

The Power to Change

Part 1 — Sin

John Botha, IT & Technical Director at Willows Methodist, 2026-03-24

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Introduction

Over the next few devotions that I do I will be looking at the power to change, which I trust you will agree is a positive thing ... and it is! There is one important aspect regarding change which we simply cannot escape, however: the truly big changes are not easy. They take effort, and a lot of the time you cannot do it alone.

Today I am talking about one of the defining aspects of our lives, as it affects every single one of us. It is a topic — even just the word — which is very unpopular, and if you even mention it in many circles you will be looked at very differently and may even be excluded. It is the word — and the concept of — sin. Dealing thoroughly with sin is absolutely vital.

There are many responses to sin, and there is one response I wish to nip in the bud right now: this devotion is *not* about condemnation — far from it! so please, stay with me, but before we continue, let us pray.

Dear Lord God, thank You that Your love for us means that You not only want us to change for the better, but that You give us the power to do so — that in our struggle against sin You are alongside us. Help us to open our eyes to Your provision and to see things from Your perspective, so that we may change as You desire, and in Your power.
Amen.

Devotion

We all know disappointment. At its heart, disappointment is how we react when what we expected does not happen, and what does happen in its place (even if nothing) is less than what we expected. A surprise party is usually not a disappointment, even though what we were led to believe didn't happen, because what happened in its place was better. True disappointment is deep, and can linger for decades.

The thing about sin is that it is disappointment at the deepest level, because the consequences are eternal. Sometimes sin itself or its impact can be difficult to identify. Take alcohol as an example. Jesus drank wine, and Paul told Timothy to have a little wine. When taken in excess, however, there are problems.

Another example is discipline. We all know that discipline is not pleasant. In fact, we are told exactly that in Hebrews 12:11. Now imagine the practises of discipline continuing *long* after the lesson has been learnt. Then it is no longer discipline and depending on the methods could start becoming abuse. Is abusing someone sinful? I doubt anyone would disagree, yet the method has not changed, only its duration.

The example I want to look at now is alcohol. If you struggle with alcohol, then don't attend a meeting in a bar or be around people who are drinking alcohol. This brings us to a general point: until you are strong enough to deal with a specific temptation, simply keep away from it! — *especially* if that means giving up on some of your friends. If they were truly your friends, they would want to help you, not hinder you, and if not, then you are definitely in the wrong crowd!

Alcohol is a pertinent example, but every single one of us struggles with sin — for goodness sake: even *Jesus* was tempted! so there's no surprise about *being tempted* — the issues are firstly whether you *put yourself in a position of temptation*, and secondly *how you deal with it when you are tempted*.

In the first instance, just stop putting yourself in that position — break contact with those so-called "friends" and chuck that alcohol down the drain. Here's a really powerful one for those whose ears can hear this message: change the password of your VPN to an applicable verse from The Bible. I know people whose lives have been changed by that one simple choice put into action — when nothing else worked.

Now you may want to pause here for some prayer and a bit of reflection. What is God highlighting in *your* life? Where does He want you to grow? What does He want you to change?

In the second instance, look to Jesus. How did He respond to temptation? The starting point is obvious: when He was tempted in the wilderness. There are many other examples, however, such as how He responded to people's joy at being healed, or to the attempts of the religious leaders to trap Him, or to the crowd when He entered Jerusalem on a colt. When you look at it, it's quite a list.

Part of how He resisted temptation is that He was prepared for it. When Satan came at Him with Scripture, Jesus responded with Scripture. The difference was that Jesus used it correctly, and in context, but He could only have done that if He knew the Scriptures, and that takes study.

Another very important point is that Jesus was not about what *He* wanted — He was about His Father's business. (Have a look in the Gospels where He talks about that.) In other words, Jesus would not allow Himself to be distracted from doing what He was meant to. If you are going to run after everything that tickles your fancy, you will achieve very little. Note that I am not here talking of success only in the world's eyes, but also in terms of your Christian witness. One of Satan's ways of making us impotent as far as the Gospel is concerned is distraction. That leads to inattention, to

starting things but not finishing them, to letting others down, to never going deep enough to make a difference, and so on, and so on.

The point is, we are to deal with sin in our lives. Are we perfect? No, not by any stretch of the imagination. But in God's power we can definitely overcome.

Conclusion

I want to conclude by reading Galatians 5:13–24, with a few comments.

For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: “You shall love your neighbour as yourself.” But if you bite and devour one another, watch out that you are not consumed by one another.

But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law. Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.

Go and read that section slowly and even if your English is very good, look up each of the works of the flesh in a dictionary. Then think about your life and don't evaluate yourself by your intentions — rather think about what it's like to be on the other side of yourself. How would you react if someone treated you the way you treat them? Are there idols in your life? Do you drink too much?

Ask God to show you those things in your life that need work. Confess your sins to Him and repent. To repent means to turn around and no longer to do what you did before. Think of the examples I gave. Maybe it's not alcohol but it's something else. Whatever it is, remove yourself from its triggers. Because you are clearly not yet strong enough to overcome the temptation, do everything you can to ensure that you don't get to face it in the first place. That is why the password example I gave is so powerful. Translate that to your situation, and if you need help, get it. Also, if someone approaches you for help, pray about it, and then help, whether that means you help by doing or you help by referring, but help! That fits in very well with Ephesians 4:15–16, which goes

Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.

Let us pray.

