

WHY WOULD YOU LIKE TO CHANGE?

Why would you like to change? Think about it for a moment. Why do you want to be more like Jesus? Why do you want to keep a lid on your temper or overcome lust or stop living in a fantasy world? Why do you want to feel less depressed or bitter or frustrated? Why do you want to be a better parent, a better husband, a better wife, a better employee? Here are three answers you may have given.

To Prove Myself to God

You may want to change so God will be impressed with you or bless you in some way or save you.

Many people think that good people go to heaven—so if you want to go to heaven, then you need to be good. We might think of heaven as a fancy nightclub with a bouncer at the door. The bouncer lets in only smartly dressed people. Anyone in jeans is turned away. So we have to smarten ourselves up to get into heaven.

Or you may think you'll be accepted on the last day because of God's grace. But you still want to impress God so he'll bless you in the meantime. "I've tried living God's way," one woman told me, "but he still hasn't given me a husband." She wanted to impress God so he'd give her what she wanted.

The instinct to self-atone runs deep in our hearts. We want to make amends for our sin on our own. But God has done it all through Christ because of his grace, his undeserved love to us. Grace is so

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simple to understand and yet so hard to grasp. It's not its complexity that makes it difficult. The problem is that we seem to be hard-wired to think we must do something to make God favorably disposed toward us. We want to take the credit. But all the time God is saying, "In my love I gave my Son for you. He's done everything needed to secure my blessing. I love you as you are, and I accept you in him." God can't love you more than he does now, no matter how much you change your life. And God won't love you less than he does now, no matter what a mess you make of your life. "God shows his love for us in that *while we were still sinners*, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8).

To Prove Myself to Other People

This is often the reason I want to change: I want people to be impressed by me. We may want to fit in or win approval. We certainly don't want people finding out what we're like inside. We wear a mask to hide our real selves. Wearing the mask can be a great strain; it's like acting a role all the time. But we dare not let people see us as we really are.

One of the problems with trying to prove ourselves to other people is that they set the standard. Their standards may be ungodly, but we adopt their behavior to fit in. Or their standards may be godly, but we're living in obedience to people rather than in obedience to God. Often what happens is that we settle for living like other people even when that falls short of living like Jesus. Or we measure ourselves against other people and decide we're more righteous. We may point the finger at others' faults so we can feel better about ourselves.

Instead we should be comparing ourselves to Jesus, finding we fall a long way short of God's standards and discovering that we desperately need a Savior.

To Prove Myself to Myself

Another common reason why we want to change is so we can feel good about ourselves. When we mess up, we feel the shame of our

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sin. So we want to put things right. We want to think of ourselves as a “former user of porn” rather than a “porn addict.” We want to say, “I used to have a problem with anger” rather than “I have a problem with anger.” So when we mess up, our primary concern is that we can’t think of ourselves as “a former sinner.” We can’t feel good about ourselves until we’ve put some distance between ourselves and our last “big sin.” For us, sin has become first and foremost sin against ourselves. If I sin, then I’ve let myself down. What I feel when I sin is the offense against me and my self-esteem, not the offense against God.

Justified by Grace

What’s wrong with wanting to change so we can prove ourselves to God or people or ourselves? It doesn’t work. We might fool other people for a while. We might even fool ourselves. But we can never change enough to impress God. And here’s the reason: trying to impress God, others, or ourselves puts *us* at the center of our change project. It makes change all about *my* looking good. It is done for *my* glory. And that’s pretty much the definition of sin. Sin is living for my glory instead of God’s. Sin is living life my way, for me, instead of living life God’s way, for God. Often that means rejecting God as Lord and wanting to be our own lord, but it can also involve rejecting God as Savior and wanting to be our own savior. Pharisees do good works and repent of bad works. But gospel repentance includes repenting of good works done for wrong reasons. We need to repent of trying to be our own savior. Theologian John Gerstner says, “The thing that really separates us from God is not so much our sin, but our damnable good works.”¹

Deep down in all of us there is a tendency to want to prove ourselves, to base our worth on what we do. Religious people do this, but so do most non-religious people. They do a secular version in which their identity is based on performance. I feel good about myself because I’m a success at work or because I dress to impress or because I’m a great performer in bed.

