

We All Want to Change (and We All Are)

Well, good morning everybody. If you have a bible, go ahead and turn with me to the book of Matthew, chapter 7. Hope you guys had a good Christmas—I hope you got your Peleton bike or whatever it was that you really wanted. If you're a guy and you're married, I hope you did *not* get your wife a Peleton bike under any circumstances whatsoever. But I'm glad you're here this morning. Today, we are kicking off a new teaching series called *Formation*—which, believe it or not, is not named after the Beyonce song. Rather, this series is about the idea of *spiritual* formation, which is just a fancy term for “the art and science of how we *change*.” This series, at its core, is a series about how we *change* as human beings.

And that right there (“how we change”) is a question that an awful lot of people want the answer to. Especially this time of year. Many of us, right now, are in the process of deciding what we want to *change* about ourselves in the new year, in the form of New Year's Resolutions. In the next few days, some of us will start doing our best to become healthier, better, less anxious, less stressed, and maybe even *slimmed down* versions of ourselves. Now, some of us are way more into that stuff than others, and some of us are way more *successful* at it than others. But there's just something about the calendar reading January 1 that just whispers to us, “this is your fresh start.” “This is your chance to become different.” “This is your shot at *change*.” You know, I think it's so interesting: for all our culture's talk about how important it is to “be yourself,” this time of the year is when none of us really want to “be ourselves” at all...or at least not the *current version* of ourselves.

But I think *all of this* prompts the question, how *do* we actually *change*? How do we *become* these new-and-improved versions of us? That's the million dollar question, right? If we knew that, we'd be a lot more successful in our new year's resolutions, and in *all* our efforts to become different and better human beings. And believe it or not, the bible actually speaks to that very question on more than a few occasions—it is very interested in helping us figure out how we change. And that, really, is what we're going to dissect this morning.

But first, we need to talk a bit about how people *assume* that we change. An awful lot of people would say we change through *what we think*. That if you want to change, you primarily just need to get the right *information* into your *mind*. This has been the predominant way of thinking about change in our country, really since the Enlightenment three hundred or so years ago. Since then, most everyone virtually *assumes* this is true.

Which means this is probably what *you* believe, whether you realize it or not. Most of us believe that change happens primarily in our *minds*. If you want to become a *healthier* person, you read a blog post on dieting. If we want to be a more disciplined person, we listen to a self-help podcast. If we want to be a neater, more tidy person around the house, we watch some Marie Kondo on Netflix. If we want to change, we assume that we just need to get the right *information* into our minds. Because change primarily happens through what we *think*. That's the assumption.

This line of thinking has its origins in writers like Rene Descartes, who believed that human beings were first and almost only *thinkers*—we are essentially just brains on a stick. But you don't have to know Descartes to believe this: it has now made its way down to a popular level: most people just instinctively believe this. As a case study, I submit to you this *R. Kelly* lyric for consideration (yes, we are covering Descartes and R. Kelly in the same teaching, you're welcome for that). ~~I realize that maybe with all that has come out about R. Kelly, we shouldn't be taking life philosophy advice from him. I just bring it up~~ because I think it's the quintessential example of this way of thinking. Here's a lyric from one of his songs:

*If I can **see it**, then I can **do it**. If I just **believe it**, there's nothing to it. I **believe I can fly**.*

That's from a song called "*I Believe I Can Fly*." Now, aside from us 90s kids all having flashbacks to the movie *Space Jam* just now, did you see the *logic* he used in that line? "If I can see it (meaning, if I can *envision* something in my *mind*), then I can do it." "If I just *believe* it (also with my mind), there's nothing to it." So R. Kelly, even though he probably doesn't sit down and read philosophers like Descartes every night, nonetheless believes that we *change* through what we *think*. And so really, so do most of *us*. We believe that if we just "set our mind" to something, there's nothing keeping us from accomplishing it. You will hear that message over and over again in a dozen different ways, because this is how we think change happens.

Now to add *to* that, we have very much *adopted* this philosophy of change in the *Church*. We *also* assume that this is the way people become more like *Jesus*, is through how or what they *think*. We've concluded that the best way to help people grow is through simple *information transfer*: sermons, bible studies, Sunday school classes. We've decided what we need to do is give people more *information*—more right *thinking*—about *God*.

