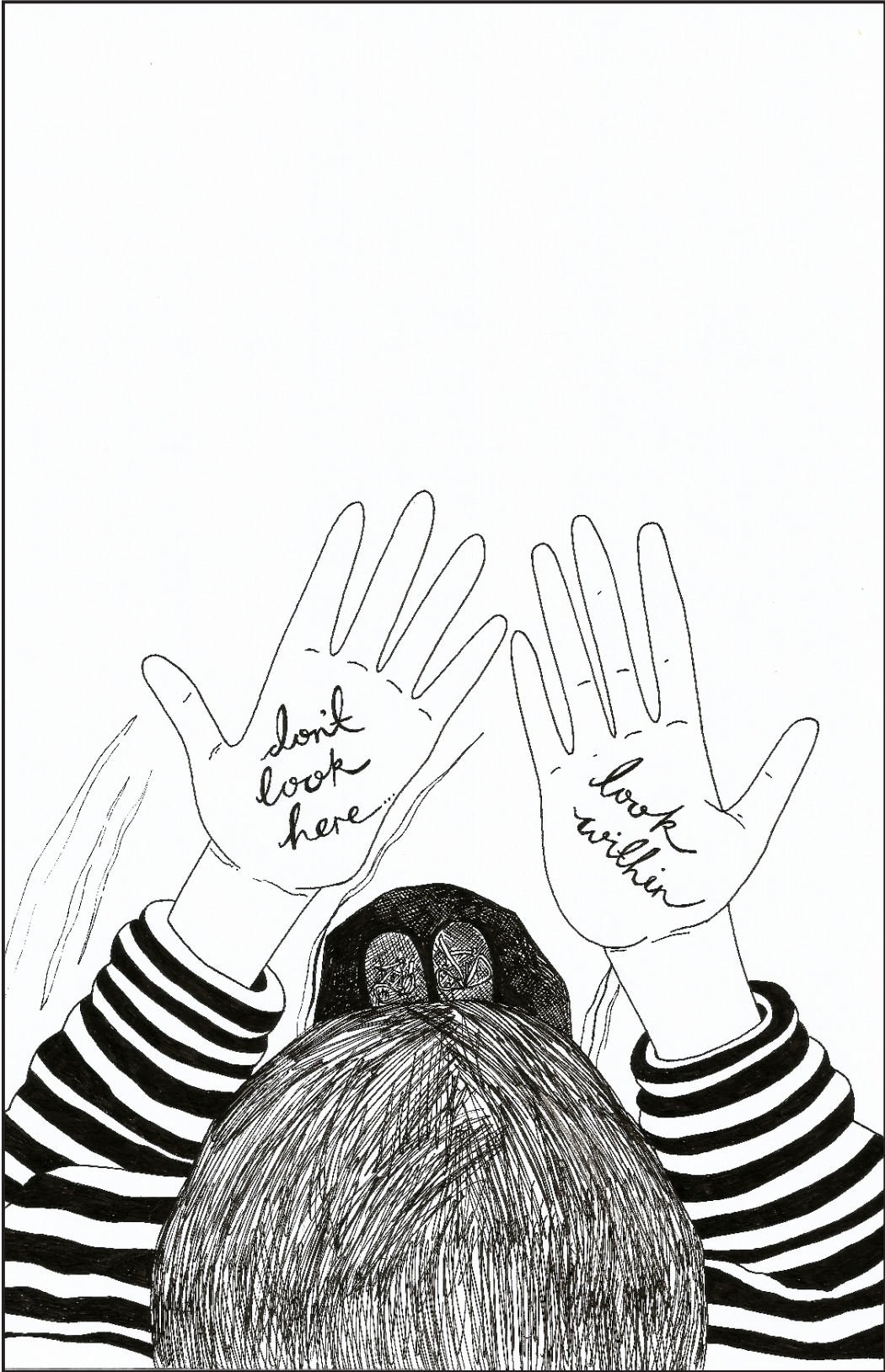


4.
TURNING
SIN
OUTSIDE
IN



What Is Sin?