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As Christians, we also slip back constantly into trying to be our own savior. At the end of the Sermon on the Mount Jesus presents us with two choices, two roads, two foundations for life (Matthew 7:13–27). We might suppose the choice is between a good life and a bad life. But when you look back over the Sermon, that’s not what you see. The alternative life that Jesus rejects is a good life lived for the wrong reasons. He rejects the “righteousness . . . of the scribes and Pharisees” (5:20). They think they’re righteous for God, but really they’re doing it for themselves (7:21–23)—“that they may be seen by others” or to manipulate God (6:1–8). Their righteousness doesn’t come from the heart (5:21–48). So the options Jesus presents are self-righteousness and poverty of spirit (5:3, 20).

Another word for proving ourselves is *justify*. We want to justify ourselves—to demonstrate we’re worthy of God or respectable in the eyes of other people. But we’re justified only through faith in what Christ has done. When you feel the desire to prove yourself, remember you’re right with God in Christ. You can’t do anything to make yourself more acceptable to God than you already are. You don’t need to worry whether people are impressed by you because you’re already justified or vindicated by God. And what makes you feel good is not what you’ve done, but what Christ has done for you. Your identity isn’t dependent on your change. You’re a child of the heavenly King.

To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else, Jesus told this parable:

Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: “God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.”

But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!”

I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted. (Luke 18:9–14)

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The Pharisee wanted to impress God. That's why he listed his achievements. Jesus said he "prayed about himself" (v. 11, NIV). And he wanted to impress other people. That's why he stood up in a prominent place (Matthew 6:5). And no doubt he was pretty impressed with himself. He certainly judged himself better than the tax collector.

The tax collector, on the other hand, didn't think he was impressive. He stood at a distance from other people. He didn't claim to be good in any way. He could only cry out to God for mercy. But, said Jesus, it was the tax collector who went home "justified." The Pharisee tried to justify himself, but he was not justified. The tax collector relied only on God's mercy, and he was justified.

I remember telling a man that his alcoholic daughter was getting baptized. He was shocked and even a little angry. He had always thought of himself as someone who was good enough for God. In fact his life was a mess in all sorts of ways, but he maintained the illusion that he was okay with God by pointing out other people's faults. At least he could think of himself as better than them. But suddenly here was his alcoholic daughter entering the kingdom of God. She wasn't good enough for God, but now that didn't seem to matter. His basis for acceptance with God was suddenly turned upside-down.

Here's the real problem with changing to impress: God has given his Son for us so that we can be justified. Jesus died on the cross, separated from his Father, bearing the full weight of God's wrath so that we can be accepted by God. When we try to prove ourselves by our good works, we're saying, in effect, that the cross wasn't enough.

Imagine you owe a huge debt that has left you languishing in poverty. Then some relatives come along and pay off your creditors. They give everything that is needed, at great cost to themselves. But then you try to give them some loose change as repayment. You let everyone know you helped repay the debt, that it was a joint effort. That would be pointless and insulting.

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We don't do good works so we can be saved; we are saved so we can do good works. "For by grace you have been saved through faith . . . not a result of works. . . . For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them" (Ephesians 2:8–10). Because they can't grasp the order of salvation and good works, many unbelievers never enjoy salvation. But it's also true that because many believers don't fully grasp the order of salvation and good works, they don't enjoy the good works of holiness.

*Many people change their behavior,
but their motives and desires are still wrong;
so their new behavior is no more pleasing
to God than their old behavior.*

You will cleanse no sin from your life that you have not first recognized as being pardoned through the cross. This is because holiness always starts in the heart. The essence of holiness is not new behavior, activity, or disciplines. Holiness is new affections, new desires, and new motives that then lead to new behavior. If you don't see your sin as completely pardoned, then your affections, desires, and motives will be wrong. You will aim to prove yourself. Your focus will be the consequences of your sin rather than hating the sin itself and desiring God in its place.

