than the outside. Last week we saw the fact that we must live by faith. And now, the fourth law is that I must think right thoughts if I'm to grow. That is because everything in your life begins with your thoughts. Ralph Waldo Emerson said, "Beware of what you set your mind on because that you surely will become."

Prov. 23:7 "For as he thinks in his heart, so is he."

All wars began as thoughts. All divorces began as thoughts. All criminal acts began as thoughts. All drug addiction began as thoughts. All suicides began as thoughts. What we think, we eventually become.

I heard about a lady who went to see a psychiatrist and she said, "Doctor, you've got to help my husband." The doctor said, "What's wrong with him?" She said, "He thinks he's a race horse." The doctor said, "How do you know?" She said, "Well, he wants to live in a stable, he walks around on all fours, and he even eats hay." The doctor said, "Well, I'm sure I can cure him, but it will take a long time and it will cost a tremendous amount of money." The lady said, "Well, money is no object, he's already won two races." You really are what you think.

If you don't like what's happening to you right now, it's your thinking that got you where you are. What we will be in the future will depend on our current thoughts.

An old proverb has put it this way: "You sow a thought you reap an act; you sow an act you reap a habit; you sow a habit you reap a character; you sow a character you reap a destiny."

THE POSSIBILITY OF CHANGE

Can a person change? I mean really change--stop being one way and start being another. Can someone go from being insecure to secure, from lazy to industrious? Can someone go from being perpetually angry to consistently peaceful? Can someone go from being pessimistic to optimistic, from selfish to generous? Can a person really change? The honest answer to that question is "yes. People can change, and the change does not come easily. Change is not something that you accidentally fall into.

Change takes effort. It requires making decisions that we don't want to make. It requires saying "no" when we want to say "yes" ... and saying "yes" when we would rather say "no." There is no "Apostle Paul" pill, or a "Billy Graham" pill that will change you. Change takes, time, effort and strategy, and it's all wrapped up in the way you think.

THE PLAN FOR CHANGE

1. STOP NEGATIVE THOUGHT PATTERNS

Almost a generation ago, when the computer revolution had just begun, not many people knew how to operate a computer and those who did made many mistakes. Sometimes the beginners experts entered the wrong data only to discover a universal truth: What you put into a computer determines what comes out. If you put the right data in, the right answers come out. The reverse is also true. Garbage In, Garbage Out. *What is true of computers is also true of the human mind.* Garbage In, Garbage Out. What you put into your mind determines what you get out. That means you need to be very careful about what you think. If you are going to grow spiritually, you must think right.

a) Self pity (nobody know the trouble I've seen)

Life is hard for all of us. It's easy to think that somehow we've been dealt an unfair hand, that while our neighbor is basking in sunshine, we're living in a perpetual downpour. The self-pitying person says, "You don't know what I'm going through" or "You try living with this 24 hours a day and see how happy you are." Without changing anything in your life, there is enough evidence for you this very moment to convince yourself that life is either miserable or magnificent. It's your choice.

b) Self depreciation (I am a loser)

Have you ever found yourself telling yourself how bad you are? "I don't look good." "I'm not as smart as other people." "People don't like me." The truth is that it does not matter nearly as much as to what you're like as it does what you think you're like. In all probability, the person that you see in the mirror each morning is not the same person that other people see.

Years ago there was a brother sister singing group called the carpenters. Karen carpenter had a beautiful voice as well as a beautiful countenance. The problem was that she thought she was fat, and she began starving herself. She was in and out of the hospital and began to have serious health problems, and she finally died. She was so skinny that she looked like a concentration camp victim, but in her eyes she was fat. Listen to what you're saying about yourself in your thought life.

c) Self vindication (I have been done wrong)

What has happened to me is not my fault. *Once you begin to pity and yourself, you become a victim*, and victims can't be blamed, right? And if you're not to blame, then someone else is. So, you find another person who seems to be the source of your problems. It might be your husband or your wife; it could be your children or your parents. It often is a friend, a neighbor, or your boss. Blaming is dangerous because it leads to perpetual victimhood.

Your thoughts matter! Negative thinking leads to negative living.

d) Past regrets

Past regrets will weaken your life. Replace it with future focus.

Philippians 3:13, "Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead."

If anyone could have gotten stuck with his past, it would have been the apostle Paul. Before coming to know Christ, he was a persecutor of the church. You can't move

forward while you are looking backward. With God, every day is a new day. You never have to be bound with past failures.

2. TEST YOUR THOUGHTS

Self talk is the kind of thinking that commonly goes on in your mind throughout the day.

Throughout each day you are talking to yourself, and what you say to yourself will directly affect and shape your life. Paul gives us a filter through which we can run our thoughts.

Philippians 4:8. Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things.

This verse gives us eight questions to ask about our thoughts. Before you think about something, ask these questions.

a) Is it true?

Do you ever find yourself thinking negative thoughts about yourself? Do you ever tell yourself that you just don't have what it takes and that things will never be any different? If you began thinking such thoughts, you need to challenge those thoughts with the scripture. The Scripture says you are a very special creation made by god for a very special purpose. The Scripture says that with god with you, you'll be able to succeed in whatever he ask you to do. Most of the negative self thoughts that run through our minds are not true, and we need to stop them.

b) Is it noble?

Is your thought life honorable?

c) Is it right?

“Is it in conformity to God's standards.” Not, “Is it right in my eyes?” or “Is it right in the eyes of others?” but “Is it right in God's eyes?”

d) Is it pure?