The battle against sin is one of the most talked about topics in the Christian community. We want to know how to master it and how to be free from it; if we even believe we can be free from it.

I have heard sin defined in many different ways over the years. Most of the definitions were based on doing things that displeased God, or acting in rebellion towards God's rule and reign in my life.

In my opinion, neither of those definitions of sin do it justice.

They are the symptoms of sin, but they are not sin itself:

And He, when He comes, will convict the world about [the guilt of] sin [and the need for a Savior], and about righteousness, and about judgment:

about sin [and the true nature of it], because they do not believe in Me [and My message];

about righteousness [personal integrity and godly character], because I am going to My Father and you will no longer see Me;

about judgment [the certainty of it], because the ruler of this world (Satan) has been judged and condemned.

JOHN 16.8-11 AMP

Just before the verses above from *John 16*, Jesus promises His disciples that it is better for them that He should leave, so that the Holy Spirit will come.¹ Then in *John 16.8-11*, Jesus says that the Holy Spirit will convict the world on three things; sin, righteousness and judgment.

1. *John 16.7.*

When Jesus says that the Holy Spirit is going to “*convict the world*”, it implies that the world has the wrong definition of sin, righteousness and judgment.

The world must have thought one way, and the Holy Spirit was coming to correct them and show them the right way.²

And Jesus gives us a helpful synopsis as to what the correct way of thinking about those three things will be.

According to Jesus in *John 16.9*, the correct definition of sin is that it is when “*they (people) do not believe in me*”.

The world thought that sin was when someone did something forbidden; yet Jesus tells His disciples that the correct understanding of sin is when someone does not have faith, or belief, in Him.

Jesus lets the disciples in on the secret; sin is all about not having faith in Him.

Both on the largest possible scale, but also the smallest. Not only does Jesus invite us to place faith in Him that will lead to an eternity with Him, but He also beckons us to have faith in Him in the midst of the smallest and most mundane day-to-day activities; to *continually* live by faith in Him.

The old way of understanding sin was all about breaking the rules, but the correct way of understanding sin, according to Jesus in *John 16.9*, is about whether we live from a position of faith in Jesus.

The law told people that certain actions were sinful, but Jesus tells His disciples that it is actually the miss-belief underpinning the action

2. In the NIV's translation of *John 16.8*, instead of the words “*convict the world about sin*”, it says, “*prove the world to be in the wrong about sin*”. This is why I believe the phrase “*convict the world*” can be translated into the phrase, “*to correct the world*”.

that makes it sinful.

Paul learnt this life-giving lesson from the Holy Spirit, as we can see in *Romans 14*:

For whatever does not proceed from faith is sin.

ROMANS 14.23B ESV

In the rest of *Romans 14*, Paul is addressing the question of whether believers can eat meat that has been sacrificed to idols.

In brief, he says that people needn't fear that such meat can have any power over them as a result of it having been used as a sacrifice to an idol. Jesus has power and authority over all things, so if the believers have faith in the cleansing power of Jesus, they can eat it.

However, Paul also says that some believers may not feel comfortable eating sacrificed meat, and that those who do feel happy eating the sacrificed meat should not force those who don't, to eat it.

His reasoning for this is that if someone is forced to do something that goes against a conviction they hold, they could be being led into sin.

Because anything that doesn't come from a place of faith in Jesus, is sin.

The Dinner Party

Picture the scene.

Rose and Albert are both sitting at the dining table with a lovely roast in front of them that their dear friends, Susie and Roger, have clubbed together to cook.

The meat has come from an animal used in a sacrifice to a pagan god. Susie, Rose and Roger feel very peaceful about eating the meat

because they all believe in the authority of Jesus to cleanse all things, including the leg of lamb set before them.

Albert, however, is feeling distinctly uncomfortable with the whole ordeal.

But, not wanting to embarrass his wife, Rose, in front of their good friends, Susie and Roger, he decides to swallow his uncomfortable feeling along with the lamb.

If we press pause and ask the class who is sinning by eating the lamb from just observing them, it would be an impressive guess at best if someone chose Albert.

Why?

Because they're all *doing* the same thing.

They're all eating lamb.

