

How to Help Someone to Change Their Ways

by Rick Thomas

Your friend needs to change.

How do you help them to change?

Maybe your husband is stuck in a bad habit and you want him to change.

How do you go about helping him to change?

Perhaps your wife is nagging and criticizing you to death.

How are you helping her to model a more gentle and caring spirit?

There are several ways to get a person to change.

Here are a few *approaches* that come to mind. As I go through this list, examine your heart to see which ones you tend to employ when someone is not satisfying your expectations:

- *The Shame Approach*: pointing out how dumb that thing was that the person did
- *The Guilt Approach*: comparing the person's poor behavior with someone else's good behavior
- *The Threat Approach*: yelling out the consequences of the person's sin if they continue in it
- *The Condemnation Approach*: putting them down or making fun of them in front of others
- *The Critical Approach*: always pointing out their faults, no matter how small they may be
- *The Cynical Approach*: though they may have done something good, you *know* their intent was selfish

How did you do? Did you see yourself in any of these approaches? I think it would be good to ask your spouse, children, or very close friends how they would characterize you when it comes to how you motivate a person to change.

Will you do that? Will you ask others for their observations about you?

All of the *approaches* that I have suggested can work. In fact, if you use them on children, they can be quite effective. However, the problem is that when the children become taller, bigger,

older, smarter, and more independent, your manipulations will not be as effective.

And if you're not careful you will assist your children into becoming very angry teenagers. You may push them out of your life. This is what we call *exasperating a child*. You can also exasperate your spouse and friends too.

Are you an exasperating person? If any of the methods above are the ones you generally employ, then you may be an exasperating person. Assuredly, if you continue to use these methods, you will push your friends and family away.

"I had mercy on you"

Maybe this is what you want. I hope not, but if so, then your manipulative tactics are motivated by ungodly desires.

Let's say that your observations are mostly correct about what you observe in the person you want to change. Just maybe you are right. Your husband, wife, child, or friend really does need to change.

Just because your observations are correct, it does not mean that your methods are correct. May I suggest to you another method that is actually biblical, blessed by God, and quite effective? It is also anchored in the Gospel.

Got niceness

There are many ways to say this, but for now I'm just going to call it *being nice*. How are you at *being nice* to the people who are not performing to your expectations?

- I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. – Matthew 5:44.45 (ESV)

- I say to you who hear, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you. – Luke 6:27 (ESV)

Some will object and say, "I've tried that and it did not work." Oh my, do you realize what you are saying? Is your being nice primarily about results or is it primarily about imitating your heavenly Father? The person who says, "I've tried that and it did not work" is a conditional friend: I will love you if you meet my expectations.

They are looking for a method or an approach to get what they want. They are looking for results. Their thinking is earthly, of this world. The truth is that you and I only have two options:

1. Be nice
2. Do not be nice.

The point in being nice should be primarily because we want to magnify God's name in our lives. We want to make His name fantastically great. Should we get good results because we were being nice, then praise God for the good results too.

Gospel motivated niceness

A person who will not be nice is a person who does not get the Gospel, plain and simple. They either do not know the Gospel at all or they have forgotten what the Father did for them at the cross of Christ. They have *Gospel-amnesia*.

Then his master summoned him and said to him, You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you? - Matthew 18:32-33 (ESV)

The context for this story is about a man who owed 10,000 talents and he pleaded with his master to forgive him. His master showed mercy and forgave him all of his debt. This forgiven servant shortly thereafter began to assail a man who owed him much less money, one hundred denarii.

When the master found out how mean this guy was to someone who owed far less than what he was forgiven, the master was angry with the servant. The servant had a lapse of *Gospel-amnesia*. The master said,

Change (cont.)

“Should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?”

Here is my question to you: Shouldn't you have mercy on others because of the mercy that was shown to you?

Let's go at it this way. Let's take a short *Gospel Test*. How you answer these questions will reveal your understanding and application of the Gospel:

1. Who is the biggest sinner you know? If you say anyone other than yourself, then you have *Gospel-amnesia*.
2. Do you believe what was done to you, whatever that was, is worse than what you did to the Savior?
3. Is there someone in your life that you will not forgive?
4. Is there someone in your life that you cannot stop being angry at?

How you answered these questions reveal your functional understanding of the Gospel. If you are more stuck on what someone has done to you rather than what you have done to Christ, then you are a problem-centered, self-centered Christian, rather than a Gospel-centered Christian.

If you believe some other person is a worse sinner than you are, then you will never be able to help that person change. You will be tempted to employ some of the approaches mentioned above. Those methods will be your primary *Theology of Change* tactics. My friend, none of them will work.

The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost. – 1 Timothy 1:15 (ESV)

How did you change?

Let me introduce to you a biblical method of change that your Father would want you to use in order to help others change. I call it the *Encouragement Approach*. Think about it with me for a moment.

- How did you change?
- What motivated you to change?

Though you probably did not think about it this way, the reason and motivation for your change was because of God's kindness. That is why I changed. God was kind to me. My Father regenerated me in 1984.

Though I did not know John 3:16 or any other verse in the Bible at that time, I realized that He was offering kindness to me. No, I did not put it in those words, but that is essentially what I was realizing.

God was offering His Son as a replacement and payment for every sin that I ever committed or that I will ever commit. That is the Gospel. I accepted His offering to me and the change process began. Even though we are many years since that day in my bedroom where God regenerated me, He is still employing the *Encouragement Approach*.

The kindness of God changes me!

