

Five Gospel Perspectives

From How People Change By Timothy S. Lane & Paul David Tripp

Five gospel perspectives give people a road map for change:

1) *The Extent and Gravity of our Sin*

It has been said that the doctrine of sin is the one doctrine you can prove empirically, yet we all tend to minimize it. Early in our marriage my wife, Luella, graciously pointed out many failures in my love for her. She wasn't being overcritical; she had seen real areas of sin rooted in wrong attitudes in my heart. I knew she loved me and that she wasn't crazy, but I simply couldn't believe that I was as bad as she was making me out to be! I look back and cringe at how self-righteous I was. Self-righteousness is your own personal defense attorney. In a scary moment of self-defense, I said to her, "Ninety-five percent of the women in our church would love to be married to me!" (How's that for humility?) Luella sweetly informed me that she was in the 5 percent!

I was a pastor at the time and regularly counseling married couples, helping them deal with the sin that stood in the way of the loving unity God intended for them. I was good at helping other people see and own their sin. But I was not willing to believe that my need was just as desperate. Maybe I was blinded by my theological knowledge or my pastoral skill. But one thing is sure: I had forgotten who I was, and I was offended that Luella had such a low opinion of me!

I don't think I am alone. The struggle to accept our exceeding sinfulness is everywhere in the church of Christ. We accept the doctrine of total depravity, but when we are approached about our own sin, we wrap our robes of self-righteousness around us and rise to our own defense.

Scripture challenges this self-righteousness with clarity and power: "The Lord saw how great man's wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time" (Gen 6:5), and "There is no one righteous, not even one" (Rom. 3:10). The effects of sin twist every thought, motive, desire, word, and action. This disease has infected us all, and the consequences are severe.

Why is this perspective so essential? Only when you accept the bad news of the gospel does the good news make any sense. The grace, restoration, reconciliation, forgiveness, mercy, patience, power, healing and hope of the gospel are for sinners. They are only meaningful to you if you admit you have the disease and realize that it is terminal.

2) *Centrality of the Heart*

Beneath the battle for behavior is another, more fundamental battle—the battle for the thoughts and motives of the heart.

The heart is the real or essential you. All of the ways in which the Bible refers to the inner person (mind, emotions, spirit, soul, will, etc.) are summed up with this one term: *heart*. The heart is the steering wheel of every human being. Everything we do is shaped and controlled by what our hearts desire.

That is why the Bible is very clear that God wants our hearts. Only when God has your heart does he have you. As much as we are affected by our broken world and the sins of others against us, our greatest problem is the sin that resides in our hearts. That is why the message of the gospel is that God transforms our lives by transforming our hearts.

Lasting change always comes through the heart. This is one of the Scripture's most thoroughly developed themes, but many of us have missed its profound implications. We need a deeper understanding of Proverbs 4:23, "Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life."

3) *The Present Benefits of Christ*

The Christian hope is more that a redemptive system with practical principles that can change your life. The hope of every Christian is a person, the Redeemer, Jesus Christ. He is the wisdom behind every biblical principle and the power we need to live them out. Because Christ lives inside us today, because he rules all things for our sakes (see Eph. 2:22-23), and because he is presently putting all his enemies under his feet (see 1 Cor. 15:25-28), we can live with courage and hope.

Our hope is not in our theological knowledge or our experience within the body of Christ. We are thankful for these things, yet we hold on to one hope: Christ. In him we find everything we need to live a godly life in the here and now. Paul captures it so well: "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (Gal. 2:20).

4) *God's Call to Growth and Change*

It is so easy to coast! We have been accepted into God's family, and someday will be with him in eternity. But what goes on in between? From the time we come to Christ until the time we go home to be with him, God calls us to change. We have been changed by his grace, are being changed by his grace, and will be changed by his grace.

What is the goal of this change? It is more than a better marriage, well-adjusted children, professional success, or freedom from a few nagging sins. God's goal is that we would actually become like him. He doesn't just want you to escape the fires of hell – though we praise God that through Christ you can! His goal is to free us from our slavery to sin, our bondage to self, and our functional idolatry, so that we actually take on his character!

Peter summarizes that change this way: "Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires" (2 Peter 1:4).

5) *A Lifestyle of Repentance and Faith*

God has blessed you with his grace, gifted you with his presence, strengthened you with his power, and made you the object of his eternal love. Because we belong to him, we live for his agenda. And if change is his agenda, then repentance and faith is the lifestyle to which we have been called.

Near the end of his career, Michael Jordan was asked why he always came early to practice before a game, even before the rookies. He was already being called the greatest basketball player of all time. He replied that his shooting percentage was just over 50 percent, which meant that over his career, he had failed almost as much as he had succeeded. He was committed to keep on practicing as long as there was room for him to improve.

There are always new sins for the Christian to address and new enemies to defeat. The Christian life makes God's work of change our paradigm for living, while we celebrate the grace that makes it possible. "For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us to say 'No' to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope – the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ" (Titus 2:11-13).