Many people change their behavior, but their motives and desires are still wrong; so their new behavior is no more pleasing to God than their old behavior. Consider an alcoholic who gives up drink because he fears social stigma or wants to save his marriage or doesn't want to end up in the gutter. It's good that he's given up drink, but he isn't more holy in God's sight because he's still motivated by selfish desires that exclude God. Or consider a

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Christian who goes to a prayer meeting to impress people or feel good about herself or avoid a Christian friend's rebuke. Her behavior has changed, but her motives and desires are unchanged. This isn't holiness (though it may be that praying with other Christians contributes to a change of affections). John Piper says, "Conversion is the creation of new desires, not just new duties; new delights, not just new deeds; new treasures, not just new tasks."²

The great nineteenth-century preacher Charles Spurgeon illustrates this point with the story of a humble gardener who presents a bunch of carrots to his king because he so esteems and loves his sovereign.³ The king rewards his love with a plot of land so he can continue to bless his kingdom. A courtier sees this and thinks, "An acre of land for a bunch of carrots—what a deal!" So the next day the courtier presents the king with a magnificent horse. The wise king, discerning his heart, simply accepts the gift with a "thank you." When the courtier is disconsolate, the king explains, "The gardener gave me the carrots, but you have given *yourself* the horse. You gave not for love of me but for love of yourself in the hope of a reward." Are you feeding the hungry or are you feeding yourself? asks Spurgeon. Are you clothing the naked or are you seeking your own reward? Are you serving God or serving yourself? The Bible talks often of reward, but that reward is God himself—the joy of knowing and pleasing the God we love and in whom we delight.

We don't change so we can prove ourselves to God. We're accepted by God so we can change. God gives us a new identity, and this new identity is the motive and basis for our change.

A New Identity

Again and again in the New Testament we are called to be what we are. It's not about achieving something so we can impress. It's about living out the new identity that God gives us in Jesus.

His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence, by which he has granted to us his

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precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire. For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love. For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. For whoever lacks these qualities is so nearsighted that he is blind, having forgotten that he was cleansed from his former sins. (2 Peter 1:3–9)

We don't need anything new to be godly because we already have all we need. The great and precious promises that shape our new identity enable us to be like God. Growth in godliness begins with faith in those promises. Notice the problem when someone is ineffective and unproductive. He's "forgotten that he was cleansed from his former sins." He's lost sight of his new identity.

Let's look at three ways in which the Bible talks about our new identity and see how they provide us with strong motives for change.

You Are a Child of the Father

When the right time came, God sent his Son, born of a woman, subject to the law. God sent him to buy freedom for us who were slaves to the law, so that he could adopt us as his very own children. And because we are his children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, prompting us to call out, "Abba, Father." Now you are no longer a slave but God's own child. And since you are his child, God has made you his heir. . . . For you have been called to live in freedom, my brothers and sisters. But don't use your freedom to satisfy your sinful nature. Instead, use your freedom to serve one another in love. (Galatians 4:4–7; 5:13, NLT; see also Romans 6:15–23)

We used to be slaves to sin. We all know this if we stop to think about it. Remember the times you've tried to change but failed. Think about how you don't live up to your own standards. Think

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about those New Year's resolutions that lasted only into the second week of January. We can't be the people we want to be, let alone people who are like Jesus.

*But God sent his Son to buy our freedom.
We're no longer slaves with a slavemaster.
Now we're children with a Father.*

We were also slaves to the law. Paul is talking about the law of Moses, but what he says is also true of any attempt to change by using a set of rules. Instead of setting us free, law crushes us. The best it can do is show us how far we are from being the people we should be. It makes us terrified of stepping out of line.