“Whatever is pure.” The word means “undefiled, chaste, clean, holy.” It touches the whole area of moral purity. Is your thought-life clean? ”

A father was doing his best to teach his children to make wise choices about what they watched on t.v. and at the movies, but they fought him all the way. Their father tried

explaining that if they put garbage in, garbage was going to come out. They didn't care. They had all the excuses. "It was just a little sex scene. They all have it. I hear more profanity in my gym class. I don't let it affect me. It's just a movie, what's the big deal?"

Nothing the father said made any difference, and if they didn't they were going to be upset. The father couldn't make them understand by telling them it was wrong. On the next Saturday morning, he announced that he was going to be making his "world famous" brownies as a special treat for that night. He didn't use the boxed brownie mix. He made them from scratch, and he only used the best ingredients. He even bought extra rich chocolate chips to make them real gooey. As an extra special treat, he bought the family's favorite ice cream to top it off. After dinner, the children could hardly sit still. The brownies were still warm from the oven. Dad cut each child an extra large slice and topped it off with ice cream. Just as they started to dig in, he reminded them that he only used the best ingredients. He also, reminded them that they were real gooey because he used extra chocolate chips. And they were extra flavorful because of all the chopped walnuts he put in. They couldn't wait. They all started to dig in again. Just before they brought the treat to their mouth he added, "And I only put in a little dog potty. It's not very much and I mixed it in really well. You probably won't even notice. Go ahead eat up." Suddenly, the children were not interested. No matter how good his ingredients were, they weren't going to put something in their mouth that had dog potty in it—no matter how well it was mixed in. It was then that they began to understand the point he was trying to make about t.v. A little bit of bad can spoil a whole lot of good. How about you? Would you eat the brownies? Are you more concerned about what you put into your physical body than what you are putting into your mind?

e) Is it lovely?

f) Is it admirable?

"Whatever is admirable." That is, is it worthy of study and contemplation?

g) Is it excellent?

h) Is it something that God would approve?

What about the music you listen to, the movies you watch, the books you read? If you feed your mind with the wrong thoughts all week, 1 hour on Sunday is not going to make up for it.

3. REFLECT ON GOD AND HIS WAYS

Focusing on difficulties intensifies the problem. When we claim God's promises and look at His majesty, the problems are put in proper perspective. We see that over and over in

he book of Psalms. As poured out his distress to the Lord, the writer also deliberately turned his focus towards God.

Psalm 25:1-3;8-10, "To you, O LORD, I lift up my soul; 2 in you I trust, O my God. Do not let me be put to shame, nor let my enemies triumph over me. 3 No one whose hope is in you will ever be put to shame, but they will be put to shame who are treacherous without excuse. 8 Good and upright is the LORD; therefore he instructs sinners in his ways. 9 He guides the humble in what is right and teaches them his way. 10 All the ways of the LORD are loving and faithful for those who keep the demands of his covenant."

When the writers of the New Testament wrote their books, they emphasized the greatness and the goodness of the Lord.

For example Romans 1:7, "To all in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ."

How many times do the writers use the word "grace?" They repeatedly tell us that god is full of grace. My favorite definition of grace is god meeting you at the point of your need. As you journey through life, you will have many difficulties and many challenges. The bible tells us that god will be there meeting you at the point of your need, that you will not have to go through it alone but that he will sustain you through his power. If I am able to get that much down, it will change my life.

Instead of thinking about you and your problems, practice thinking about god, who He is and what He promises to do.

4. Memorize Scripture

Psalm 119:9-11, "How can a young man keep his way pure? By living according to your word. I seek you with all my heart; do not let me stray from your commands. I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you."

It is the scripture that god uses in our lives to change us and give us spiritual growth. And, in a world that is filled with negative and impure thinking, we need a constant influx of scripture. The psalmist said,

"Your word have I hidden in my heart that I might not sin against you." (Ps. 119:11)

The word "hidden" literally means "to store up" or "to load." A few years ago, we bought a tivo in order to record programs that we would like to watch later. The problem is the tivo only has so much memory. After you have fully loaded its memory, it cannot carry any more information. The psalmist says your mind is to be so loaded with the truth of the word of God, there is no room for the lies of the devil. The problem is that you cannot carry an open bible with you everywhere you go. But you can carry the bible with you if you have it in your head and in your heart. Sitting in traffic is not something

any of us want to do, but it can be transformed into a good thing if you're meditating on scripture that you have memorized. And it is amazing how in times of question and need god can bring just the right scripture back to your mind if you have it memorized. You'll never be able to let the word of god live through you until the first of all lives in you.

5. CRY OUT TO GOD FOR HELP

Psalm 139:23, "Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts."

Changing the way you think is not something that you'll be able to do yourself. It will take god working through you can make it happen.

Changing the way we think isn't easy, because thinking isn't nearly as easy as it looks. It's hard work. Henry Ford said, "Thinking is the hardest work there is, which is the probable reason why so few engage in it."

Most of us allow our thoughts to be carried along by the whim of our emotions. Or we let allow our circumstances dictate the way we think. However, if you want to experience lasting change, you've got to control your thought life.

Transformation takes 5 steps:

1. When you change your thinking, you change your beliefs.
2. When you change your beliefs, you change your expectations.
3. When you change your expectations, you change your attitude.
4. When you change your attitude, you change your behavior.
5. When you change your behavior, you change your life!

"We can't transform ourselves. We are transformed by God. Our part is changing what we think about. Then transformation happens." *John Maxwell*