Now, this philosophy on how we change isn't *wrong*, per se. It's not *incorrect*. How we *think* is an important *component* in how we change. Even passages like Romans 12 in the bible seem to indicate that: "...be transformed by the renewing of your *mind*." But I think **it would be a mistake to believe that we change *only* through what we think**. Simply put, **information *alone* is not sufficient to change a person**. And I think if we stopped to think about it, we actually know that. For instance, how many of us (no need to raise your hands) have had the thought, "I want to be more fit," and then proceeded to absolutely not exercise even a little bit more as a result of that thought? How many of us have thought "I really should start using a *budget* to get my spending under control," and then proceeded to not even *attempt* making a budget? Right. So what we're saying there is that we had the right *information*—we had the right *thinking* in our minds—and yet somehow it did not lead to *transformation*. It did not magically turn us into different kinds of people. That's because *information* does not inherently lead to *transformation*.

And on a much more serious note, when it comes to *spiritual* transformation, how many of us have known somebody who seemed to have all sorts of right *thinking* about God—they knew their theology backwards and forwards, they could teach a *graduate-level theology class*—and yet that person's *life* did not look remotely like Jesus? Their posture towards others was mean and cruel and judgmental and self-righteous, despite all the right *thinking* about grace and mercy and compassion and love that they possessed? Right. That's because information does not inherently lead to transformation.

So it would seem then, that we actually need something *more* than right *thinking*. Right thinking is *great*—I'm a big fan of it—but it would seem we're going to need something *else* to go with it. So what is it? Well *that* is where Matthew 7 comes in. So with all that in mind, let's take a look, starting in v. 24 (just FYI—I'm gonna be reading from the NIV today instead of the ESV. I know that's not what's in our bibles, but I just think it does a better job with this passage. So feel free to click over to that one if you're using your phone, or follow along on the screen):

[24] "Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine **and puts them into practice** is like a **wise man** who built his house on the **rock**. [25] The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. [26] But everyone who hears these words of mine and **does not put them into practice** is like a **foolish man** who built his house on **sand**. [27] The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash."

So here, Jesus is drawing out a *contrast*. **It's a contrast between two different types of people: one person who hears what Jesus says and puts it into practice, and another person who hears what Jesus says and does not put it into practice.** Jesus says that those two people will experience very different *outcomes* from one another.

Now notice that the contrast here *isn't* between those who *hear* the things Jesus says, and those who *don't hear* the things Jesus says. It's not between those who possess the right *information* or *thinking* about God, and those who don't. That's important, but that's not what Jesus emphasizes. What he emphasizes is the difference between those who *hear and practice*, and those who only *hear*. Which means that apparently, to Jesus, *information alone* is not sufficient to change us. Otherwise, *both* people in the story would've been in good shape. Jesus is saying that **it is not enough to just think a certain way about the gospel or the kingdom of God or about God himself. That's a great place to start, but in and of itself, it will not change you.** It will not lead to lasting, noticeable transformation in your life. What *will* change you is *knowing* those things about God and *then putting them into practice*. **To actually change, you can't just know things, you have to do something with what you know.**

For example, if you believe that God is sovereign—if you believe he runs things—that's great. But that means that you should be *practicing* praying to him on a regular basis, since he is in fact sovereign over all things. If you believe that God is *wise*—that he is smarter than you—that's great. But that means that you should *practice* regularly seeking out and meditating on his wisdom through the Scriptures. If you believe that you are a sinner in need of Jesus, great. That means you should *practice* regularly *confessing* that sin to Jesus and to other people. Are you seeing how this works? If you *know* all of those things, but it is not having any impact on what you *practice*, then what you *know* matters very little. Because knowledge is great, but knowledge should lead to *practice*. And our *practice* is actually what changes us.

Put *another way*, **a central piece of how we change is through our habits: the things we do over and over again.** Those are, to use Jesus' language, the things that we "*practice*." A guy by the name of James K.A. Smith wrote a fantastic book a few years ago about all of this titled *You Are What You Love*—I highly recommend that book to you. In the book, he famously describes all of this, this way: *the things we do, do things to us*. There is a direct connection between *repetition*, and *formation*. We become the people we become largely based on the things we *do* over and over and over again.¹

¹ This is paraphrased from a fantastic quote by a guy named R.J. Snell, in his book, *Acedia & its Discontents*.