But God sent his Son to buy our freedom. We're no longer slaves with a slavemaster. Now we're children with a Father. We don't have to worry about proving ourselves because God says, "You're my child." We don't have a spirit of fear, but a Spirit who prompts us to cry, "Abba, Father." We don't have to worry about the future because God has made us his heirs so that all his resources are ours. G. C. Berkouwer says, "The adoption to sons—that is the foundation of sanctification, the only foundation. . . . In his faith each has all the possession he requires and can therefore freely and lovingly devote his entire life to the service of his fellowman."⁴

We were slaves of sin, and now we are children of God. It would be crazy to go on living as slaves and not as children. Freedom doesn't mean we can sin; that's not freedom, that's going back into slavery. Imagine an alcoholic whose addiction has wrecked his life. Someone kindly puts him through rehab, and after several months he leaves, free from his addiction. He's not going to say, "I'm free at last, so I'm going to get drunk." That's not freedom. That's returning to his old slavery.

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It was Sophie's first day with her adoptive parents. She stalked nervously around her new home, fearing one of the beatings she was used to getting if something got broken. The toys in her room went untouched; she couldn't quite believe they were hers. At dinner she secretly stuffed food into her pocket: you never knew where your next meal would come from when you were on the streets. That night she felt so alone in her big room. She would have cried if she hadn't long since learned to suppress her emotions.

Now listen to her new mother one year later: "She crawled into bed with me last night because she was having a bad dream. She curled up next to me, put her head on my chest, told me that she loved me, smiled, and went to sleep. I nearly cried with contentment."

Sophie had a new identity on day one. She'd become a child in a new family. But initially she still lived like a child of the street. Her actions and attitudes were shaped by her old identity. Christians too have a new identity. And we're to live out our new identity, to be what we are. So don't live like a slave when you can live like a child of the King of heaven.

You Are the Bride of the Son

Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. (Ephesians 5:25-27)

The church is the bride of Christ. He has loved us, wooed us, cleansed us, rescued us, and won us. Our relationship with Christ is a relationship of love and intimacy. It is a union—an exclusive union.

Why do I bring my wife a cup of tea in bed in the mornings? It's not because I need to make her mine. She's already my wife, just as Christ is already my bridegroom. It's not because I need to make

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sure she won't leave me. She's committed herself to me with the covenant promises of marriage, just as Christ has committed himself to me with covenant promises. It's not even so she'll treat me well. She often treats me well even when I treat her badly, just as Christ is always gracious toward me even when I don't deserve it. No, I try to please my wife because I love her and because she loves me. I delight in delighting her. So it is with Christ. Christ is our lover, our partner, and our bridegroom, and so we live for him, want to please him, and do what he asks. The more my wife loves me, the more I find myself loving her. Christ has loved me with infinite love, giving himself for me on the cross. He loved me when I was unlovely. If I'm holy, clean, or radiant, it's only because he made me so. And so I love him and live for him.

The Bible often describes sin as "adultery" (Jeremiah 3:7–8; 5:7; Ezekiel 23:37; Matthew 12:39; James 4:4; Revelation 2:22). Sin is like adultery because it's a betrayal of our true and best love. Why would you commit that sin? The "love" of an adulterous lover is no love at all. Sin doesn't love us. It tries to use us, abuse us, enslave us, control us, and ultimately destroy us. Sin takes from us and gives nothing in return. It may use enticing and seductive lies. It may promise the world. But it's all lies. Sin never brings true and lasting satisfaction. Why would you leave a husband as good, loving, gracious, strong, able, and beautiful as Jesus for some cheap alternative? This is how Paul put it to the Christians in Corinth: "For I feel a divine jealousy for you, since I betrothed you to one husband, to present you as a pure virgin to Christ. But I am afraid that as the serpent deceived Eve by his cunning, your thoughts will be led astray from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ" (2 Corinthians 11:2–3). One woman put it to me like this: "As a child I dreamed of my wedding day, of walking down the aisle in a beautiful white dress. In none of my dreams was my dress covered in dirt and grime."

