

How Does Christianity Work?

If you ask almost any Bible Belt Christian what the gospel is for they will usually tell you something like, "Well, if you're saved you won't go to hell when you die." Although this is true, it falls way short of God's intention.

A favorite verse of many Christians is, "God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God." It is very comforting to know deep down in your "knower" that God is looking after you and that even when people and events seem to conspire together for your harm God can turn it all to your favor.

What is often overlooked is a following phrase which says that God has chosen you to "become conformed to the image of his dear son." This means, quite simply, that God expects you to grow to be just like Jesus.

Since most church goers know that Jesus is not only a sinless man but also God, it is nearly impossible for them to believe that God expects them to become just like Jesus. If they think about this for very long they may even decide that God is being unfair to expect this of them.

They come to this conclusion because they don't understand just how God expects them to do this. Like most other things in life they just presume that they are expected to accomplish this transformation in this life with enormous amounts of self-effort. In other words, becoming like Jesus is a monumental task of self-improvement. However, this is not the case. God through the work of the Holy Spirit can transform you. God wants us to be little brothers and sisters of Jesus. But you have to let him. He will not impose this change on you involuntarily.

Furthermore, the entire passage assures us that God will follow through with this process until his goal is accomplished. ⁱ

The next objection raised by the natural mind of the average believer is, "of course, we can't become perfect, a really finished product, in this life. We will have to wait for the Resurrection for it to be complete. Dwelling in this thought only causes us to abandon any real spiritual growth in this life. That

is a trap. Unless we do grow and show improvement in this life we will be mostly worthless in the next. God builds character starting now.

The next concept that interferes with our transformation is the whole idea that Jesus is always "nice." It is somewhat of a mystery just where this notion comes from because the New Testament writings do not support it. It is "the gospel according to Emily Post."

One bright day when Jesus was with his disciples he asked them who they believed he really was. Good old Peter responded that he is the Son of the living God. For this Jesus praised him strongly. Not too long after that Jesus implied that he himself would be killed by evil men. Peter responded to this by trying to correct Jesus and was told "get behind me Satan!" This was not nice. But it was necessary. ⁱⁱ

There are many other places in the Gospels where Jesus really lays into people. He was especially hard on the Pharisees because they were extreme legalists.

Does this mean that Jesus did not love people? No. however, there is a difference between loving someone and affirming their wrong attitudes or actions. Jesus knows the difference and we should too.

In order to really grasp our ability to grow we must first understand how Grace, the continuing free gift of forgiveness and cleansing, works. Because it is "a good thing for the heart to be established with Grace." ⁱⁱⁱ

The Other Way: The Human Drift Away From God

How Deep Does It Go?

Ro 1

20 For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse. 21 For even though they knew God, they did not [n]honor Him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened. 22 Professing to be wise, they became fools, 23 and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and [o]crawling creatures.

24 Therefore God gave them over in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, so that their bodies would be dishonored among them. 25 For they exchanged the truth of God for [p]a lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed [q]forever. Amen.

26 For this reason God gave them over to degrading passions; for their women exchanged the natural function for that which is [r]unnatural, 27 and in the same way also the men abandoned the natural function of the woman and burned in their desire toward one another, men with men committing [s]indecent acts and receiving in [t]their own persons the due penalty of their error.

28 And just as they did not see fit [u]to acknowledge God any longer, God gave them over to a depraved mind, to do those things which are not proper, 29 being filled with all unrighteousness, wickedness, greed, evil; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, malice; they are gossips, 30 slanderers, [v]haters of God, insolent, arrogant, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, 31 without understanding, untrustworthy, unloving, unmerciful; 32 and although they know the ordinance of God, that those who practice such things are worthy of death, they not only do the same, but also give hearty approval to those who practice them.

Step One: Accept Jesus

Step Two: Stop Counting

When Jesus told his disciples to forgive not seven times but seventy times sever he did not mean to forgive 490 times. Seven is the number of

God's perfection. Ten represents completeness or infinity. We should have no limit on our forgiveness because God forgives us completely.

There is a "grace channel" inside every human soul. If you let it get clogged up you can no longer receive or give forgiveness. God's Word is not so much as a law book presided over by an almighty God who can punish greatly. It is an "owner's manual." God made us and he knows how we are made and what we need to do to function properly. The grace channel within us runs both ways, the more we give the more we are able to receive. We forgive others because God has forgiven us infinitely. This means that there is no use counting the number of times we forgive or that God forgives us.

If we are counting the sins and shortcomings of others then we are invariably counting our own sins. If we cannot forgive others, then we will not be able to forgive ourselves.

Often in Christian counseling the counselee is told that since they have confessed their sins they are forgiven and then ask them if they forgive themselves.

Some answer that they cannot forgive themselves. A sympathetic counselor might say that they understand this but that they should pray about this that God will give them the ability to forgive themselves.

A master counselor will usually confront the counselee by asking them, "Who are you to refuse to forgive yourself when God in Christ has forgiven you?"

This will often catch the counselee off guard and they will realize that it is their pride that will not allow them to forgive themselves.

There is a difference between confrontation and conflict. Confrontation is not going to battle. It is corrective.

When this writer was conducting drug counselor classes in a state prison I would often ask the men how many times they believed God would "take them back."

They would usually come up with a number like 3 times or five or even 50 or a hundred times. I would then announce that God would take them back as many times as they needed him to no matter what they had done if they were truly sorry for their actions.

Then they would then just sit and stare at me. This was almost too much for them accept. But they wanted to, I could see it in their eyes.

I went on to tell them that the civil judge might have to send them to prison, but that they could be forgiven by God even there.

You see, the Good News is truly difficult to believe unless we are desperate. Why wait until then? Accept it now. But you have to Stop Counting! ^{iv}

ⁱ 28 And we know that [a]God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose. 29 For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren; 30 and these whom He predestined, He also called; and these whom He called, He also justified; and these whom He justified, He also glorified. Rom 8:28-30

ⁱⁱⁱⁱ Matthew 16:23 But he turned, and said unto Peter, Get thee behind me, Satan: thou art an offence unto me: for thou savourest not the things that be of God, but those that be of men.

ⁱⁱⁱ Be not carried about with divers and strange doctrines. For it is a good thing that the heart be established with grace; not with meats, which have not profited them that have been occupied therein. Hebrews 13:9

^{iv} Hebrews 8:12 For I will be merciful to their unrighteousness, and their sins and their iniquities will I remember no more.

Hebrews 10:17 And their sins and iniquities will I remember no more.