Now, something very important for you to know, is that this is happening in your life all the time, whether you realize it or not, even in the small things. For instance, a couple months ago, my wife and I began watching from the very beginning, the show *Brooklyn 99*. Any 99 fans out there? Nearly every night, we'd get the kids to bed—which if you don't have kids—putting kids to bed feels a little like running a marathon for an hour, while having tiny humans scream in your face the entire time. That's what it feels like. But nearly every night, we'd put the kids to bed, we'd get some snacks from the kitchen—which mostly consisted of potato chips and some very sugary cereal—and we'd watch an episode, or two, or seven of *Brooklyn 99*. But **here's the thing: after we had done that for a week or two, I noticed something. All of a sudden, we started experiencing this gravitational pull towards** getting snacks from the kitchen, and watching *Brooklyn 99*. It felt nearly impossible to imagine doing anything *other than* watching *Brooklyn 99*. Like we *knew* that we needed to clean the house, or do our budget, or any number of *useful* things that grown humans do, but it was like all we could think about doing was watching *Brooklyn 99*. We had set into motion a *habit*, that had turned us into certain types of people as a result of the habit. The thing we did, had *done something* to us. Do you see how that works?

This is what habits *do*. There are scientific reasons for this: the way our brains work, our habits create these neural pathways that shape what we love and care about and long for. So once we do something a certain number of times in a row, it becomes so difficult to imagine doing anything other than doing that thing, again. And this all happens through our habits. So practically speaking, if every morning, you start off the day by hitting the snooze button 14 times before you get up, you are going to become the type of person that *needs to* hit the snooze button 14 times before you get up. If you get up each morning and spend the first 15 minutes of your day scrolling through Instagram, you are going to become the type of person who *needs to* spend 15 minutes first thing in the morning scrolling through Instagram. With every time you repeat doing the same thing, the harder it becomes to do anything other than that thing again.

So listen: **we like to think that our habits are prompted by the things that we love, right? This is why we say things like “well I'm lazy, and that's why I like to watch so much TV.”** And that may be true to a certain extent. **But what I'm saying is it also works the other way around: we are lazy, because we watch so much TV.** We have practiced laziness for long enough that we have actually *become* lazy. **Our habits form us into a certain type of person. The things we do, do things to us.** // So—and here's where this becomes so immensely practical for followers of Jesus in the room (look right

at me)—**if we want to become the type of people who look more like Jesus, our habits are a massive part of how we'll get there.** If you will change your habits, *you will change* as a result. If you *will not* change your habits, you will *not* change much at all.

Now, that being said, let me just pause for a second and speak to a concern that some of us might have when it comes to all of this. For those of you who have been around church for a while, it's possible that you're getting a little bit *nervous*. Because to *you*, all this talk about our habits and “practice” and what we *do*, sounds a lot like religion, or “legalism.” It sounds to you like we're advocating for what is commonly called “works” in the bible. In your mind, it sounds like we're talking a lot about what *we do to grow*, and not enough about what *God does to grow us*. And I want you to know I hear that concern; I really do. In fact, I *feel* that same concern in me too.

And so on that note, I want you to know that in saying that we change through our *habits*, I'm not trying to say that God *isn't ultimately* the source of change in our lives. **By saying our habits change us, I'm not trying to say that the Holy Spirit *doesn't* change us.** I'm not trying to say that God's *grace doesn't* change us. Rather, I'm trying to say that **our habits are one very important means that the Holy Spirit uses to make us more like Jesus.** They are one very essential avenue that God's grace flows *through*.

And just to show you that this isn't out of step with the idea of transforming *grace*, look with me at this from Galatians 6:

Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. Whoever sows to please their flesh, from the flesh will reap destruction; whoever sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life.²

So here we have the apostle Paul (who was a *huge* fan of grace—huge *proponent* of grace, and huge *opponent* of “works”). But in this passage, he actually says that to think you can change without changing your habits (what you “sow,” in his language), would be like *mocking* God. To think that you have no active participation in forming your character, would be like a lazy teenager showing up to their first job, doing nothing at all, and then holding their hand out for their paycheck. Paul says that's not how our relationship with God works. That's not how *change* works. Instead, you *reap* what you *sow*. If you *sow* to the Spirit, you *reap* from the Spirit. If you *sow* to the flesh, you *reap*

² Galatians 6:7-8.

from the flesh. Another way of putting that is that our *habits*, for better or worse, *shape* who we become.