We're to live out our new identity, to be what we are. And this means being a pure, devoted, loving bride of Christ.

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You Are the Home of the Holy Spirit

Flee from sexual immorality. Every other sin a person commits is outside the body, but the sexually immoral person sins against his own body. Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body. (1 Corinthians 6:18–20)

The temple in the Old Testament was a holy place. Nothing impure was allowed. Now we are the holy place of God. Our lives, and our life together as a Christian community, are sacred spaces, consecrated to God.

Christians have come to use the term *sanctification* to describe the lifetime process of change into Christ's likeness. But when the New Testament talks about Christians being sanctified, it usually refers to a past, definitive action by God.⁵ We have been consecrated by God for his service and made new by the Holy Spirit. Our role is to live out this new identity as God's holy ones or saints. (*Transformation* might be a better term for what we call sanctification, but *sanctification* is now the term commonly used for this process of transformation.)

Imagine you've done the cleaning at home because you have guests coming. You've scrubbed the floors, cleaned the windows, tidied the rooms, and dusted the furniture. Everything is spick-and-span. And then you pop out to get some flowers from the shops, through the rain and mud. What do you do when you get back? Do you tramp your muddy feet through the house and shake out your wet clothes? No; you carefully take everything off at the door. You want to keep your home clean for your guests. The Holy Spirit has cleansed and washed us. He's given us a new start and a new life. He's come to make his home in us. He's consecrated our lives as his temple. Why would you want to mess that up by bringing in your dirty habits or returning to your filthy sins? Would you want a friend to live in a trash bin?

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We're to live out our new identity, to be what we are. And that means being a holy temple for God's Spirit.

The challenge for us is to let these new identities define us on Monday mornings. It's easy to sing about being a child of God or the bride of Christ on a Sunday. The challenge is to think of ourselves as children of God in the classroom on a Monday morning when our classmates jeer at the way we live. The challenge is to think of ourselves as the bride of Christ in the office when the banter is coarse and the ambitions are worldly and as the home of the Holy Spirit in the supermarket, when everything feels mundane and dreary.

Freedom and Love

Let's sum up our motive for change: *to enjoy the freedom from sin and delight in God that God gives to us through Jesus*. I want to highlight four things arising from this definition.

All too often we think of holiness as giving up the pleasures of sin for some worthy but drab life. But holiness means recognizing that the pleasures of sin are empty and temporary, while God is inviting us to magnificent, true, full, and rich pleasures that last forever.

First, *growing in holiness is not sad, dutiful drudgery*. It's about joy. It's discovering true joy—the joy of knowing and serving God. There is self-denial, sometimes hard and painful, but true self-denial leads to gaining your life (Mark 8:34–37). There will be times when we act out of duty, but we do this believing that duty leads to joy, that denying ourselves leads to gaining our life (Mark 8:35–36).⁶ How often have you reluctantly dragged yourself out on a cold night to pray with others only to find yourself energized and blessed?

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Second, *change is about living in freedom*. We refuse to go back to the chains and filth of our sin. We live in the wonderful freedom that God has given us. We're free to be the people we should be.

Third, *change is about discovering the delight of knowing and serving God*. Our job is to stop wallowing around in the dirt and instead to enjoy knowing God, to give up our cheap imitations and enjoy the real thing. All too often we think of holiness as giving up the pleasures of sin for some worthy but drab life. But holiness means recognizing that the pleasures of sin are empty and temporary, while God is inviting us to magnificent, true, full, and rich pleasures that last forever.

Fourth, *becoming like Jesus is something that God gives to us*. It's not an achievement that we offer to him. It's enjoying the new identity he has given us in Christ. It begins with his work for us. He has set us free from sin and offers us a relationship with himself.

