

## HOW TO CHANGE YOUR ATTITUDES

## PSALM 25

I'm told that way up in the extreme northern parts of Canada there are just two seasons each year: winter and July. When the unpaved, back roads in these remote areas start to thaw, they get muddy. Vehicles venturing into this backwoods country in July leave deep ruts in the roads that get frozen solid when cold weather returns. I understand in one such area, there's a sign posted for those who try to drive the roads during the winter months. The sign reads, "Driver, please choose carefully which rut you drive in, because you will be in it for the next 20 miles."

Attitudes are like ruts in a road we travel every day of our lives. Attitudes cut their way into our everyday lives and give us a kind of track to run on – emotionally, mentally, and spiritually. We're in the midst of a short series of messages on attitudes: "Do You Need an Attitude Adjustment?" Last week we reflected on the fact that an attitude is simply an inward feeling expressed by outward behavior. Attitudes dictate our performance in every aspect of life: how you interact with other people, how you work, how you study, even how you relate to God Himself. Followers of Jesus can choose between godly attitudes or ungodly attitudes. We do choose the ruts we want to live in – good ruts or bad ruts, life-enhancing ruts or life-destroying ruts, Christ-like ruts or self-centered ruts.

Every now and then it's a good idea to stop and take stock of your attitudes. Are they serving you well? Are they making your life better or worse? Are they encouraging or discouraging to other people? Do they point people to Jesus or turn them away from Him? But how do you go about changing your own attitudes? Attitudes don't change by themselves. No, changing an attitude is something you do consciously and willfully. You have to drive out of one attitudinal rut and create a new, better, healthier rut, so to speak! The Bible suggests at least three ways you and I can invite godly change in our attitudes. Here's the first way.

### EXERCISE THE CHOICES WITHIN YOU.

You're either the master or the victim of your attitudes. It's a matter of personal choice. Who you are today is the result of the attitudinal choices you made yesterday. Who you will be tomorrow depends on the attitudes you're governed by today. Change always requires a choice. The first choice you and I make requires self-analysis: evaluate your current attitudes. What are they like? Are they positive and godly or will they lead to a dead end? The Bible says, "You must have the same attitude that Christ Jesus had." (Ph 2:5 NLT) What were some of Jesus' attitudes? He was loving rather than hateful, submissive to God instead of rebellious, serving instead of selfish, humble instead of proud, and other-oriented instead of being self-centered. What happens when you really evaluate your attitudes? As the Holy Spirit enlightens and enables, you start to identify ungodly feelings and what someone's called "stinkin' thinkin". He helps you put your finger on perspectives and outlooks that you know are just flat out wrong. A little flicker of desire starts up. Desire for what? Change. Are you willing to even evaluate your attitudes? That's a choice you make and it has huge consequences.

The second choice is to count on your faith being stronger than your fear. All of us fear change and what it might mean for our lives. That's even true when it comes to changing our attitudes. A story from the Bible illustrates this principle. In Acts 4, the first followers of Jesus were facing stiff opposition. They'd been told to stop telling other people about Jesus or face severe consequences. They faced a choice of how to respond. I want you to notice how they handled their own understandable fear. They started to pray. "And now, O Lord, hear their threats, and give us, your servants, great boldness in preaching your word." (Ac 4:29 NLT) That's a very enlightening prayer. They didn't ask God to stop the opposition; instead they asked for greater courage and confidence. My tendency is to ask God to remove everything unpleasant immediately. Perhaps, instead, I should ask Him to fill me with fresh faith that's greater than my fear. The next verse says, "Stretch out your hand with healing power; may miraculous signs and wonders be done through the name of your holy servant Jesus." (Ac 4:30 NLT) They asked God to do something miraculous for them after they expressed willingness to obey God regardless. What happened next? "After this prayer, the meeting place shook, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit. Then they preached the word of God with boldness." (Ac 4:31 NLT) God did send the Holy Spirit to them to provide power, grace and strength. He will do the same for you when you're facing circumstances and situations that are unpleasant or threatening. Is your faith stronger than your fear? That's a choice you make and it directly affects your attitudes.

