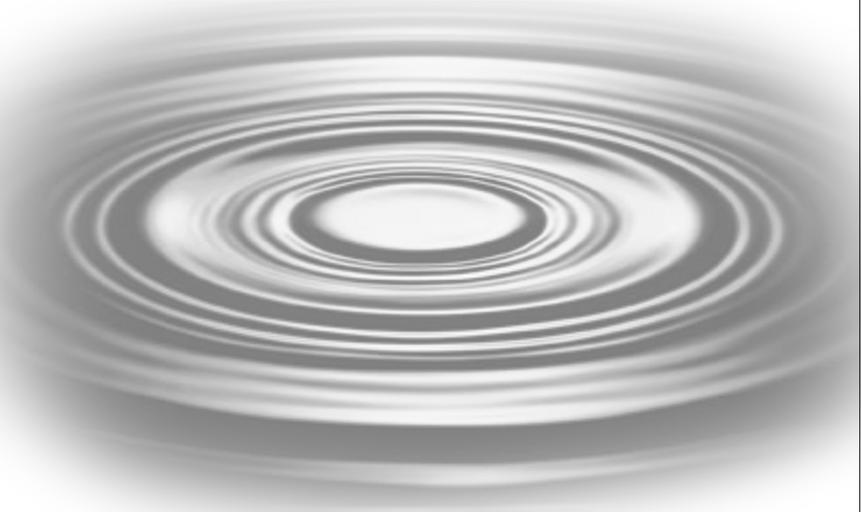


GRACE

THE POWER TO CHANGE

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DR. JAMES B. RICHARDS



WHITAKER
HOUSE

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GRACE: THE POWER TO CHANGE

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ISBN-13: 978-0-88368-730-7 • ISBN-10: 0-88368-730-5
Printed in the United States of America
© 1993 by James B. Richards

Whitaker House
1030 Hunt Valley Circle
New Kensington, PA 15068
www.whitakerhouse.com

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Richards, James B. (James Burton), 1951–
Grace : the power to change / by James B. Richards.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references.
ISBN 0-88368-730-5 (alk. paper)
1. Grace (Theology) 2. Change (Psychology)—Religious aspects—
Christianity. 3. Christian life. I. Title.
BT761.3 .R53 2001
234—dc21

2001006151

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DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to Robert Paul Lamb, writer, preacher, and personal friend. It was his encouragement and direction that launched me into the writing ministry. Because he helped me to write and publish my first book, thousands of people have been helped. Thank you, Robert.

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CHAPTER ONE

THE POWER TO CHANGE



One

The Power to Change

Probably the greatest frustration among serious believers is the inability to change. For the most part, Christians seem to keep their problems for a lifetime. This is not the will of God for the Christian; however, in most cases that is the way it works.

I have seen many situations in which individuals get caught in a trap and cannot seem to break free. For most people this is the major frustration in their walk with God. It does not have to stay that way.

When people are first saved, they usually experience an immediate change in many areas of their lives. Often, however, these changes are very short-lived. It seems that many believers fall back into the sins that had them bound before they came to the Lord. Beyond the obvious difficulties, this makes many new converts question the reality of their salvation experience. Whether or not we fall back into sin, however, can never be the means by which we determine the legitimacy of our salvation experience.

Then there are those sins we fall into after being born again. As an experienced counselor, I have observed that whatever takes hold of a new believer is seldom conquered. Once it becomes habitual, that problem is usually there for life. This is why we must guard our hearts above all else. If our hearts ever become corrupted with sin, that sin will seem impossible to conquer.

How does this corruption happen? Usually a person falls into sin through ignorance or unbelief about walking in the grace of God. Receiving and continuing in grace is the only biblical assurance we have of victory over sin. The apostle Paul wrote, *“For sin shall not have dominion over you: for ye are not under the law, but under grace”* (Rom. 6:14).

Grace gives assurance of victory over sin.

It is, therefore, this issue of grace that determines whether the Christian life will be one of joy, peace, rest, and victory, or one of difficulty, frustration, and defeat. If the new believer would continue in the Lord the way he came into the Lord, none of these problems would ever occur. *“As ye have therefore received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk ye in him”* (Col. 2:6).