It's as if there are two feasts: the feast of God and the feast of sin. We're invited to both. God invites us to find satisfaction in him. Sin entices us, with its lies, to look for satisfaction in sin. So we're double-booked. All the time we have to choose which feast to attend. This is God's invitation to us:

Come, everyone who thirsts,
come to the waters;
and he who has no money,
come, buy and eat!
Come, buy wine and milk
without money and without price.
Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread,
and your labor for that which does not satisfy?
Listen diligently to me, and eat what is good,
and delight yourselves in rich food. (Isaiah 55:1–2)

Sin promises so much. But it doesn't deliver, and it charges a high price—broken lives, broken relationships, broken hopes. Ultimately the wages of sin is death. But God offers us a feast that satisfies. He offers delight for our souls. The motivation for change

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and holiness is this: God's feast is so much better! And the price tag reads, "No cost." There's no charge. It's his gift to us.

Which feast are you going to attend today?

Reflection

1. Take a look at the following paragraphs. I've taken some verses from the Bible and made them say the *opposite* of what they actually say. See if you can turn them back into what they really say. You can check by looking at Romans 5:1–2 and Ephesians 2:8–10.

- When we prove ourselves by living a good life, we have peace with God through what we do. It's what we do that gives us access to God's blessing and a good standing in people's eyes. This means we can worry less about whether we'll share God's glory.
- It's by changing that our problems will be sorted out, through working hard. It's up to us. This is what we can do for God. We're saved by what we do, so we can prove ourselves. If we do the good works that God plans for us, then we can become God's masterpiece, new people in Christ Jesus.

2. Identify when sin made one of the following promises in your experience. *What did it actually deliver?*

- Sin promises fun and excitement, but it delivers pain and tragedy.
- Sin promises freedom, but it delivers slavery and addiction.
- Sin promises life and fulfillment, but it delivers emptiness, frustration, and death.
- Sin promises gain, but it delivers loss.
- Sin promises that we can get away with it, but the fact is, we don't.⁷

Change Project

Why would you like to change?

Do you really want to change?

- Does the thought of becoming like Jesus make you feel sad?
- Do you think your life will become boring, unsatisfying, and hard?

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- Do you think of giving up sin as an unpleasant duty you need to do to win God's approval?

Do you want to change for the wrong reasons?

Do you sometimes think:

- God won't bless me today because I've let him down?
- God will answer my prayers today because I've been good?
- I need to make it up to God because I've sinned?
- I need to change so God will accept me on the final day?

If you answered yes to any of these questions, you may be trying to change to impress God.

Do you sometimes:

- make sure people know about the good things you're doing?
- tell "little white lies" to cover up your failings?
- imagine people being impressed because you're so spiritual?
- feel like you've let yourself down when you sin?

If you answered yes to any of these questions, you may be trying to change to impress people or to feel good about yourself.

What do you think will happen if you're successful in your change project?

What difference will it make to:

- God's love for you?
- people's opinion of you?
- how you view yourself?

What can you do to strengthen your desire to change?

If you suspect you don't really want to change, think what you could do to strengthen your resolve. If you suspect you may want to change for the wrong reasons (to impress God, to impress people, or to feel good about yourself), then think what you could do to focus on your new identity in Christ.

Here are some ideas:

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- Compare slavery to sin with being a child of God. Compare the sin of adultery to being the bride of Christ. Compare the filth of sin with being a clean home for the Holy Spirit.
- Memorize Romans 5:1–2, Ephesians 2:8–10, or Titus 3:5–8. Use these verses to speak to your heart when you think in wrong ways.
- On the cross Jesus cried out, “It is finished.” Imagine yourself answering back, “Not quite. I need to finish the job. I still need to win God’s blessing.” Think how ridiculous and insulting to God this is.
- Imagine two homes side by side. In one, God is hosting his feast. In the other, sin is hosting its feast. Compare the two feasts. What satisfaction do they offer? How lasting and real is that satisfaction? What price must you pay?

Write a summary of why you would like to change, putting it in a way that resonates for you. Add some ideas on how you could strengthen your desire to change.