Do you see?

In *Romans 14* Paul is telling the Roman church that there needs to be a transition in their understanding of sin. Instead of sin being primarily an external, action-based theology, it is actually an internal, faith-based theology.

Albert was *doing* the same as those around him, yet his internal conviction was different to theirs.

Susie, Roger and Rose all believed that God had cleansed the meat and so they were eating the lamb from a place of faith.

Albert did not believe that the meat was clean, and so was not living from a place of faith.

Anything that doesn't come from faith is sin.

Sin is about where an action comes from, not what the action is.

For too long some of us have believed that there is a list of actions that are 'sinful', without asking the question, "*Why?*"

Of course there are actions that will never proceed from faith, such as murder or adultery, but they are not sin purely because they appear on a 'sin list'.

They are sin because they are actions that will never come from a place of faith in Jesus!

They are some of the things the Spirit will never lead us to do.

When Paul wrote to churches forbidding them from doing certain things, he wasn't just banning certain actions; he was rebuking actions that were coming from impure motives. Paul knew that the things some of these churches were practicing were not coming from a place of faith in Jesus, and so he corrects them.

Not just so that they will amend their practices, but so that they will realise what is happening within their hearts.

Some of us have been teaching an unofficial law, telling people that there are some things that are objectively wrong without delving into the internal beliefs behind these 'banned' actions.

God's desire is for us to live by faith, not by laws.

This does not mean that God isn't passionate in His dislike of sin.

He hates it and could not be further from it, which is why He has done everything necessary to deal with it for once and for all!³

3.1 *Peter 3.18.*

But the problem of sin that Jesus came to resolve was not one caused primarily by people ‘breaking the rules’; it was one of relational distance caused by people living in rebellion to God in their hearts.

Surely the narrative of Scripture clearly shows that God desires us to have pure hearts towards Him, not just that we adhere to a set of regulations?

The regulations that the people in the Old Testament tried their utmost to follow, could not get them pure hearts.

These pure hearts that God so desires His people to have towards Him, are exactly what the sacrifice of Jesus has made available to us.

As we grow into these pure hearts, given solely by the kindness and graciousness of Jesus, we find that our actions and lifestyle begin to resemble that of Jesus’.

For every belief we have in our hearts works its way into our actions, our hands.

Whether it is a new, glorious belief in Jesus, or a belief in a lie from Satan, it will work its way out into what we say and do.

Faith without works is dead

JAMES 2.20 NIV

Faith and action have always been linked, and faith, no matter what it is in, always leads to works. If we think we can have faith in something without it affecting our actions and behaviour, we are mistaken.

For belief always leads to action.

If we find ourselves doing and thinking things that we don’t believe are God’s best for us, then let us ask the Spirit to explain our beliefs in that moment, asking Him to uproot and dispose of any beliefs that aren’t based on the truth of the Gospel.

As we allow the Spirit to continually change our hearts, I believe we will see ourselves doing loving deeds.

Because faith in Jesus, leads to kingdom works.

And faith in a lie, leads to us doing things that reflect that lie.

The question is not, “*What are you doing?*”

It is, “*In what are you believing?*”

Heart To Hand

*Blessed are the meek,
For they shall inherit the earth!*

*Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,
For they shall be satisfied!*

*Blessed are the merciful,
For they shall receive mercy!*

*Blessed are the pure in heart,
For they shall see God!*

*Blessed are the peacemakers,
For they shall be called sons of God!*

MATTHEW 5.5-9 ESV

Sometimes I feel like we try harder to imitate what Jesus did with His hands, than we do trying to imitate who He is in His heart.

If we want to see works similar to the works of Jesus coming from our hands, then we must understand who He is in His heart.

What does He value?

What are His priorities?

How does He work?

In the Beatitudes Jesus unveils what is on the inside of Him.

His heart.

He doesn't say that those who *demonstrate* meekness inherit the earth.

It's not those who *show* hunger for righteousness who will be satisfied.

Or those who *act* mercifully who will be shown mercy.

Nor those who *do* pure things.

Jesus is telling people to *become* different, not just to *do* differently, if they truly want to be like Him.