It Was a Complete Work

The greatest change anyone ever experienced in life came at the moment of salvation. In an instant, everything changed. That change came about by simply believing. The moment we believed God, His grace came into us, and we changed. If the greatest change came about because we believed, why not continue in that same simple believing? Or as Paul said in Galatians 3:3, *“Are ye so foolish? having begun in the Spirit, are ye now made perfect by the flesh?”*

In other words, when you came into this salvation, the Spirit of God did a work in you. Do you think that, now you are saved, you will finish this work by your own ability? The answer is obvious. No! Just as surely as you could not save yourself by your own efforts, you cannot bring about change through your own resolve. You are not saved by grace, then brought into righteousness by works.

When you came to Jesus, when you believed, God gave you a new heart and a new spirit. His Word tells us, *“A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you: and I will take away*

the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you an heart of flesh” (Ezek. 36:26). Your spirit was not only made new, but also made righteous, perfect, and complete. Your spirit was not made a little baby that had to grow up. God did a perfect work in you. Your spirit is as whole, clean, righteous, and perfect as it ever will be.

The need is not for you to become righteous. The need is for you to get that which is in your spirit to become a reality in your life. So how do you get what is on the inside to the outside? How do you get all that righteousness, holiness, and perfection into the realm where you really live?

Your Heart Is the Door

God has given you a new heart. All that God has done in your spirit comes into your life through your heart. The condition of your heart determines what will come out of your inner man. When you were given a new spirit, you also received a new heart. Now, the heart and the spirit are not the same. There are different Hebrew words for heart and spirit, just as there are different Greek words for heart and spirit, and the functions of both are described differently.

The heart is the seat of your being. It is who you really are. The heart is the place where who you are in your spirit and who you are in your soul come together. All that God has made you in the new birth comes together with the thoughts, beliefs, and emotions of the soul. All this combined is the real you.

At the new birth, God also made your heart new. All the hurts and fears of the past were healed. Believing God suddenly became easy. You had new feelings about nearly everything, but for most people that doesn't last. Why?

Although our spirit man can be changed only by God, our hearts can be changed by our thinking. What we think, what we expose

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ourselves to, the beliefs we adopt—all affect and influence our hearts. Most of us manage to destroy the work God has done in our hearts, thereby limiting the life of God from flowing out into our souls and bodies.

Remember, the heart is the channel through which the life of God in our spirits reaches the rest of our being. Our spirits can be full of life, healing, joy, and integrity, but the condition of our hearts can keep those things from becoming a reality in this realm.

Losing the joy of our salvation, losing the victory over sin, losing anything that God gave us at salvation is not a reflection of the condition of our spirits, but the condition of our hearts.

Let me recount for you a story that I have heard hundreds of times. It usually goes something like this:

I got saved, and everything was great. I felt the love of God. I was happy. It seemed like every time I prayed, God heard my prayer. Life was so exciting. Then, somewhere along the way, it began to change. I didn't feel the joy and peace that I had felt. I lost interest in reading my Bible. It all seemed to dry up.

I went to talk to my pastor, and he said that, when I was first saved, I was a little baby Christian. God did those special things for me then because I was a baby. But now God expects me to grow up and mature. He expects me to stand on my own two feet.

This advice seems very reasonable and practical, but there is just one problem: You can't find this kind of advice anywhere in the Bible. You lost those feelings because your heart changed. God did not change; salvation did not change; the terms for salvation did not change—*your heart changed*. Thus, you cannot participate in what God has done for you.

The kind of advice that most people receive at this point puts them right into works and right out of grace. It is here that we start

trying to get good enough for God to give us those feelings again. Thus, the emotional roller coaster ride begins. The more we follow the typical religious advice, the worse it gets. It's no wonder so many people just give up!

A Deep Frustration

The frustration of this dilemma is realized so dramatically because of the ultimate call of God. When God created man, He intended for him to live in His likeness and image. From that God-given identity and righteousness, man then would enter into an intimate relationship with God. It was only when man rejected the identity that God had given him that he lost the confidence he needed to have a relationship with God.

From the beginning of time, it has been the destiny of man to be conformed to the likeness of the Lord Jesus, through God's power, and to abide in a loving relationship with our God and Father. This is the highest calling of the believer.