*Thank You, God, that You help us in our weaknesses and that You give us the power to repent. Please help us to avail ourselves of that, and to live our lives in such a way that we build up Your Body in love.
Amen*

The Power to Change

Part 2 — Yes or No

John Botha, IT & Technical Director at Willows Methodist, 2026-04-14

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Introduction

This is part two of a series called “The Power to Change”. Part one was on 24 March and focussed on sin, looking at some of the things that we can *do* — through the power that God gives us — to overcome sin in our lives. Two core examples I gave concerned not putting yourself in a situation where you know you will struggle, and I concluded by looking at Galatians 5:13–24, which starts by talking about the freedom we have and then contrasting the works of the flesh (and their consequences) against the fruit of The Spirit.

Today I am talking about two very interesting excerpts from Scripture: Matthew 5:33–37 and James 5:12. The text in Matthew is part of the Sermon on the Mount, and reads as follows:

Again you have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform to the Lord what you have sworn.’ But I say to you, Do not take an oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. And do not take an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. Let what you say be simply ‘Yes’ or ‘No’; anything more than this comes from the evil one.

James 5:12 says “But above all, my brothers, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or by any other oath, but let your “yes” be yes and your “no” be no, so that you may not fall under condemnation.” I mentioned that the text in Matthew is from the Sermon on the Mount. Even though it’s quite long — Matthew chapters five, six, and seven — it reads easily and is full of advice on how God wants us to live. To understand this passage, however, it helps to look at what exactly an oath is.

Before we continue, though, let us pray.

Dear Lord God, thank You that Your Word gives us direction for our lives not only in what is clearly the grand topics such as life or death, but also in what may appear to be less so, such as how we treat one another. Help us to see, Lord, that how we live our lives can have eternal consequences both for us and for others, and that we may avail ourselves of the power to change that You have given us. Amen.

Devotion

In today's language, when you hear that someone "swore", you think of what children are told are "bad words", but in this context it means something else entirely, so let's unpack it a bit. For context, it is part of the list which includes vows, oaths, and covenants. To help us understand, one *makes* a vow, one *swears* an oath, and one *enters into* a covenant. For any of them, though, if you don't live up to it, you *break* it. Let's look at each in turn, as they have different purposes.

A vow is about deep personal intention — breaking a vow comes with disappointment. Here's an example: "I will love you for ever." It is commonly said by those newly in love, and sadly it is often broken. A more formal set of vows is the set of marriage vows — you know, "in sickness and in health", "for richer, for poorer", and so on. Beyond the pain and deep disappointment, breaking a vow does not usually come with legal repercussions.

Jumping to the other end of the scale, a covenant is quite another matter. Although often used in spiritual applications, at its heart a covenant is a legal exercise, where each party has responsibilities defined in the covenant, often with very specific consequences specified for breaking the covenant. Like most contracts, there should be mutual benefit when the parties abide by the terms of the covenant.

Before we continue, a quick aside. Yes, there are legal consequences to breaking marriage vows, but it's not because the vows themselves were broken, but because the marriage *contract* was broken *and* because the human legal system defines the consequences.

What Jesus was talking about in the excerpt from Matthew and what we read about in James is the swearing of an oath. An oath carries external accountability — breaking it comes with (often serious) consequences. Here's a Hollywood example: "By my mother's grave." I'm not sure how the accountability works in that example, nor, actually, in the case of making an oath in God's Name. It's not as if swearing an oath in His Name is going to force God into anything, nor that He necessarily approves of the oath.

The point of an oath is to ensure as much as is possible that what is said is true and thus to be believed. Perjury is the act of lying under oath, and if there were no serious consequences to perjury, then what would stop people from lying? So, given the seriousness of the subject matter, in the South African Criminal Procedure Act perjury is a criminal offence with consequences ranging from a fine to imprisonment.

One of the most famous oaths is that by the Apostle Peter, when he denied Christ. Matthew 26:72,74 gives us the stark picture. In verse 72 we read "And again he denied it with an oath: 'I do not know the man.'" while verse 74 reads "Then he began to invoke a curse on himself and to swear, 'I do not know the man.' And immediately the cock crowed."

We are not told the contents of either of these two oaths, but the second was likely stronger than the first, since we are told that "he began to invoke a curse on himself", which is about as strong an oath as one could have sworn.

There is a sub-text, however: if you need to swear an oath in order for people to believe you, then something is wrong, and I believe that *this* is the reason why Jesus said “Let what you say be simply ‘Yes’ or ‘No’”. Put differently, our words should never need an external authority or force to be believed.

That is not all, however, as the sentence in Matthew continues: “anything more than this comes from the evil one.” Similarly, the verse in James ends “so that you may not fall under condemnation.” I want to draw this devotion to its conclusion by explaining why I wrote it, and it is my hope that doing so will help to explain these two verse endings.

Conclusion

Consider that this is part of a series titled “The Power to Change”. That begs a number of questions, including “Change *from* what *to* what?” The answer is both trivially simple and incredibly difficult: “Change from yourself — your selfishness — to being the bearer of God’s image that He wants you to be.” That alone will set us apart from the world.

According to 2 Corinthians 5:16–20, when we are in Christ we are so radically different that we are a new creation. Because of that we no longer regard others as we used to, and what is more, God has entrusted to us the ministry of reconciliation. Verse 20(a) reads: “Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us.”

Not only is that an awesome responsibility, there are implications. One of them is that we cannot behave like the world does, for then how are we different? How can we tell the world that Christ has changed us when they see no difference?