A third choice is simply to possess the authentic desire to change your attitudes. Among many wonderful promises in God's Word, this one stands out, "Take delight in the LORD, and he will give you your heart's desires." (Ps 37:4 NLT) Do you really want your attitudes to please God? Changing your attitudes is possible if you truly desire it. But right there is the problem. Many people don't have a very strong desire to change – to change even negative, destructive, and ungodly attitudes. Two sisters remind me of this truth. One sister was an excellent swimmer because she spent a lot of time practicing her strokes. Her sister also participated in organized swimming, but she had little desire to practice. The first sister won a swimming race and got her name in the paper. Hoping to motivate his other daughter, Dad said to her, "Sweetheart, wouldn't you like to work really hard and get your name in the paper, too?" She said, "No, Dad, I'd rather just sit here, eat cookies, and drink milk for the rest of my life." Well, at least she was honest! Sadly, that's the place all too many people choose to stay all their lives – even some followers of Jesus. They lack any real desire to change their attitudes. As a result, their attitudes never change.

What makes you want to change anything about your life? In some cases, hurt or pain will force you to change. Sometimes you'll choose to change if you get bored or restless enough. Child of God, you don't have to be dominated, controlled, or governed by fear, worry, discouragement, resentment, defeat or any other ungodly attitude. Jesus died and rose again for you. He lives in you every day through the Holy Spirit. Of course, with His help, you can change any ungodly attitude. Actually, that gets to the meaning of repentance. A desire to change is the beginning of repentance. It's more than just feeling bad about wrong behavior or attitudes in your life. Genuine repentance requires

us to get rid of ungodly attitudes and behavior. Do you really want godly attitudes to dominate, control, and govern your life? It begins with a choice only you can make.

Live one day at a time. That's a fourth choice when it comes to changing your attitudes. Jesus said, "So don't worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring its own worries. Today's trouble is enough for today." (Mt 6:34 NLT) But aren't you supposed to think ahead? Aren't you supposed to plan for the future? Of course! Then, what was Jesus' point here and how does it apply to attitudes? Don't add tomorrow's concerns to today's tasks. When we add on all the excess baggage of tomorrow's issues – and, then, what happened yesterday, too – that's when we get crushed and overwhelmed just trying to maintain godly attitudes today. I appreciate the insight that God doesn't promise to give me any grace today for tomorrow's burdens. He does promise to give me all the grace I need for today. And I can expect fresh grace for tomorrow. Here's the choice and it directly affects your attitudes. Will I allow either yesterday's problems or tomorrow's uncertainties to overwhelm today's grace? Will I live one day at a time?

One more choice: fill your mind with godly thoughts. The Bible says, "Fix your thoughts on what is true, and honorable, and right, and pure, and lovely, and admirable. Think about things that are excellent and worthy of praise." (Ph 4:8 NLT) What do you fill your mind up with? What sorts of movies and TV shows do you watch? What kinds of social media do you sample? What sorts of Internet sites, books, and magazines do you look at? What's the music you listen to? What do the lyrics say? It doesn't even have to be overtly sinful stuff to damage your attitudes. The question is does it add anything positive to your life? Do you ever read or meditate on Scripture? How much? How many books about what it means to follow Jesus have you read in the past year? How much time do you give to prayer, to worship, or to spiritual conversation? Whatever holds your attention determines your action. Whatever occupies your mind determines who you are and the kinds of attitudes that control your life.

The year after I graduated from high school I attended a Bible school in England. One of the teachers was Billy Strachan. One day he came into the lecture hall acting silly and all excited. He'd just turned 40 years of age! Often, that's a reason for grief, not rejoicing. But Billy explained it this way to us that day, "Twenty years ago at the age of 20 I became a Christian. Before my conversion, I'd wake up every morning and only one message played in my mind, "Dirt. Dirt. Dirt." But for the last twenty years, I've been filling my mind with what is true, noble, right, pure, lovely and Christ-honoring. Over the last twenty years, I've had to choose each morning what was going to dominate or control my mind that day. Today, the amount of godly material is finally even with the ungodly stuff. And tomorrow, the Christ-honoring material will be greater and the choice will be easier to make." Whatever holds your attention determines your action. When you deliberately fill your mind with good, godly stuff each and every day, you are making an intentional choice that directly affects your attitudes.

Sure, it's easier just to slip into old ruts than cut brand new ones. It's far easier to slide back into ungodly attitudes than maintain new, godly ones. The old farmer put it well, "The hardest thing about milking cows is that they never stay milked!" Attitudes don't

just stay changed. They have to be tended. You and I will have to keep on choosing them every day of our lives. Here's another way we can change our attitudes.