Dallas Willard famously said, “*Grace is not opposed to effort, it is opposed to earning.*” What we all want to guard *against* as followers of Jesus is an attitude of *earning*. We want to guard against the mindset that God’s *acceptance* of us is *dependent* upon our effort. Against the mindset that we have to earn and maintain God’s love for us. **Hear me say, loud and clear, that God’s love and acceptance of you, if you are in Jesus, is not dependent upon your actions.** The good news of the gospel is that Jesus went to the cross to, once and for all, *secure* God’s acceptance of you as his son or daughter, independent from your actions. Which means your actions (or lack thereof) cannot do anything to change that reality about you. But that doesn’t mean that our actions don’t *matter when it comes to our spiritual maturity*. They do. And if you want to become more like Jesus, some effort is going to be required.

And there’s one more thing I want you to notice about that Galatians 6 passage. Notice that it actually presented two different options: “sowing to the Spirit,” and “sowing to the flesh.” Another way of putting that is that your habits are *always* transforming you into a certain type of person, good or bad. We are *always* being changed by our habits, the only question is *in what direction are we changing?* If we currently find ourselves caring very little about the things of God, it’s because *the habits we have set up in our lives have formed us into* that kind of person. If we currently find ourselves caring very little about the people around us—about living in meaningful relationship with them—it’s because the habits in our lives have *formed us into* that kind of person. If we currently find ourselves caring very little about fighting sin in our lives, it’s because the *habits* in our lives have *formed us into* that type of person. To use business terminology, “your system is perfectly designed to give you the results that you’re currently getting.” **So if you’re unhappy with who you currently are, especially as it relates to following Jesus, it’s worth asking the question, “what habits got me here?” and then, “what habits could I be participating in instead?”** Does that make sense?

And *that’s* what we want to zoom in on in this series: how our *habits*—the things we practice on a regular basis—make us more and more like Jesus. We want to participate in the art and science of how we change. Each year, at the beginning of the year specifically, we focus in on one particular “habit” or “practice” that helps us become more and more like Jesus. Over the years, Christians have often referred to these as “spiritual disciplines.” Each year, we emphasize one practice that, over the long haul, can help us become more like Jesus.

And this year, we're going to focus on the practice of reading and studying the bible. We'll be looking at how the Holy Spirit uses the *bible* to form us as human beings. Now most likely, we're all over the map in regards to our current relationship with the bible. For a lot of us, it's probably a *central* piece of our life—we spend regular, consistent, even *large* amounts of time reading and studying the bible. For others of us, it might be little more *inconsistent*: maybe we've had seasons where we're in the Scriptures a good bit, in a good rhythm of it...and then other seasons where life got crazy, or life got hard, or for one reason or another, that time in the bible just got lost in the mix. And for others of us still, when it comes to the bible, it's pretty much a non-starter. If we're honest, we can't remember the last time we sat down and cracked it open, and maybe our primary interaction with the bible is on Sundays—what we're doing right now. There's probably a lot of variation in the room when it comes to our relationships with the Bible.

My own relationship with the bible is an interesting one. As I've mentioned before, I grew up in a large Baptist church. And *that* church, as far as I can remember, had a very *high* view of the bible. In fact, I remember on several occasions people saying things from stage like “here at our church, we *love* the bible, we *believe* the bible.” And that was all well and good. The only problem for me personally is that at the time, those things weren't true of *me*. And there didn't seem to be a lot of help available for what to do about that. In other words, there was a lot of talk about how we all *should* read and love the bible, but not a lot of instruction or help on *how* to get there. And if I had to guess, some of us in the room have had a similar experience in regards to the bible. We know we're *supposed* to read it and love it. But that's just not where we're currently at. And we don't really know how to get there. Maybe we don't even know where to *start* in the *process* of getting there.

And so what we're going to do in this series is try to give you a roadmap. Our goal is to not just get us all *reading* the bible, but also *understanding* and *loving* what we read in the bible. And maybe that sounds like a bit of a pipe dream to you because of where you are currently at. But I truly believe we can get there. Or at bare minimum, we can get all of us a little closer to that than we are *now*. We're going to spend the next five weeks unpacking what the Bible is, how to understand it, and how to love reading it.

But—in light of our conversation today—it seems like it would be ill-advised to just use this series to give you *information* about the bible, and not actually form a *habit* of reading the bible, right? Because our *habits* are actually what change us, right? So if all that happens at the end of six weeks is that all of us know more *about* reading the bible, but

don't actually form a practice of reading it, we're still the guy in the story who built his house on the sand, right? So rather than doing that, we have actually put together some resources to help you put into practice reading the bible on a regular basis in your own life. On your way out, we have booklets available to you that contain a year-long bible reading plan. I'll give you more details on how all of it works at the very end of the service today.