To further drive this home to the crowd listening to Him, Jesus talks about anger and lust being matters of the heart.

If you harbour anger in your heart towards another, you will be subject to judgement, because it is as if you physically harmed them, even murdered them.⁴

If you look at, or think about, a person lustfully, Jesus says you've committed adultery with them in your heart.

Jesus is trying to demonstrate to the crowd that righteousness is about your inside.

4. *Matthew 5.21-22 & 27-28.*

Your heart.

Where the law taught people not to do certain things in order to be righteous, Jesus explains that righteousness is actually to do with the state of the heart.

Let me reiterate that we cannot achieve this righteousness of heart by our own effort or resolve.

Scripture lays it plainly before us when it says that no one is good other than God⁵, and that we've all fallen short of His righteousness through our rebellion.⁶

But this makes the righteousness on offer all the more outrageous.

God is the only one who is righteous, and yet He was willing to die to make it available to others who stood no chance of obtaining it for themselves.

Not only that, but this righteousness of heart is totally transformational for everyone who welcomes it.

A total transformation that works its way out to affect every little thing we do.

Our actions are a signpost to the state of our hearts.

John tells us in *1 John 1.6* that we cannot claim to have love within us whilst acting in an unloving way, and in the same vein, we cannot claim to be agreeing with the righteousness set within us by God's grace, if we are not acting righteously.

Because love leads to demonstrations of love, and righteousness leads to demonstrations of righteousness.

5. *Mark 10.18.*

6. *Romans 3.23.*

If we are truly being filled with God's love, it will be reflected in what we do. This need not make us try to act in a loving way to convince our hearts that they have been filled by God's love, but is an encouragement that God's transformation is not just an internal reality, but an all-consuming renovation that can be seen in the works of our hands.

The righteousness of God, unobtainable by man, has been gifted to those who believe in God, thanks to His grace, and the death and resurrection of God's own Son.⁷

This righteousness makes its home in our hearts along with the presence of the Spirit.⁸

Sin and righteousness are opposites that have always contested for the same property.

The heart.

If we believe that sin is just about what we do, when we do something we perceive to be sinful, our response will be to only address our actions so that we don't do the same thing again.

However, in light of the teaching of Jesus in *Matthew 5*, we know better.

Sin works its way from our hearts to our hands, our works. So instead of simply addressing what we do, we must look at our motivations and desires, trusting that a healthy heart will lead to healthy actions.

We get to look beyond trying to control what we do and seek to understand the fabric of who we are.

Why do we do what we do?

7. *Romans 5.9 & 2 Corinthians 5.21.*

8. *Romans 10.10 AMP & 1 Corinthians 3.16.*

How can we become like Jesus on the inside, not just on the outside?

Upside-Down-Cake

When God taught me that sin originated from a lack of faith in my heart, it changed how I responded to bad decisions I made, and the bad habits I had.

Take the example of anger.

I always thought that to beat anger in my life I needed to suppress any anger I ever felt, which I took to mean avoiding any situation where someone annoyed me, or cutting short conversations that were starting to rub me up the wrong way.

You get the idea.

But if I did let my anger get the better of me, and it bubbled out onto some poor unsuspecting victim, after a suitable period of feeling guilty and sorry for myself, I would stringently try to not do it again. I would tell my accountability partner, vow to him and myself that I wouldn't do it again and, if I did, I would let him know what further precautionary action I would take.

Effectively, I was trying to manage my 'sin'.

We have to stop here and ask ourselves;

“Since when was life to the full merely a sin management program?”

Avoiding a situation where 'sin' may appear in our lives is like trying to hide a spot with make-up.

It doesn't remove the spot's presence; it just makes it less obvious to others, maybe even less obvious to us!

Often we equate victory over sin as ‘never doing something we think to be wrong’. And to ensure this, we try to avoid any situation where temptation might arise.

We must stop thinking that being able to avoid making mistakes is the pinnacle of sinlessness.

That is just avoiding the problem.

Of course it is good to not allow an emotion such as anger to master us, but we don’t have to settle for simply preventing ourselves from doing something regrettable; we can ask the Spirit to heal, change and restore our hearts so that anger never threatens to get the better of us.