### **ENLIST THE OPPORTUNITIES AROUND YOU.**

For example, seek out the co-operation of a good and godly friend. The Bible says, "Two people are better off than one, for they can help each other succeed. If one person falls, the other can reach out and help. But someone who falls alone is in real trouble." (Ec 4:9-10 NLT) We need each other -- even when it comes to attitudes! Some ungodly attitudes are deeply entrenched. We can begin to feel inadequate trying to get rid of them all by ourselves. It's like those two cows out in the pasture watching the milk truck go by. On one side of the truck were the words "pasteurized, homogenized, standardized, vitamin A added." One cow looked at the other one, sighed, and said, "Makes you feel sort of inadequate, doesn't it?" Many of us struggle with feelings of inadequacy. That's where you need a good, godly friend. Find someone encouraging. Unfortunately, not every child of God is automatically encouraging! Find a person who appreciates honesty and authenticity, but - at the same time - won't allow you just to wallow around in ungodly attitudes either. When you find him or her, talk with and pray with that person regularly.

That leads right into a second opportunity around you. Associate with the right people if you want to change your attitudes. The Bible says, "Don't be fooled by those who say such things, for 'bad company corrupts good character.'" (1 Cor 15:33 NLT) The reverse is also true – good company promotes good character. The people you hang out with either hinder or help you to grow into godly attitudes. That doesn't mean you never spend time with or build relationships with non-Christians. Otherwise, how are they ever going to hear about Jesus? By the same token, intentionally spend time with people who also want to grow spiritually and become all that God wants them to be themselves. When it comes to living life with consistently godly attitudes, what matters more is the crowd you hang out with rather than the circumstances you encounter.

When it comes to getting and keeping godly attitudes, why not select a model to follow? The Christian leader, Paul, wasn't reluctant to invite people to follow his own example as he followed Jesus. He said, "Keep putting into practice all you learned and received from me—everything you heard from me and saw me doing." (Ph 4:9 NLT) Why not begin looking for a follower of Jesus who will help you to grow specifically in the area of godly attitudes? I suggest someone who has overcome his or her own obstacles in life and who still approaches life with a positive, godly perspective. He or she is at a place in his or her life right now in terms of attitudes that you'd like to be someday.

Be willing to learn from your mistakes. Do you remember the story about the woman caught in the very act of adultery who was then brought before Jesus? Some mistakes in life are mistakes and some are sins against God, others, and yourself. Her actions were all of the above: a big mistake and a huge sin. The Jewish leaders wanted to stone her right then and there. Jesus wanted to forgive her and also challenge her to change. He said to her, "Woman, where are they? Does no one condemn you?' 'No

one, Master.' 'Neither do I,' said Jesus. 'Go on your way. From now on, don't sin.'" (Jo 8:10-11 MSG) We've all heard that we learn from our mistakes, but the greater truth is that you can't learn without making mistakes. Some people never grow and never change because they can't stand to fail ever. Often the most successful people have had more failures than successes in life. Perhaps Winston Churchill was right when he said, "Success consists of going from failure to failure without loss of enthusiasm." My friend, if you've sinned, then confess it, renounce it, and move on confident in God's power to forgive and restore you. If you've made a mistake or experienced some kind of set-back that doesn't fall into the sin category, well then, accept the fact you're limited and not perfect, learn from it, and allow it to make you a wiser, better person. Here's yet another way you can change your attitudes, and it's the most important one by far.

### **ENGAGE GOD ABOVE YOU.**

Someone might conclude, "Anyone can change their attitudes. You don't have to be a follower of Jesus to have great attitudes." Maybe not, but a non-Christian with great attitudes is a walking, talking contradiction. Why? He or she is living in a fantasy, make believe world. Now, non-Christians with sour, horrible attitudes make a lot of sense to me. Their attitudes correctly reflect both their present and their future. He's a slave to sin. The devil has her right where he wants her. He's heading for an eternity in Hell unless he surrenders to the lordship of Jesus. She has every justifiable reason to be miserable because without Jesus she's a condemned sinner. Non-Christians have no rational reason to have great attitudes about anything. E. Stanley Jones, a great missionary last century, made this point. "Anything less than God will let you down. Anything less than God is not rooted in eternal reality. It has a built-in failure."