But if I can, I just want to wrap up by just speaking briefly to three major *obstacles* I think we encounter when it comes to reading the bible. When I say "let's read through the bible this year," I think there are probably three different hesitations that we feel rise up in us. And what I'd love to do this morning is just try to set you free from them. Does that sound okay? We'll try and go through these lightning fast.

"I don't have time."

Some of us just feel like there's no way we could make time for that in our daily rhythms. Life is just too *full* for us to block out time to read the bible. Now first off, let me say, *I feel you*. I really do. Many of you guys know that we have two kids, aged seven months old and four years old, so life is full speed ahead all the time. There are days where I feel like I don't even have time to *think* or *eat*, much less read the bible. Some of you parents know what I'm talking about, I'm sure. So first, if you don't feel like you have time to read the Bible, know that I can identify with you and I have all kinds of sympathy for you.

But second, as someone on your team, let me also say that we all probably *do* have time. The most recent statistics I found said that the average American watches just under four hours of TV every day. The average adult is on their phone just under *three* hours a day. So really, I don't even know when we're *working* or *watching our kids*, to be honest. But the point being, in all likelihood, you have more time available to read the bible than you think you do. And even if you buck the trend on those stats—even if you're here today, and you're going, "I don't watch *any* TV, and I don't even *have* a smartphone," which might be true for like *five* of us—I would be willing to bet, no matter how hectic your life is, that you still have time to read the bible. Or you can create time. If you don't feel like that's true, I'm dead serious about this: *come talk to me about it*. I would love to sit down with you, look at your daily schedule and help you find time to read the Bible. It is that important to me as your pastor. I think we all actually have the time if we try.

I realized this myself the other day when I was feeding our daughter, Norah. I was sitting there holding the bottle in one hand, and scrolling through Instagram with the other, for like 10-15 minutes straight while she ate. And I all of a sudden had this realization: if I can scroll through *Instagram* while I'm feeding my daughter, I can probably read the bible while I'm feeding my daughter too. Now, nobody's arguing that that is like optimal, focused, bible reading time. But if that's the only time you've got, it sure is better than not reading the bible at all, right? So we probably do have time, if we're completely honest about it. Second...

“I don't know how.”

For others of us, maybe we do have *time* to read the bible, and we want to, but just feel so lost as to where to start. Maybe the whole thing feels intimidating in the first place, or every time we start *trying* to get in the habit of reading the bible, we just get so lost so fast that we are inclined to give up.

And that's understandable. This book—especially parts of it—are not easy to read. So what we want to spend almost this entire series doing is helping you get to a place where you feel more and more comfortable reading and understanding the bible. Our goal is that by the end of these seven weeks, your confidence level would increase dramatically when it comes to finding your way around the Scriptures. We've got all sorts of ways of doing that that we'll get to in due time, but if you'll commit to being around for these six weeks, and catching the podcasts for the weeks that you miss, I really believe we can get you there. And we've got some resources to help in the meantime that I'll tell you about, again, at the end of the service.

And then one more...thanks for your patience...

“I don't want to.”

I think if some of us were honest, this reason is the one underneath it all. The problem is that we don't really *want* to read the bible. Maybe we've *tried* to read the bible before and we just don't feel like we got anything out of it as a result, we didn't *enjoy* it. And so maybe we're thinking, “well I don't want to be legalistic. I mean God wouldn't want me to read the bible if my *heart's* not in it, right? So maybe I should just wait until I feel *motivated* to read the bible, and read it then.”

Here's the problem with that mindset. That assumes that you have no control over your desires. It assumes that you have no control over the things that you love and want. And

if you remember, from James K.A. Smith earlier, that's not entirely true. The truth is that however little you care about the bible, you actually got yourself there. Right? If you currently don't *want* to read the bible, it's because the *habits in your life have made you into a person who doesn't want to read the bible*. So...if you're a follower of Jesus, wouldn't it be better to go "I'm going to choose to read the bible, even when I don't inherently *want* to, and I'm going to pray that as I do that, the Holy Spirit breathes on it and forms me into the kind of person who *loves* reading the Bible"?

And my bet is that the Holy Spirit will do just that. if you participate in reading the bible, even when you don't feel like it, and even despite not always "getting something out of it," you might just find that the Holy Spirit uses all that to make you the type of person that loves the Scriptures. But chances are, he's going to do all of that *through* the thing you've chosen to do over and over again.

That's what I pray happens through this series. Let's pray together.