One of the easiest ways to stand out is to be honest: let your “Yes” be yes, and your “No” be no. If you have to give extra assurances, you’ve already lost. Furthermore, if your “Yes” actually means “That would be nice — unless something nicer comes along...”, then maybe you won’t feel so bad when you don’t do what you actually said to the other person you would do (remember, you actually said “Yes”). For them, however, you have broken *something* — at the very least their trust in you. Your not following through on a “Yes” could destroy your chance to be Christ’s ambassador to someone.

Let us pray.

Lord Jesus, You gave Your all so that we might be reconciled to You. Please help us to live as we ought so that we may truly be Your ambassadors. Help us to let go of the sin which so easily entangles and to run with perseverance the race that You have marked out for us.

Amen

Have You Heard?

Spreading the Word and not just words

John Botha, Willows Methodist Church, 2026-04-26

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NOTE: While this was given as a sermon, it is part three in the series *The Power to Change*.

Introduction

Some of you may know of David Pawson, probably most famous for his book *Unlocking the Bible*, in which he gives a fascinating and easily-readable overview of every book in the Bible. His autobiography has the rather strange title of *Not as Bad as the Truth*, and the reason is revealed at the end of the book, in the epilogue. Listen to this extract.

Some years ago I was the target of rumours which were totally untrue. I later tracked them down to a source in Wales and was able to stop them. But at the time they were both painful and damaging. Speaking engagements began to be cancelled (evasive apologies simply said: ‘Arrangements for your visit have fallen through’). I had no idea why until three elders from Cardiff drove all the way to Surrey to tell me what was being said and ask whether any of the accusations were true. [That’s about 250 km per direction] I told them it was not for me to say. Scripture orders that any accusations against a Christian leader must be accompanied by the testimony of two or three first-hand witnesses of the offence, which they could not provide in this case. However, I took pity on them for making the effort to come and see me, so told them there was no truth at all in what they had heard (among others, that I no longer read my Bible but only listened to the Spirit and that I believed that all Jews would go to heaven without believing in the Saviour). After they had gone I turned to the Lord and complained bitterly about both the personal pain and the damage to my ministry. I have rarely known him speak to me as clearly as he did then. His reply was this: ‘The worst they can say about you is not as bad as the truth... but I know the worst and I still love and use you.’ ... my eyes fill up again as I write this. I realised what incredible grace he had shown to, in and through me.

Today’s sermon is titled

Have You Heard?

Spreading the Word, and not just words

Words have great power — ask any comedian. A good comedian can have you crying with laughter. But of course, we also know the little school-yard ditty: ‘Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never harm me.’ And we know that it is false — words most definitely can harm, as we just heard in that extract from David Pawson’s autobiography.

Sermon body

Today we will look at things like gossip and slander — what they are, how to deal with them, and what to do instead. One question to address immediately is ‘Why?’ Why is this worthy of a sermon? Well, take a listen to Romans 1:29–32, which speaks about the unrighteous — those who refuse to acknowledge God.

They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless.

Though they know God's decree that those who practise such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practise them.

—Romans 1:29–32

That is quite a list, and gossips and slanderers are in it: God takes it seriously. All of us have engaged in gossip, and some of us here have may even have engaged in slander.

I was wanting to give tight definitions of those terms, but it is very difficult because the law comes into play. I had a brief look at the South African, the British, and the American legal definitions and quickly became caught up in a quagmire: is it libel, or slander, or defamation? Was it written or only spoken? Was it prefaced with ‘It is my opinion that...’? because then it could be legally OK, depending on which constitution is applicable, And on, and on.

All that matters at the end of the day is God’s view. You see, if we lives our lives as He intends, we won’t gossip about anyone, and we won’t slander anyone. Instead, we will follow Ephesians 4:29, which says

Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear.

— Ephesians 4:29

You are probably familiar with this verse from 1 Corinthians 10:

So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.

— 1 Corinthians 10:31

Let’s look at some of its context. Here are verses 23–24:

“All things are lawful”, but not all things are helpful. “All things are lawful”, but not all things build up. Let no one seek his own good, but the good of his neighbour.

— 1 Corinthians 10:23–24

From what I’ve read, the phrase “All things are lawful” was a saying the Corinthians frequently used to justify all manner of bad behaviours, and it is referred to (and corrected) more than once in

the letters to the Corinthians. Here we are given two checks to apply when wanting to exercise our freedom: is it helpful? and does it build up? Also, we are told to seek not our own good, but that of our neighbour (and refer to the parable of the good Samaritan if you're unsure of whom your neighbour might be).

I believe we can now give a few working definitions. As is often the case, there seems to be a spectrum. We'll start with

Working definition: Flattery

Saying something to someone's face that you would not say behind their back.

For example, saying to the hostess at a party, 'Oh! You look magnificent in that dress' — all the while thinking to yourself 'Now *there's* mutton dressed up as lamb.' ... and possibly saying even worse things in the car on the way back home. What you said to her face was flattery, but what you said in the car on the way home was...

Working definition: Gossip

Saying something about someone behind their back that breaks that person down and that you would not say to their face.

This is where it starts getting difficult, and we'll look at slander before coming back to gossip. Slander can have consequences which involve the legal system, because it is...

Working definition: Slander

Spreading falsehood about someone. This could be to their face but usually is not.

Remember how flattery quickly turned into gossip? Let's look at them all together.

Flattery: Saying something to someone's face that you would not say behind their back.

Gossip: Saying something about someone behind their back that breaks that person down and that you would not say to their face.

Slander: Spreading falsehood about someone.

