



Links Players

How We Change

And when God is personally present—a living Spirit, that old constricting [moral] legislation is recognized as obsolete. We're free of it! All of us! Nothing between us and God, our faces shining with the brightness of his face. And so we are transfigured much like the Messiah, our lives gradually becoming brighter and more beautiful as God enters our lives and we become like him. (2 Corinthian 3:18, MSG)

“Improvement” in any area of life is usually associated with exercising one’s will. Improvement then is self-generated by means of willpower. If you are to improve your handicap it requires that you take action.

Improvement literally involves YOU taking action—getting to the range and swinging the club. Only then will your scores improve.

“Good Christians” often take the same pragmatic approach to the spiritual life. We begin to exercise our willpower to clean up our lives. After all, improvement, from our experience, has shown it requires action on our part.

Real spiritual change requires much more than an act of the will. Willpower is not enough to produce genuine transformation. If we could fix ourselves, we would be our own savior (God). We would not need God’s enabling grace.

Alcoholics Anonymous uses the term “white-knuckling”—when the addict attempts to use willpower to quit drinking. Someone who is white-knuckling has not experienced holistic and internal change; they’re relying on willpower alone to stay sober. They are simply a “dry drunk,” as they say. The outward behavior may change, but the person’s internal world remains chaotic.

In Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, he addresses the issue of “white-knuckling” when he raises the moral standard so high that we collapse under its weight.

Jesus says: hate equals murder, lust equals adultery, and we must be perfect as God is perfect. Jesus’ standard is so out of reach that it makes you want to quit before you ever get started. White-knuckling doesn’t stand a chance in the face of Jesus’ requirement for perfection.

So, how do we change if it’s not simply by making the choice to modify our behavior?

In Jesus’ Sermon in Matthew 5, he provides the answer. The descriptives he uses for real change start with an internal shift in a person’s disposition. Behavioral adjustments won’t do it. Jesus says we must be poor in spirit, contrite, humble, spiritually hungry, and thirsty. One’s internal world must undergo a revolutionary overhaul before a person will begin to see outward change.

So, how do we change from the inside out? Where does the power come from to literally become somebody new on the inside?

Jesus explains that real change begins with evidence of God-initiated paradoxes in our lives, typically born out of our circumstances. A paradox is an apparent contradiction that reveals how transformation works. Victory begins with surrender, strength with weakness, happiness with contrition, spiritual filling with spiritual hunger, and forgiveness is received when we forgive others.

Simply stated, we must reach the end of ourselves. At that moment, we are forced to choose between spiritual life and spiritual death. Desperation is the doorway to supernatural change.

In the crucible of a spiritual life-or-death decision, genuine faith chooses Jesus. Jesus makes it clear that he is our only option for life—"I am the way, the truth, and the life," he tells us (John 14:16).

With a simple cry for help, the Holy Spirit can begin his work inside of us. At that moment, moral striving becomes obsolete. No more white-knuckling. We are finally free from trying harder! With a step of faith, a real heart-change begins, and the fruits of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23) are born within us.

The secret to personal change is not willpower but daily dependence on a Savior who loves us and has the power to make us new men and women from the inside out.

Prayer: Lord, may I stop striving and go to you for help in each moment of each day.

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Boo Arnold

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