His methodology of change has never changed. It was the kindness of God that changed me then and it is the kindness of God that changes me now. This is what Paul was saying to the Romans:

Do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God's *kindness* is meant to *lead you to repentance*? – Romans 2:4 (ESV)

The answer to his question is assumed. Paul is saying, “You know this, right?” His assumption is that you do know this. Let me ask you: do you know this? Are you aware that it was God's kindness that led to your change (repentance)?

Paul is also warning us not to take His kindness for granted. Are you presuming on His kindness? Have you taken it for granted? Have you forgotten how He changed you and how He is changing you?

God's riches given to others

Further note the conjunctions in the verse. He is talking about the riches of His *kindness*, the riches of His *forbearance*, and the riches of His *patience*. These are the things the Father employs in order to bring about change.

- Are you employing the riches of God's kindness on the person you want to change?
- Are you employing the riches of God's forbearance on the person you want to change?

- Are you employing the riches of God's patience on the person you want to change?

If you are not employing these riches, but choosing to implement the ungodly approaches mentioned at the beginning of this article, then you're whistling in the wind. Change will not come. What you want will not come to pass. Relationships have no chance of being restored, and God will not be glorified.

Rather than *nickel and diming* a person to death or constantly reminding him of his faults and where he gets it wrong, it seems like the *Encouragement Approach* is a better idea. Don't you think it is a better idea?

What about sin? What do I do when they sin? This does not mean that you should overlook sin. We should not ignore when a person sins, not at all.

However, finding fault is not hard for me. I'm thinking it is probably not hard for you as well. It is easy to see when someone sins. I think I have a gift for observing people's mistakes, so ignoring sin is not usually an issue with me.

What I have to train my mind toward is encouragement. That is my problem. I do not natively think of and make encouragement my practice. Encouraging others is something I have to work at.

What you and I need to do is practice observing our friends and family members getting it right rather than getting it wrong. We need to exercise our *getting it right muscle*. And if we do *catch them getting it right* we need to *isolate* and *identify* those moments where God's grace is actively working in their lives.

We need to talk about what we saw and how encouraging it was. Remember: if you and I do anything right, then it is evidence that God is working in our lives. It is only by His grace that we can do anything right.

Therefore, if you are encouraging someone for getting it right, then you are expressing your gratitude for the grace of God in their lives.

Encouragement illustrated

We do this with our children all the time. That is not an exaggeration. Each one of our children are encouraged many times throughout their day. They are regularly *caught doing good*.

Change, cont.

We have found it beneficial when we *catch them getting it right* to not only commend them for what they did, but to connect the dot in their little minds that the good thing they just did is something Jesus would have done.

In short, they were acting like Jesus in that moment of good behavior. This has a fourfold effect:

1. They are encouraged in their behavior.
2. They gain insight as to how Jesus behaved when He was here on earth.
3. They begin learning what is good and acceptable behaviors.
4. It is another opportunity to praise God for His work in their lives: God is with us.

It would not be unusual for you to find Lucia or I sneaking around our home hoping to catch our kids doing something that is *right!* And if we do catch them, then we draw attention to it. Are you *sneaking around your home* catching each other getting it right? Do you have a well-tuned *Got-It-Right-Antenna?*

As you might imagine, this approach takes more time and is harder to perfect than being a nitpicker. Our kids typically are doing more things wrong than right. It takes more effort to catch them doing well, but when we do catch them getting it right it motivates them toward more change.

It is God's kindness that leads to change.

I will tell you where I messed up

God's kindness not only motivates me to change, but it motivates me to come to Him in my time of need. Because of the continued daily encouragement I receive through the cross of Christ, I am aware that

I can approach my Father and He won't lash out at me, hurt me, or call me names.

Therefore, it is logical to assume that He will be kind to me when I come to him with my problems. He has shown His kindness to me in the past, and I'm assured He will be kind to me when I come to Him in the future.

One of the implications of the cross is that God will not give me what I deserve. He will not punish me for my sin. He will deal kindly with me. He will help me to change.

Because of his *prior* kindness in salvation I know there will be *future* kindness too. The kindness of God was not only effective in securing my salvation, where I first changed, but it is effective in my on-going change needs.

- Does the person you want to change know you are there for them?
- Do they know that when they come to you, they will be encouraged to change, rather than hammered into change?
- Are they aware that you have their best interests in mind?
- Are they motivated to come to you when they mess up because they know you will treat them just like God treats you, with kindness?
- Because of how you respond to them are they motivated to be transparent with you about their problems?

Prior encouragement sets the stage for future grace in interactive relationships. My past Gospel experience informs me that my future experience with God will be a kind and gentle experience. I trust God to carefully and kindly care for my soul. Will you gently and kindly help a person to change?

A context of grace has been established in my relationship with God and because of His kindness, it pays off when more future difficulty comes. How are you doing in creating a context of grace in your relationships that motivates people to be honest, transparent, and willing to seek you out in order to get help?

Application Questions

1. Do you want someone to change?
2. Are you going to be nice to them?
3. Are you going to be kind to them?
4. Are you going to encourage them to change?
5. Are you going to motivate them by the Gospel to change?
6. Are you going to treat them the way your heavenly Father treats you?

Let's start over

I'm going to re-ask my *starter questions*. Perhaps you got the wrong answers the first time around. If so, you can retake the test. Good luck!

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- How do you go about helping him to change? Perhaps your wife is nagging and criticizing you to death.
- How are you helping her to model a more gentle and caring spirit?

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