When I look at the life of Jesus as portrayed by Scripture, I don’t see a man continually trying to make sure He doesn’t sin. I don’t see a man who is continually making mental assessments as to whether He is in a ‘risky environment’ or not; like how to make a good exit from an ‘awkward situation’ when a woman starts crying on His feet.⁹

I don’t see a man who avoids being near people who might lead Him to sin.

I don’t see a man putting sin cover-up on.

I see a man who is so free and full of love for God that making a decision, or doing something from a place outside of faith—‘sinning’—just didn’t appeal to Him in the slightest.

Jesus was not spending His time on earth thinking about how not to sin; His mind was consumed with pursuing the will of the Father.

The life of Jesus is an example to every believer of what is possible through the grace of God and the power of the Holy Spirit.

9. *Luke 7.36-50.*

Please understand that I'm not proposing we all rush out and throw ourselves into the environments where we struggle the most! On the whole, God takes His time to transform our hearts, and then it takes more time still for this transformation to alter our actions.

But I long for us to see that it is possible for God to change our hearts so much that we no longer find *any* environment too much to bear.

That God can totally transform us.

Will there be temptation?

No doubt there will; but a faith and love for Jesus grown within us by God can far outweigh the most deceptively attractive temptation thrown at us from hell.

So how do we become like Jesus with regards to sin?

How do we become so consumed with faith that all else fades to nothing?

Self-Control

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.

GALATIANS 5.22-23 ESV

For me, the first step to understanding Jesus' notion of sin was to have my understanding of one particular fruit of the Spirit, self-control, corrected.

I had always thought that self-control was the key to living a life free from 'sin' because it enabled me to exert control over my actions, and I had believed that 'sin' was primarily about *doing* the wrong things.

If I could control myself so I didn't do something bad, I was winning against sin.

But what I discovered was that this understanding of self-control came almost entirely from my own effort; I found myself loathing and hiding the parts of me that I couldn't control, and becoming proud of the parts I could.

No fruit of the Spirit leads to self-loathing or pride, and no fruit of the Spirit comes from one's own strength.

So this notion of self-control was incorrect.

One morning my old mentor, Greg, was in the office preparing a sermon, when I walked in.

We often talked through each other's sermons and threw ideas around.

That day Greg had been thinking about the fruit of the Holy Spirit:

Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.¹⁰

Greg asked me why I thought we need the Holy Spirit to help us gain self-control?

He could understand why we needed the Holy Spirit for all of the other fruit, but not for this one.

Surely the whole point of *self*-control is that we should be able to control ourselves without anybody else's help?

Why do we need the presence of God to empower us to control ourselves?

10. *Galatians* 5.22-23.

We talked and laughed for a while, trying to find an answer, and we eventually stumbled upon the fact that perhaps it was because we weren't truly ourselves without the Holy Spirit's presence within us.

If self-control is about controlling oneself, then the only reason we would need another's presence within us to enable us to control ourselves is if we weren't truly us without them.

How can you control yourself if you're not yet you?

What I realised was that the Holy Spirit's presence inside of me is an integral part of me.

Without Him, I'm not the full me I was made to be.

As I reflected on this revelation, I became hopeful that I could finally have self-control. I understood that I wasn't fully me without the Holy Spirit, so now that I needed to be full of Him in order to be truly myself, surely I would have self-control and I could win in the battle of sin in my life once and for all?

Not quite.

Self-control isn't at the top of the Holy Spirit's priority list.

Galatians 5.22-23 tells us it's a fruit; by very definition it is a product of the Spirit's presence within us.

The aim, purpose and focus of the Holy Spirit is to lead us to the Father, teaching us everything that Jesus taught.¹¹ The Spirit does this by rooting us in the love of God and overwhelming us with His presence.

That is what it means to be filled continually with the Holy Spirit.¹²

11. *John 14.26.*

12. I've added 'continually' here because when Paul talks about being (*cont. on next page*)

The *by-product* of being filled continually with the Holy Spirit is that the fruit of the Spirit grows and flourishes within us.