This transformation is made possible only by the Lord Jesus. *"For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren"* (Rom. 8:29). Man was created with an intense need to be like his maker. David said it this way: *"I shall be satisfied, when I awake, with thy likeness"*

**Trying
harder isn't
the answer.**

(Ps. 17:15). The born-again believer has a need to change into His likeness. No matter how we try to deal with it, cover it, or pervert it, the desire is still within us. It is a part of our new natures, and the Holy Spirit continually works in us to accomplish it.

For this reason, the desire to change is very strong in every believer, and that inbred need is a major source of frustration for many. When hope is deferred, the Bible says, it makes the heart sick

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(Prov. 13:12). This is especially true when the thing we hope for is a change of character that will free us from those sins we have grown to hate. We desire to change, but it seems to be impossible.

People can mask this inability to change in many ways. Suppression, self-justification, criticism, legalism, and depression are just a few of the many carnal methods of coping with the problem. Unless a believer learns to receive the grace to change, his life will be full of frustration and deceit.

We Must Learn of Him

It has been my observation that most Christians want to change. They just don't know how. For many, the hunger for transformation turns into a lifelong struggle with the flesh that leads to a "works mentality." Although these people may lead moral lives, they still experience little inward victory. Their thoughts still rage within them. They even may go from seminar to seminar, or counselor to counselor, looking for the "anointed secret formula" that will set them free.

Real victory goes far beyond behavior and performance. Right behavior is of little value if we inwardly crave to act another way. Real victory is not walking away from sin, longing to give in to it. Real victory is walking away from sin with a deep sense of pleasure, peace, and gratification.

God has something better than "biting the bullet." It is not His will for the Christian's walk to be so difficult. It is His will that we change *"from glory to glory...by the Spirit of the Lord"* (2 Cor. 3:18.) Jesus said, *"Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest"* (Matt. 11:28). If your Christian walk has been one of labor and heaviness, it is time to come to Jesus. You may say, "I already have come to Jesus. I am born again; I know I'm saved. I don't need to come to Jesus." Oh yes, you do. You need to

come to Him and learn of Him so that you can find rest. Maybe you have met Jesus, but now it is time to *learn of Him*.

The children of Israel were a type or example to us. We can learn from their mistakes. Their major mistake was that they refused to enter into rest. They refused to trust God and allow Him to give them victory. He wanted them to enter the Promised Land. He wanted them to live in houses they did not build and eat fruit from trees they did not plant. In other words, they were to enjoy the fruit of someone else's labor.

But they would not go into the Promised Land. Instead, they looked at the enemy. They looked at the obstacles. They looked at the giants, and they said, "We can't do this." God knew they could not do it alone. He did not expect them to do it in their own strength. He said that He would drive out the enemy, but they didn't trust Him. As Hebrews 3:19 says, "*So we see that they could not enter in because of unbelief.*"

The Israelites died in the wilderness of fear, frustration, and intimidation because they did not enter into rest. They did not enter into that place where they trusted God to do what He said He would do. Likewise, if we do not enter into rest (grace), we will die in our emotional wilderness.

Let us therefore fear, lest, a promise being left us of entering into his rest, any of you should seem to come short of it....For we which have believed do enter into rest, as he said...For he that is entered into his rest, he also hath ceased from his own works, as God did from his. Let us labour therefore to enter into that rest, lest any man fall after the same example of unbelief.
(Heb. 4:1, 3, 10–11)

Trust is earned; it is never given. We come to trust people as we become involved with them. As we come to know them, we start

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to trust or distrust them. In order to know someone, you must learn of him. The Israelites did not learn of Him. They didn't really know God. Moses knew Him, but the Israelites knew only about Him.

If you will humble yourself and learn of Him, you will find rest for your soul. For as Jesus says, *"My yoke is easy, and my burden is light"* (Matt. 11:30). If your yoke is not easy and your burden is not light, you have not really yoked up with Jesus. You have not learned of Him. You do not really know Him. You are still laboring in your own strengths and abilities.

As you get to know Him through a life of fellowship, prayer, and study of the Word, you will enjoy the transformation and renewal that you so desire. Instead of striving and trying with all your might to change, transformation will happen naturally. It will be like slipping on a new set of clothes. However, instead of putting on new clothes, you will be putting on the new you. The Bible commands us to *"put on the new man, which is renewed in knowledge after the image of him that created him"* (Col. 3:10).

**The power
to change
is inside
you.**

You can change. The power to change is inside you. As you read these pages, you will find effortless change by the power of God.