Flattery could be either true or false, but the point is that it is done for some purpose or other. Usually it is to make the other person feel good about you. Sure, what you say may make them feel better about themselves, but that's more of a side-effect.

Gossip becomes difficult in that while there may not be the intent to harm the other person, you know that if it came out — if the other person got to hear about it — it would not be good ... especially for you, and even more so if the other person has a temper (things will get hot) or worse, a mean streak, because then it could go into a-dish-best-served-cold territory.

Gossip could be repeating to someone else what the person in question told you in confidence. That is already a breaking of trust, but here's the rub: neither you nor this new person knows the entire context. So conclusions which are drawn can be very far from the truth. When this new person now

repeats the story, possibly with incorrect conclusions thrown in, it can become something almost with a life of its own, and in the end it can be not only very far from the truth, but very damaging as well.

I want to give you some facts about myself from three decades ago. I underwent two spinal surgeries which kept me in bed for more than six weeks. Some difficulties were that our bedroom was upstairs and I would need help getting to and from the loo, but my wife worked in the day, and while our children were at crèche and at day care, the youngest was three months old and still slept in bed with us, kicking us quite freely in the process. The solution was that I stayed with my parents, who were retired.

For the sake of example we shall now deviate from what actually happened.

Let's consider persons A, B, C, and so on. A gets to hear about the above and shares it with B. It's all factual, and nothing breaks me down, so no problem. A little while later, B shares it with C, but not all of it. It's still factual and doesn't break me down, but there's now less context than before. C, however, tells D, E, and F only that my wife and I are not sharing the same bed — in fact, that I am living with my parents! Worse, my wife has to look after a toddler and a three month old baby all by herself! What a selfish so-and-so I must be!

In this fictitious scenario, persons A and B were sharing facts, while C withheld certain facts on purpose, added some embellishments, and used different words and phrases in order to make the story more juicy. So while C's version contained some truth it was couched in terms meant to present the truth in such a way that unquestioning hearers would more easily come to the wrong conclusion. It also contained falsehood: that bit about looking after the kids by herself was untrue, as the slightest inquiry would have revealed. Thus that part would actually have been slander.

The most effective falsehood is one hidden amongst the truth.

But what if someone who shared the information had no intent to slander; if they believed that what they were repeating was the truth? In our fictitious scenario that could have been anyone who listened to person C. Well, consider the effect of the information; if it breaks someone down or could be interpreted negatively, you need to be *sure* of what you believe is true. Saying "But I thought it was true! Person C told me!" is little more than believing in hear-say. You need to check facts, especially if they are damaging in some way.

On Friday I heard one half of a telephone conversation my wife had (we were in the same room). She is an Occupational Therapist and sometimes struggles with people who don't pay or who seem unable to comprehend how her discount for prompt payment works (there's a strong hint in the name: 'prompt payment'). It sounded like the other person just wasn't listening to her and it got to a point where I was very tempted to give this guy a piece of my mind about how not to treat people.

Later he sent her a voice message with a profuse apology: he thought she was a different therapist (in a completely different discipline) who had also treated his child but had charged for sessions the child did not have. So while anyone in his shoes would also be upset, he didn't check his facts

before launching a crusade against the wrong person. When his wife presented him with the facts, however, he repented and apologised.

Applying the lessons from 1 Corinthians 10:23–24 should sort out any grey areas:

- Is it helpful?
- Does it build up?
- Are you seeking the good of your neighbour?

If you don't know, then *find out!* Assumptions can be very, very wrong and lead to very, very bad outcomes. If you are sharing things about someone with someone else, *ask* these three questions — the first two are about what is being shared, and the third is about *you*: are *you* seeking the good of your neighbour?, and remember that the verse actually says 'Let no one seek his own good, but the good of his neighbour.' When we all do that, our own good *will* be sought, but it won't be us doing the seeking.

A litmus test for slander is how the perpetrator reacts when told that what is being said is false. If the person apologises, seeks out the truth, and takes corrective action, then the slander is hopefully nullified. On the other hand, if there is no correction, no remorse, no apology, the slander remains and the situation could easily end up in the courts — if the victim of the slander has the means and the will to pursue it.

There is one overlooked aspect to all of this that is blindingly obvious when we think about it. Consider this statement:

Since you cannot read minds, assume the best of others — never the worst.

And no, I am not saying you should be gullible: keep your eyes open, but give people the space to rise to the occasion ... but so should you: if you receive a negative report about someone, rise to the occasion and check it out. That is what those three elders did who went on a road trip to check with David Pawson *himself* whether what they had been told about him was true or not. Sadly, they were the *only* ones who did this! Who knows how many others had heard the same reports but chose to believe what other people said *about* David Pawson rather than doing the right thing and *asking him*? And look at the damage that caused.

To bend a metaphor slightly: When you need to get something from the horse's mouth, then you *have to speak to the horse*.

There are other aspects to this as well. A very important one is not to get offended. The above slide applies to both sides of this. If someone has gossiped about you or even slandered you, don't assume the worst of them, because it could be as simple as them not having spoken to the horse. Of course, they should have, and you would need to correct them, but that has to be done in love. Hopefully they are honourable and will feel bad enough about themselves without you having to wipe their noses in it as well.

Imagine going in with this: ‘How dare you!? Do you have no consideration of the hurt you have caused? What went through your mind? Didn’t you *think*? One phone call! Just one phone call and you would have had the truth! This kind of thing makes me sick.’

Now while all of that might be how you feel, and the questions are actually pertinent, chances are close to zero that any kind of relationship will be restored by this approach, not to mention reconciliation.