Just like a healthy orange tree produces oranges, so a Christian being continually filled with the Spirit bears the fruit of the Spirit.¹³

An orange tree does not need to think about the fruit it will produce. It bears fruit because that is what it *naturally* does when it is well rooted and nourished.

What I want to draw out here is not how we can bear good fruit instead of bad.

The point is for us to throw our energy and effort into rooting ourselves deeply into God's love, trusting that His Spirit will bear good fruit through us as we do this.

As I've just said, the primary aim of the Spirit is to root us ever deeper within God's love.

Every fruit of the Spirit speaks of, and furthers, this primary aim of the Spirit.

So self-control, a product of the Spirit, is part of the Spirit's work to lead us further into the love of Jesus.

I had previously thought the main point of self-control was to help me avoid making poor decisions, but actually self-control is more about enabling me to consistently choose Jesus.

The difference, albeit subtle, is incredibly important.

(*cont. from last page*) filled with the Spirit, as he does in *Ephesians 5.18*, it carries a present continuous meaning. Paul is not encouraging us to be filled once with the Spirit, he is encouraging us to be filled 'continually' with the Spirit.

13. Credit to *Jon Tyrell* for that line.

The work of the Holy Spirit, God Himself, focuses on drawing us closer into Himself, not drawing us away from evil.

Of course, being drawn into God also draws us away from evil, but the focus is different!

We can walk away from evil without pushing into God, but we cannot push into God without walking away from evil.

The aim of self-control is to help us to pursue God, not to avoid sin!

The result of pursuing God?

Fleeing sin.

You could even say that when we sin, it is just because we slowed our pursuit of Jesus; we lost sight of Him and His love.

When we remain in the love of God we are living by faith, and continually living in faith leads us away from sin.

Just like Jesus.

He lived in continual agreement with God, full of love for God and so lived by faith.

The result?

He was sinless.

Sinlessness is a fruit of faithfulness.

Being sinless wasn't the focus of Jesus' life; being faithful to God was.¹⁴

14. And, as we've said before, He wanted to be faithful to God because He loved God.

If you want to get rid of darkness, don't push against the shadow.

Find a way to have more light.

Walking In The Light

The reason that many of us find ourselves overwhelmed with our own shortcomings, is because we mistakenly take responsibility for our transformation into our own hands.

When we believe this, we spend our effort focussing on all that needs correcting within us because we think it is our job to change ourselves.

We might as well attempt heart surgery on ourselves.

Not recommended.

Ultimately, we must place the responsibility for our growth and transformation squarely into the hands of Jesus.

Our hearts cannot be transformed by anyone other than God Himself.

We may be able to manufacture an illusion of change within us through controlling our behaviour, but only God can actually change the very fabric of who we are.

In order to be peaceful with the fact that our transformation is not in our own hands, we must understand that, through Jesus, God has already made us holy. He has clothed us in the purest of garments and invited us to approach Him at any moment of any day.¹⁵

We are not attempting to become holy through acting in a correct way, we are allowing the holiness that God has clothed us in to shape and

¹⁵. *Isaiah 1.18 & Hebrews 10.20.*

transform our behaviour.

We do not gain this holiness by our own merit; it is given by the graciousness of Christ.¹⁶ Through His willing sacrifice He earned the right to call others to share and partake in His holiness and purity.

Somehow we have allowed ourselves to read in Scripture that Jesus' blood has made us holy, yet believed and professed that we are not holy.

When God says holy, He means holy.

We are now a holy, blameless and spotless people.¹⁷

Of course, it is a great mystery that we are holy yet still being transformed; free, yet continually being liberated. This is because holiness and freedom are not static states.

They are ever-unfolding realities.

Paul refers to this when he speaks of being transformed from glory to glory in *2 Corinthians 3.18*. We are already glorious, thanks to Jesus, at the same time as continually experiencing an ever-unfolding glory.

We can be confident before God because Jesus has clothed us irrevocably with His righteousness and invited us to walk boldly before the throne of the Father.¹⁸

Grace is our invitation and our justification for being in God's presence, and we are justified by grace in our best moments, and in our worst.