When it comes to getting and keeping godly attitudes, engaging God Himself is greater than any choice or any opportunity. OK, but how does that happen? One way you can engage God Himself is in and through His Word. The Bible is the greatest attitudinal change handbook known to humanity. If you let it permeate your mind and heart, your attitudes can only improve. The Bible is full of people who displayed godly attitudes often in the midst of the most challenging life circumstances. So read the Bible. Meditate on it. Memorize it. Discuss it with others. Let it saturate your heart and mind. Here's what the Bible says about itself, "Every part of Scripture is God-breathed and useful one way or another—showing us truth, exposing our rebellion, correcting our mistakes, training us to live God's way. Through the Word we are put together and shaped up for the tasks God has for us." (2 Tim 3:16-17 MSG) God will use His Word to help you change your attitudes if you let it.

Another way you engage God is through prayer. Right here I want you to look with me at a portion of Psalm 25. David is the author. He was a man who chose the right road to walk in life, but he hadn't found it an easy walk all of the time by any means. David had plenty of enemies – many were outside his life, some of them were inside David himself. Psalm 25 can teach us much about prayer. Allow me to make a comment or two as we read through v. 1-10. Verse 1 says, "In you, LORD my God, I put my trust." David knew exactly who to ask for help. He went to God immediately and often.

Verses 2-3 say, "I trust in you; do not let me be put to shame, nor let my enemies triumph over me. No one who hopes in you will ever be put to shame, but shame will come on those who are treacherous without cause." David trusted God because he knew God's character." Verses 4-5 say, "Show me your ways, LORD, teach me your paths. Guide me in your truth and teach me, for you are God my Savior, and my hope is in you all day long." David asked God to change him – not just his troubling situation. Wise prayer! Because when you ask God to change something you don't like, He usually begins with you! Verses 6-7 say, "Remember, LORD, your great mercy and love, for they are from of old. Do not remember the sins of my youth and my rebellious ways; according to your love remember me, for you, LORD, are good." Why pray to God at all? Because God is both great and good. You and I are neither great nor good. Then look there at v. 8-10. "Good and upright is the LORD; therefore he instructs sinners in his ways. He guides the humble in what is right and teaches them his way. All the ways of the LORD are loving and faithful toward those who keep the demands of his covenant." Prayer puts its confidence in God and His character.

Yet another way you and I engage God is in and through His Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is a Person. He Himself is God – part of what we call the Trinity. The Bible says, "But you belong to God, my dear children.... The Spirit who lives in you is greater than the spirit who lives in the world." (1 Jo 4:4 NLT) Does the Holy Spirit live within the inner spirit of every follower of Jesus? By definition, absolutely. But is every Christian filled with the Holy Spirit? No. Being filled with the Holy Spirit implies you are controlled by the Spirit. And that can only mean that He is dominating and empowering your attitudes so that love, joy, peace, patience, goodness, kindness, gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control show up in your life every day. Because God lives in us through the Holy Spirit, we get His guidance in times of confusion, we get His healing for every wound life inflicts on us, and we get His strength for every task He gives us.

Kyle Idleman is a pastor and an author. Years ago, he started a new church in Los Angeles. He got overwhelmed by pressure and stress. When the church was about a year old, he woke up during the night. He had this strange sense that God was laughing at him. As he lay in bed, he wondered, "Why is God laughing at me?" It would take five years before Kyle finally got an answer to that question. When Kyle and his family moved into another house, he saved the heaviest piece of furniture for last—the desk from his office. As he was pushing and pulling this desk with all his might, Kyle's four-year-old son came over and asked if he could help. So together they started sliding it across the floor. Kyle's son was pushing and grunting as they inched their way along. After a few minutes, Kyle's son stopped pushing, looked up at his dad, and said, "Dad, you're in my way." And then he tried to push the desk by himself. Of course it didn't budge. Then Kyle realized that his son thought he was actually doing all the work, instead of him. Kyle couldn't help but laugh. The moment he started laughing at his son's comment, he recalled that middle-of-the-night incident. He realized why God was laughing at him five years ago. Kyle thought he was pushing the desk – building up the ministry of that new church. Instead of recognizing God's power and strength, he started to think it all depended on him.

So, how about your attitudes today? Do some of them need an adjustment? If you're honest with yourself, we all do. And for change to happen, we're going to have to exercise some choices, enlist some opportunities, and – above all – engage the One who alone has the power to change ungodly attitudes into godly attitudes.