It brings us back to this: we cannot read minds, so assuming *anything* is a risk, and in the realm of relationships, that can be dangerous.

So, can you speak about others in their absence? Of course you can. Things to consider when you do so include whether anything is private (no matter how you got to know it), whether speaking about the person would be helpful, whether it would build up or break down, whether your speaking about them will actually be for their good.

There is one word in all of this which at first glance muddies the waters: intent. You see, intent matters — ‘Did he *mean* to kill the other guy?’ is a very valid question, which human law takes into account when it comes to both the charges and the sentencing. Again, different jurisdictions have different definitions and norms, so we won’t go there. Instead, let’s look at 1 Samuel 16:7

But the LORD said to Samuel, “Do not consider his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him. The LORD does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart.”

— 1 Samuel 16:7, NIV

You may recall that this was when Samuel was sent to the household of Jesse to anoint David as the next king of Israel after Saul because The Lord had rejected Saul as king. We read about it in 1 Samuel 13 and in Acts 13.

Why did God remove Saul but keep David, even though David did a *lot* that was sinful? The biggest difference I see is that when confronted with his sin, Saul tried to explain it away by justifying his actions, while David repented.

That needs to be our heart: that we want to please God, and when we discover an area of our lives where we have not, we should repent, remembering that repentance is not just being sorry about sin, but also *no longer doing it* and in some instances, making restitution.

That said, we need to study God’s Word, as otherwise how would we know? Ignorance is not an excuse, because all of us have access to the Bible and many other resources on-line for free.

Also, it’s not as if David did not know that having sex with a woman who was not his wife was sin, or that having her husband murdered was sin. He knew, and he kept quiet about it, but when exposed by the prophet Nathan, he repented.

Even so, there were consequences that he (and others) *suffered*. In some instances God is gracious toward us and we suffer less, but we should remember that Christ died for the wages of sin, which is death. He did not die so that we can have a comfortable life. And we should not be surprised when our actions bite us. If you run headlong into a brick wall you will bleed; you may even break your neck and die.

Conclusion

I want to conclude by looking at how to deal with gossip and slander in a way that I believe is Biblical.

It helps to understand what drives gossip. It feeds a false sense of superiority: you know something others don't, and you are willing to share it with them. Adding 'Don't tell anyone' makes you all part of a little club as well. Doing so, however, sows mistrust and destroys your integrity in the process. There are certain people with whom I just won't share some things because they have proven themselves to be untrustworthy in this regard. I am not judging them (God will judge us all); I am simply doing pre-emptive damage control, because gossip can ruin reputations, but there is a far more important point: if you are known as a gossip, chances of anyone believing your witness about Christ are very slim, because your gossip-mongering witnesses to something else entirely.

Please understand that I am not condemning anyone here. Different people struggle with different things. I might struggle with things that most people here would find laughably easy to overcome, but there are ways to deal with our struggles. Two of the most important are to pray, and to ask for help from people whom you can trust. Let them hold you accountable. Before you pass on information, honestly answer these questions:

- Is it helpful? Does it build up? Am I seeking the other person's good?
- Will sharing this glorify God? (remember: '...*whatever* you do...').
- Have I verified every single thing I am about to share?
- Is the person involved OK with this? In other words, have they personally told you that you can share this in this way?

Here are a few ways you can nip gossip in the bud when you are on the receiving end:

- Ask 'Oh, did so-and-so actually tell you themselves, and are they happy you are sharing this?'
- Another version: Wow! I find that difficult to believe. I'll quickly phone and check (and then start dialling).

There is one last point: with gossip and slander being listed as they are in Scripture, we cannot simply ignore them, as they will start destroying the fellowship of believers. We have no choice; we have to deal with it. Thankfully Scripture shows us how.

Matthew 18 from verse 15 makes it very clear: go and speak to the other person first. If you can sort things out at that point it's a win. If the person is unrepentant, continue with Matthew 18 and take along two or three witnesses. Note that these would be witnesses to the accusation, not merely

witnesses to what you and the other person say to each other. Have a look at 1 Timothy 5:19 in this regard.

By this time the other person should have realised that things are serious, because the next step is to tell it to the church. The step after that is effectively disfellowship: you can (and should!) continue to engage with them, but it is not from the perspective of family in Christ, as their actions have placed them outside of fellowship. Just remember that repentance and reconciliation are always the goal, as that is the model of the Christian family that we should be showing the world.

When all is said and done, the point of it all is the Great Commission. Our words and our deeds should be in alignment with that at all times, remembering that how we live our lives plays a massive role in how our words of witness are received. After all, if anyone has had anything to do with us for a while, they would long ago have formed an opinion of us. If we then come at them with words that align with how we have been living, getting a hearing should not present any great difficulty.

Even so, remember what God told David Pawson:

The worst they can say about you is not as bad as the truth... but I know the worst and I still love and use you.

Let us pray.

Thank You, God that You give us the tools to deal with things like gossip and slander, because You care for us and want us to build each other up. Please help us, O Lord, always to seek to build up instead of breaking down, and to speak Your life into any and every situation. Lord, You make it clear in Your Word that You take these matters very seriously. Help us to do the same, O God, so that we may apply the power of our words being in alignment to our lives to spread Your Word. Help us to live our lives in conformance to Your Word, so that our witness would be to the change which You have made in our lives, the same change You wish to make in the lives of others.