16. *Hebrews 10.14*.

17. *Isaiah 1.18 & 1 Peter 2.9*.

18. *Hebrews 4.16*.

We are justified by grace in *every* moment.¹⁹

Nothing can change that.

If we believe we are not good enough to be before God and be used by Him, we will either try to rush sorting ourselves out, or we will become despondent because of our inability to change ourselves.

Neither is true freedom.

If we truly long to live into the holiness and freedom given to us thanks to the Holy Spirit, then the solution is not our own effort.

The solution is Jesus.

Yes we have a responsibility to bring ourselves before Him, not passively waiting for Him to work within us, but proactively seeking Him and giving Him access to our hearts, minds and lives; and yes we can choose whether we make good decisions based on faith in Jesus, or not.

But ultimately, it is only Jesus who can actually *change* us.

We must fill our gaze with Him.

As we take our hands off the controls and allow Christ to lead us in our transformation, we find that He doesn't always do things as we would.

Often, He changes us in stages.

Explaining a layer at a time, unpicking miss-beliefs like an expert weaver unpicking a mistake.

God intends to make lasting changes.

¹⁹. *Romans 3.24 & Titus 3.7.*

This means re-calibrating us at every level. We may only see a surface issue, but God will un-pick us to our very core.

Are we willing to be changed at the centre of who we are?

For God to alter the very things we desire and the way we work?

Often Jesus works on parts of us that we aren't expecting Him to, at times faster than we would like, and at others far slower than we would desire. But the joy is this; as we put our freedom into His hands, we can be assured that He is unfolding His perfection within us in the perfect way.

So let us not hide when we are presented by our own shortcomings.

Let us not become despondent and ashamed.

Let us lift our chins and fill ourselves with the light of Jesus so that He can move within us, ever unfolding His perfection.

I Don't Know You

In the next chapter I want to further explore the topic of purity. How do we actually live in line with the blameless, pure people God has transformed us into by His grace?

What even *is* purity?

But before we move on, there are a couple of things I want to throw into the mix on this topic of sin.

Earlier I said that there are some actions that will never come from a place of faith.

It is also possible for an action that appears to be 'good', to in fact be sinful, because it isn't originating from faith.

Perhaps that is why Jesus said that some people would come to Him, telling Him that they'd prophesied in His name, but that His response would be to tell them to get away from Him, saying:

*"I don't know you."*²⁰

Even though these people were prophesying, they did not *know* Jesus in their hearts. That meant that what they were doing wasn't originating from faith.

When we do something just because we think we 'ought' to, or because it is the 'right' thing to do, it may be worth just checking with the Holy Spirit to see if He is leading us in that moment.

Let's take a minute to ask the Spirit whether what we are doing is the best thing to be doing in that moment.

He may place a strong impression on us that it is, or that it isn't.

No matter how 'good' and 'godly' something appears, if the Spirit suggests that it isn't right for now, let us follow His lead.

How often do we maintain a set of actions because it is just 'what Christians do', without seeking God as to whether it is what *He* is leading us to do in that moment?

I'm not suggesting we question every rhythm or discipline of faith we have, or that we become unsure of doing anything because we haven't heard God specifically endorsing it, but let's ask ourselves whether we do what we do in our walk of faith because of a deep desire to know and follow the living Jesus, or whether we are doing it because it is what we've always done, and what we've been taught to do.

God has given us all authority on heaven and on earth, but He still

²⁰. *Matthew 7.22-23.*

wants us to use it *with* Him, following *His* lead!

Now, let us not forget God's heart in this.

God wants to unveil an inordinate amount of His power on this earth. We can expect to do miracles, see resurrections and healings through us, by God's power.

But the point I'm trying to make is that as we evaluate our lives to see whether there is any 'sin' present, we must prioritise evaluating our hearts, not our actions, because even the best looking action could be coming from an un-whole motive.

Do you know and understand your own heart?

As the Holy Spirit helps you to look at yourself, let Him guide you to look through your actions, to see your heart.

Seek to be filled continually with the Holy Spirit and allow Him to undo your heart and put it back together.

