

GOD'S BEST FOR YOU: BREAKING FREE

By Andrew Wilson
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Romans 6:1-4, 11-14
Luke 10:1-2, 8-9, 17-20

I've lived in Pittsburgh and in several other large cities that actually have professional football teams and I can tell you: Steelers fans are a breed apart. They love to be hated. They love the in-your-face antics of Ben Rothlisberger. And they love the fact that they already have more Super Bowl titles than any franchise in history. Another win would put them on top of the sports world. (Of course to stay there, they'll have to sell the Pirates. But either way, the fans will keep reminding us that God's anointed ones are not from New Orleans.)

God wants the very best for each one of us, and he proved it by sacrificing his only begotten Son. When we give our lives to Christ, God does for us what we could never do for ourselves. He forgives us. He gives us his Holy Spirit. He puts to death the prideful, rebellious spirit that rules and ruins our lives and gives us new hearts – hearts that are in tune with his purposes – hearts that are full of his joy and peace. He molds and shapes us into the image of Christ.

All of this is accomplished by God and through God. But that doesn't mean we have no role to play in the work of salvation. Nothing could be further from the truth. God wants us to be players instead of spectators. He expects us to strive for the prize he has set before us. If we want to live into God's plan for our life, and become a disciple who resembles the Master, we have to cooperate with God' Spirit.

One of the ways we cooperate with God's Spirit is by developing intimacy with God. We talked about this last week. We deepen our friendship with God by being transparent with him, by obeying his Word, and by falling passionately in love with him. None of those changes would be possible without the Spirit; all of them occur as the Spirit draws us close to God's heart. Yet the Spirit clearly works in direct partnership with our spirits.

Another way we cooperate with God's Spirit is by developing a new relationship with the world around us. The Spirit inspires and persuades us to relate to the world as children of God and citizens of his kingdom.

When we talk about the world in spiritual terms we're not referring to the objects and landscapes and people that God created. We're referring instead to the ways that people *interact* with each other, and the ways that we as individuals *respond* to the world.

A powerful example of this use of the concept occurs in the first chapter of John's Gospel. John says of Jesus:

He was in the world, and... the world did not recognize him.
- John 1:10

What John means is that Jesus' way of relating to others and responding to the world was so strange and so counter-cultural that people failed to see who he really was. Jesus spoke God's truth, yet people couldn't see that he was God's Word made flesh. He radiated God's love, and yet the people couldn't see that he was the Messiah, the Christ.

John makes a similar reference to the world in the second chapter of his First Letter when he issues this warning:

Do not love the world or anything in the world. If you love the world, love for the Father is not in you. For everything in the world – the cravings of sinful people, the lust of their eyes and their boasting about what they have and do – comes not from the Father but from the world.

- 1 John 2:15-16

John isn't saying that we should hate people who don't love God. And he isn't telling us it's wrong to enjoy Ben and Jerry's Chocolate Chunk, or the colors of a sunset, or even a Super Bowl game between two teams that probably don't deserve to be there. He's telling us, instead, to guard our hearts against the intense passions and cravings that drive our society and destroy relationships. He's saying we shouldn't let sex, or money, or power, or any other self-centered pursuit become our reason for living.

When we give our lives to Christ in faith, a new person is born. But of course our old self, the one that's ruled by sin, doesn't die, at least not right away. It continues to influence us. Because our old self is in direct conflict with the God-loving person that Christ has brought to life inside us, it does everything it can to sabotage our relationship with the Lord. The warfare between our old and new self is intense and unending. For us who love God, winning that war is the most important challenge we face in life.

Paul addresses these themes in the sixth chapter of Romans, which Jim just read for us. He presents the conflict between the old and new self as a life or death struggle. The only way to defeat the old self and to keep from being dragged down by the world, according to Paul, is to surrender everything we have and everything we are to God:

[D]o not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires [Paul writes,]...but rather...offer every part of yourself to [God] as an instrument of righteousness.

- Romans 6:12-13

In his letter to the Ephesians Paul elaborates on this strategy of denying the old self and submitting to God as he re-creates us in Christ's image. He writes:

You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.

- Ephesians 4:

Notice that Paul mentions three particular areas of life where we need to cooperate with the Holy Spirit. If we want to prevail against our sinful self, he says, we have to

- *Let go of old habits*
- *Change old ways of thinking*
- *Acquire godly virtues*

Let's think about how we might utilize this advice in our daily struggle to be faithful. (You'll see the relevant verses on the screen as we go through the passage.)