Amen

References and Sources Consulted

- *Not As Bad As The Truth: The Musings and Memoirs of David Pawson*, by David Pawson. 2015. John Murray Press. MOBI-ASIN:B00T39BMPG

The Power to Change

Part 4 — A matter of opinion

John Botha, IT & Technical Director at Willows Methodist, 2026-05-05

Introduction

This is part four of a series called ‘The Power to Change’. Part one was on 24 March and focussed on sin, looking at some of the things that we can *do* — through the power that God gives us — to overcome sin in our lives. Part two was on 14 April and looked at some of the implications of Jesus’s command that our “yes” be yes and our “no” be no. Part 3 was actually my sermon of 26 April, and looked at things like gossip and slander — what they are, how to deal with them, and what to do instead. Today we are looking at how to deal with differences of opinion. We definitely need wisdom for that, so before we continue, let’s pray.

Lord God, You know that the exercise of the freedom You give us can so easily lead to difference, yet You call us to unity in Christ. Thank You that You don’t leave it there, but You also give us the tools we need to achieve this. Help us to keep our hearts and minds open to You and to Your guidance, O God. Amen.

Devotion

When dealing with disputes we need to be sure of what kind they are, because our reaction — how we deal with it — should be different for different kinds. It stands to reason that not every disagreement is because of a sin, and the process Jesus outlined in Matthew 18 is to resolve matters *if you have been sinned against*. Today we are looking at Romans 14, which speaks mostly about opinions, and how those can easily slide into sin. Verse one puts it well: ‘As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions.’ In the NIV it is rendered ‘without quarrelling over disputable matters’. The Greek word used is *dialogismos*, from which we get our word ‘dialogue’. So it is not addressing sin, but matters which we can discuss in order to get the other person’s point of view, their opinion.

There are many things which are no more than a matter of opinion and as we know, opinions differ. They become a problem when lines are drawn in the sand and we start to quarrel over them, inflating their importance. As a very simple example, taste of musical styles. One of the musical styles I enjoy is Jazz, but I really struggle with rap. Still, it’s just an opinion. The concept of beauty being in the eye of the beholder comes to mind, and styles of visual art is a good example, where it ranges from photo-realism to indiscernible blobs of colour: *someone* will pay a lot of money for it.

The thing is that in matters of opinion it helps to have dialogue. At the very least you will get to understand the other person better, and who knows? You may even change your opinion! An important point, though, is that our opinions of people should not be shaped by their opinions about disputable matters. My view of you as a person should not be impacted by your opinion of a sports club ... or of a kind of food. Imagine this: I don’t like you because you like Brussels sprouts and you

don't like me because I like tomatoes. While that is a contrived example, Romans 14 uses food to explain this very thing.

In those times meat was used in sacrifice to idols in pagan temples. A portion of the meat was sacrificed, and the rest was either eaten by the priests or if not, sold in the market. Since sacrifices could not be of bad meat, only good meat was used in sacrifice, but of course there was a great deal of good meat which never ended up being sacrificed.

Why this is important is that Christians who had come from that culture would not want to associate with pagan sacrifices any longer, and in some cases felt that their faith was not strong enough to deal with the knowledge that the meat they were eating *might* have been involved in pagan sacrifice rituals. Their solution was simply to avoid eating meat sold in the market, since they did not know what had happened to it on the way to the market.

The problem is with that becoming judgementalism, where those who withheld started looked down on those who did not. But there was another problem: those who ate any meat could, in the exercise of their freedom, end up causing a new convert to fall back into their pagan lifestyle. We see this in verse 20, which reads 'Do not, for the sake of food, destroy the work of God. Everything is indeed clean, but it is wrong for anyone to make another stumble by what he eats.'

On the other hand, verse 16 says 'Therefore do not let what you know is good be spoken of as evil.' [NIV], so we are not meant to walk on egg shells all the time just in case someone else is impacted negatively — in case someone takes offence.

This is balanced by verse 22(b), which says 'Blessed is the one who has no reason to pass judgement on himself for what he approves.' There *are* things of which we should not approve, but we should not allow others to speak of as evil that which we know is good.

How we react to each other in our expression of where we are in our faith journey is put well in verse 3: 'Let not the one who eats despise the one who abstains, and let not the one who abstains pass judgement on the one who eats, for God has welcomed him.'

So remember that Greek word in verse 1: we should *dialogue* on these things. The train of thought continues in chapter 15, where verses one and two tell us 'We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Let each of us please his neighbour for his good, to build him up.' The aim is thus building each other up in our knowledge of The Lord, and not to please ourselves. Those whose faith is not that strong should not stay in that position, but should grow, helped by those who are building them up in the faith ... and that is not going to happen if we despise or pass judgement on one another.

'Nobody's perfect!' is often the defence given when someone points out a fault. There's also the joke in church circles: 'If you find the perfect church, don't join it, because if you do, it won't be perfect any longer!' We all have faults. What's important is not to hold those faults against each other, but to be open to have our faults pointed out (in love!) *as part of being built up*, so that we can grow.

Conclusion

I want to close with two points and another Scripture.

It is well known that those closest to us can hurt us the most. ‘How could he or she say that about me?’ Often our reaction is an overreaction, which in itself can cause hurt to the other party. It is far better to seek understanding; to ask ‘Is this what you meant? Because if so, it really hurts.’ When handled well, that will be the beginning of reconciliation and a closer relationship. If handled badly, it can lead to a breaking down of relationship, with much pain.

I recently read an article by Timothy Dalrymple, President and CEO of Christianity Today, and this excerpt¹ stood out:

The problem is not when the Christian is in the conflict. The problem is when the conflict is in the Christian. Our engagement with one another and with society should follow the pattern of Christ and not the culture.