Fill yourself with Jesus and trust *Him* for your holiness.

Do not just seek to imitate the *works* of Christ.

Imitate Christ Himself.

Two Little Asides

1. Making Confident Decisions

It would be incredibly easy at this point to become paralysed through a fear of making a decision that doesn't originate from a place of faith.

We can become so fearful of doing the wrong thing that we never make decisions, or we think that no decision is good enough to have

truly originated from faith.

Let's remind ourselves of a couple of things.

God is for us.

He also doesn't always tell us every single thing that we are to do.

He doesn't always tell us what to wear, or what to eat that day.

He tells us enough for us to move forward, then things just seem to slot into place. Or sometimes that which was once cloudy, suddenly becomes clear.

God wants you to make brilliant decisions and choices.

If you can't hear Him on a decision, then make the best decision you can, prayerfully searching the Scriptures and taking counsel from mature Christian friends for wisdom. If you end up considering a decision that God is not for, He will let you know. If you are seeking Him with a soft heart, He isn't going to let you lead yourself down a dark path.

Think of Mary and Joseph.

Mary tells Joseph that she is pregnant before they're married and have slept together.

He wasn't expecting that.

He needs to go away to think about it:

Her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly.

MATTHEW 1.19 ESV

Joseph needs to make a tough decision and he hasn't heard God's

direction on it yet. Scripture tells us that he was a just and upright man; a man who had a good heart. He decides to divorce Mary quietly because that is what he thinks is the most just decision given the circumstances:

But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the LORD appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit."

MATTHEW 1.20 ESV

Isn't it fascinating that God waited for Joseph to make a decision in his heart before He intervened and corrected it?

Sometimes when we are making a big decision, God seems silent.

But that doesn't mean we can't make a decision.

If we can't hear God, then we can make a decision based on who we know Him to be, and trust that if it isn't the correct decision He will let us know!

And if we make the decision that God desires us to make in the first place, then He doesn't need to break in and change our mind.

Silence isn't always a bad thing.

And then sometimes, we just have a choice.

Remember, the will of God is sometimes a land to explore and sometimes a path to stick to.

The key to making good decisions is having a soft heart and a clean ear.

If we are constantly living a life of love for Jesus, where we are attentive to what He may be saying and confident of His desire for goodness in

our lives, I believe we will work out how to live lives of faith, making consistently fantastic decisions.

2. Mistakes Happen

We sometimes make mistakes and poor decisions.

It happens when learning.

But God is exceptionally graceful.

Even when we make a mistake, if our heart is to love God and to live for Him, He will bring us back, teach us, refine us and set us again on our unique path of life with Him.

Think of King David—He committed adultery and murder.

But David's heart was for God—he was a man after God's own heart.²¹

Even though David made a few really bad decisions, underneath it all he still loved God. And God, because He knew David's heart, set people around him who could correct him.

David repented and moved forward.

Sometimes we can be so fearful of making a mistake, or feel so guilty because of something we have done, that we forget God is good and that Jesus paid for sin so that we can learn from our mistakes, rather than die because of them.

Good news.

Nothing should make us fearful of God anymore.

21. 1 Samuel 13.14.

Not even our own mistakes.

Looking On

As we come to the end of this chapter let us reflect on the opportunity that lies before us.

Jesus has corrected the misunderstanding that sin is all about the outside, when in fact it is all about the inside.

Sin starts as a lack of faith in Jesus in our hearts, that then works its way out to our words and works.

But in the same way, the righteousness that Jesus offers us through His blood and by His grace, can set up home in our hearts and work its way out to heavenly behaviour and actions.

Jesus longs for us to lean all our lives upon Him, putting our faith in Him in all we do.

In doing so, His Spirit will set to work within our hearts, minds and lives, bearing good fruit through us as He roots us in the love of the Father.

This life of faith in Jesus will lead us into God's heart and purposes, and draw us away from all darkness and evil.

So let us continually remind ourselves of the way of life that Jesus demonstrated and holds out to us to experience for ourselves, through living by faith in Him, empowered by the Spirit, and enthralled by God's love.