Cooperating with God's Spirit, at the most basic level, means letting go of old habits that tear us and others down. God has made a new start with us, and given us a new life in his kingdom of love. It makes sense that we would break out of patterns of behavior that have been instilled in us by the world.

Some of us have a tendency to whine and complain. We've gotten into the habit of grumbling about every problem we face, no matter how small it may be. God wants us to remember the ways he has blessed us, and trust that his plan for us is good even when circumstances seem to conspire against us. .

Some of us are easily drawn in when others are gossiping or tearing people down. But God wants us to encourage people and look for ways to build them up. He commands us to answer evil with good.

Most of us struggle with sexual temptation of one kind or another. I know an unmarried couple that had to make a hard decision when they both become Christians. They had been sleeping together and they realized God was calling them to a new way of relating to each other. They decided to trust God, and abide by his Word. And with the wisdom of hindsight, they can say, as a happily married couple, that God abundantly blessed that decision.

Some religious people choose to live in a drab, colorless world that has been stripped of all pleasure. But that isn't the kind of world God has designed for us. We have to remember that pleasure is his idea – it's God's invention. The worldliness that the Bible warns us against occurs when people get either too much or too little of a good thing, and they begin to lust after it and organize their life around acquiring it. Goethe once offered this wise advice: "A man should hear a little music, read a little poetry, and see a fine picture every day of his life, in order that worldly cares may not obliterate the sense of the beautiful which God has implanted in the human soul."

A change in our habits will lead to a change in our thinking. As we're exposed to God's truth in the Bible, and we respond in obedience, we gain a whole new understanding of who we are, who God is, and what our life is about. Our minds become more clear, critical and disciplined. Christ shines a light in the darkness and gives us a new hope, a new love, and a new understanding of our life's meaning and purpose.

The new thoughts engendered by Christian faith have a powerful impact on our attitudes. For example, if we truly believe that the Spirit is our advocate and is fighting on our side, that belief will be reflected in a positive outlook. And if we truly believe that God loves us and has a good plan for our lives, that belief will be reflected in our smile. When we focus on our blessings and opportunities, we prove our faith in God, and we become instruments of his grace.

To a greater extent than most people realize, our thoughts shape who we are, and determine our future. If we fill our heads with thoughts of failure and defeat, we'll reap failure and defeat. Not only that, we'll become confused about who we are and why we're here. Our thoughts will become muddled because our minds will be filled with darkness and doubt. But if we focus our minds on the great promises of God's Word, the Spirit will enable us to discern the way he has planned for us.

Paul makes a similar point in his letter to the Philippians. He tells us to focus our minds on the things of God, and he provides us with a list of exactly what those things are:

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...
- Philippians 4:8-9

If you follow this advice, Paul concludes, "...the God of peace will be with you" (Philippians 4:9).

As we learn to think with the mind of Christ, we will be empowered to develop new virtues.

Virtue is a word that sounds old-fashioned. Virtue, in many people's minds, is vaguely associated with abstaining from beer, cigarettes and poker. A virtuous young woman is one who has no interest in boys. A virtuous young man is one who tattles on his friends and follows all the teacher's rules.

It's unfortunate that such an important concept is now so widely misunderstood. But it's hardly surprising. Not only are we confused, as a society, about virtue, we're confused about just about everything else pertaining to ethics.

I recently read about a woman who mailed a check to the Internal Revenue Service for \$300. Enclosed with the check was a note. It read, "I cheated on my income tax last year and have not been able to sleep since. This check covers half of what I owe. If I continue to have trouble sleeping, I will send you the other half."

The Bible tells us that this life is a prelude to the life to come. God wants us to acquire qualities of character that will prepare us for heaven. He doesn't insist that we become paragons of virtue. He isn't going to refuse to admit us into heaven if we're still struggling to be courageous, or if our faith is weak. But if we haven't got at least a hint of those qualities inside us, then we aren't going to be ready for the kind of happiness God is preparing for us. We aren't going to be equipped to fulfill our eternal purpose, which is to love and serve God, and enjoy him forever.

In the world – in the great Super Bowl game of life – what matters most is what we do. We're shaped and defined by our career. We're admired and respected according to how much influence we wield and what we can do for others.

In God's kingdom all of this is turned upside down. What matters most to our Master and King is who we are, and what we're in the process of becoming. So may we cooperate with God's Spirit as he helps us to break destructive patterns and habits. May we open our minds to the truth of God's Word. And may we strive each day to acquire the virtues of a true disciple.