There is much in that, and I encourage you to meditate on it in the light of what we have looked at today, but let us conclude with Scripture and with prayer. May we model ourselves on this, from 2 Timothy 2:24–26

And the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, correcting his opponents with gentleness. God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth, and they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil, after being captured by him to do his will.

Let us pray.

Lord God, Your Word makes it abundantly clear that Your desire is for us to live in peace with one another. Please help us, O Lord, to learn from Your Word about how to do this, and so doing, to bring You praise and glory.
Amen.

¹ Timothy Dalrymple, *Against the Culture of Demonization*, retrieved on 2026-05-04 from <https://www.christianitytoday.com/2024/09/against-culture-demonization-timothy-dalrymple/>.

The Power to Change, Part 5

Forgive, or...

John Botha, IT & Technical Director at Willows Methodist, 2026-05-28

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Introduction

Part four looked at differences of opinion, or disputable matters, and how best to live so that matters don't escalate. Sometimes, however, things do escalate, and today we are looking at part of how to deal with that. We definitely need wisdom here, so let's pray before we continue.

Thank You, God, that You show us how to live our lives in ways which please You. We know that we often fall short, and even then You give us guidance on how to restore. Please help us now to hear Your Will in this devotion, Lord.

Amen.

Devotion

We generally have a very strong sense of righteousness. Think of how you react when you feel done in by someone or something. You get upset because you've been *wronged!* And you'll probably stay upset until it has been put *right* — it's about right and wrong and you want restitution. Earlier this week something happened to me that puts this into perspective.

My wife and I went shopping and were excited to see a large sign advertising a considerable discount on prawns, so I decided to get some. At the check-out counter, however, the total was more than I expected and it turned out that the discount had not been applied. I was not at all unpleasant about it, but firm that I wanted the expected discount, so I went to fetch the sign.

The lady at the till agreed that it should have gone off and called her supervisor. The supervisor struggled a bit and then called the branch manager. He tried various things on the computer and then noticed in tiny print in the bottom right corner of the sign that the special had run its course — it ended the previous week! He was very magnanimous, however, and gave us the discount. There are a few points from this story that tie in with today's topic. To get there, however, we need to go back a bit.

My sermon of 26 April was actually part three of this series and in it I touched on the famous steps that Jesus gave in Matthew 18:15–17 on what to do when you have been sinned against. Note that

these steps apply when we have been *sinned against*, so *that* is the point of qualification which starts this *specific* procedure: one-on-one, then with witnesses, then in front of the church, then dissociation. If it's not *sin*, then these are *not* the steps to follow.

Also, understand that these steps come to a halt the moment there is repentance and, as importantly, that forgiveness is extended. Then the work starts on restoration and reconciliation.

That is the backdrop to Peter asking Jesus just a bit further on how many times he should forgive his brother (this is in verses 21–35). We all know Jesus's reply: it's a big number, but He then drives the point home by contrasting how a king punished one of his servants after the king had wiped away a truly *massive* debt the servant owed him, but then the servant refused to do the same for a relatively miniscule debt owed to him by another servant.

The text uses ancient monetary terms that mean nothing to us, so here they are in more concrete terms for today. The king forgave the servant the equivalent of 200,000 — wait for it — *years of a labourer's wages*. In today's Dollar terms that's over eight thousand million Dollars. His colleague owed him the equivalent of 100 days of a labourer's wage, or less than twelve hundred Dollars. When he did not forgive as he had been forgiven, he was punished.

Jesus concludes by saying in verse 35, 'So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.' He said pretty much the same directly after The Lord's Prayer in Matthew 6:14–15, which reads

For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

So we see that forgiveness implies a change — being forgiven means that we, in turn, forgive. If we don't, no forgiveness remains for us.

Conclusion

My experience with the discount on the prawns highlights a few points which tie in here.

- The lady at the till had nothing to do with the problem, so getting upset at her would have been very unfair toward her. Thankfully, though firm about the situation I was in no way overbearing.
- While the supervisor did try to help, she was unable to do so, but she didn't just shrug it off; she appealed to someone who had the authority to sort it out.
- In a sense I could say that I was led astray by the advertising — the eye-catching text was set in bold type and was about ten times the size of not-bold text specifying the validity period. But that validity period was printed on there to deal with exactly this kind of situation, which is the next point.

- Someone didn't do the job of removing the sign when it should have been removed. Why? I don't know; maybe that person was ill and someone else was able to do only part of their job. What matters is how it was dealt with.
- The branch manager started out by looking at common causes in the IT realm, and then switched to other possible causes, which is when he saw that tiny print.
- At this point, he had a choice to make: either he could enforce the terms of the validity period, or not. He obviously has some leeway in being able to do things like this, and this case fell within it. In the end he gave us the discount, and I am pretty sure that the supermarket chain still did not make a loss; just less profit, but more goodwill.

In all of this the branch manager exhibited wisdom in how he dealt with the situation, and that is going to be a big focus of my devotion of next week Thursday, when we look at what to do when things escalate between Christians.

Let us pray.

God, You say in James² that if we ask You in faith for wisdom, You will give it to us. We desperately need wisdom in this world, O Lord. Please lay on our hearts that we need to be wise in how we deal with one another, that we may spread Your light and love.

Amen.

2 James 1:5–8

The Power to Change, Part 6

Objection, your honour!

John Botha, IT & Technical Director at Willows Methodist, 2026-06-04

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Introduction

In my previous devotion (of 28 May) I said that today we will look at what to do when things escalate between Christians. Today we are looking at 1 Corinthians 6:1–8 and the following quote³ helps us to understand the passage better (you can see the PDF for the full reference):

If in Romans Paul resembles the modern professor of Biblical Theology, in 1 Corinthians he resembles the pastor-teacher, faced with the care of the church on the firing line of Christian warfare.

In other words, 1 Corinthians addresses very real, practical issues.

Before we continue, let us pray.

Thank You, God, that You are the great Judge of all, and not another. No evidence needs to be presented to You because You alone know all things. You are righteous, fair, loving, kind, gentle, and the only source of true grace. You know our hearts, and You know that we are but dust. Please help us now to hear Your Will in this devotion, O Lord.

Amen.

Devotion

There are three aspects of history which will help us to understand today's passage and topic better.

Firstly, the Romans are justly famous for many of their accomplishments, one of which you cannot see, but the effects of which you experience daily — their legal system. The Roman society was apparently quite litigious. The Greeks were known for going to the courts more than most, and the Corinthians even more so. In the mid first century before Christ the Romans introduced the so-called *Lex Remmia de calumnia*, a law which defined explicit penalties if someone brought a false case against another. The results could go all the way to losing one's citizenship, but often included being branded with the word *calumniator*, indicating to others that the person was not to be trusted.

³ S. Lewis Johnson Jr., *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, in *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary*, p. 1229, as quoted in Constable's Notes on 1 Corinthians, p. 5.

Secondly, in Greece cases were heard in the open in the *Agora*, which included the marketplace and government offices, and judgements were pronounced from the so-called *Bema* seat. Because it was literally in the open, cases could easily become entertainment for those not involved. You can imagine the gossip that this caused!

Thirdly, the legal system differentiated between its laws (such as against murder and theft) and people's religious matters (such as which food not to eat), and judges refused to get involved in the latter. The very bema seat of Corinth was most likely where Gallio, the proconsul of Achaia, pronounced on exactly this when Paul was staying in Corinth and the local Jews dragged him to the tribunal (see Acts 18:12–17).

So with that as background, let's listen to 1 Corinthians 6:1–8.

When one of you has a grievance against another, does he dare go to law before the unrighteous instead of the saints? Or do you not know that the saints will judge the world? And if the world is to be judged by you, are you incompetent to try trivial cases? Do you not know that we are to judge angels? How much more, then, matters pertaining to this life! So if you have such cases, why do you lay them before those who have no standing in the church? I say this to your shame. Can it be that there is no one among you wise enough to settle a dispute between the brothers, but brother goes to law against brother, and that before unbelievers? To have lawsuits at all with one another is already a defeat for you. Why not rather suffer wrong? Why not rather be defrauded? But you yourselves wrong and defraud—even your own brothers and sisters!

Clearly, some Corinthian Christians were taking each other to court, *and the cases were being heard*. That immediately says two things:

1. The matters at hand related to secular law, not religious matters, and so carried legal penalties.
2. Given the potential impact on the accuser, chances are that the cases were not based on false accusations — one party had almost certainly broken a law.

If two Christians appear before the secular courts to settle a matter, then one has to cast doubt on at least one of them, and also upon their Christian community as a whole.

Concerning the individual, at least one of the parties did something so wrong that there are legal implications, because the courts would not entertain a case that has no merit. The point, however, is far deeper and more serious than that: verse 9(a) reads “Or do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God?” There are eternal consequences for the wrongdoer.

Upon first reading it may seem that we are told not to stand up for what's right, and simply to roll over. After all, verse seven says “Why not rather suffer wrong? Why not rather be defrauded?” Well, it says these two things in the context of how verse seven starts, which is “To have lawsuits at all with one another is already a defeat for you.” This is the critical point here, and is why Paul wrote in verse five (as per the NIV translation): “Is it possible that there is nobody among you wise enough to judge a dispute between believers?”

The impact of what is described in 1 Corinthians 6:1–8 is our witness *as Christian community*. The essence is that when we (as a group of Christians) do not behave as we should, we cannot point to ourselves as the kind of community that God has designed, quite simply because then we are not actually a Christian *community* — and that is why I used the term ‘group of Christians’ above.

Not everyone is at the same level of knowledge or maturity, so part of exercising wisdom is to solve inter-personal issues *in the Church*. What makes this difficult is our highly individualistic approach while God designed us to live in community.

Conclusion

Jesus outlined a very specific series of steps in Matthew 18:15–17 which we should follow in the Christian community when sinned against. Breaking secular law would surely qualify. Go and read that section to familiarise yourself with the steps, but understand that those three verses do not stand on their own — they are part of Matthew 18:15–35, so spend some time reading, praying, and thinking about that whole section.

In this extremely brief overview we have merely scratched the surface, but the core idea is that true Christian community is not one where something like what Paul addresses here is possible. How can it be, when we have been given specific guidelines on how to deal with such problems? If we don’t, then we are not living as we should.

The goal in this, though, is not condemnation. Rather it is justice brought about by forgiveness being extended to one who repents, followed by restoration and where appropriate, restitution. Have a look again at Luke 19 and see not only what Zacchaeus did, but what Jesus had to say about it.

I want to end with this famous quote from the Old Testament, Micah 6:8

He has told you, O man, what is good;
and what does the Lord require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God?

Let us pray.

God, You say in James⁴ that if we ask You in faith for wisdom, You will give it to us. We desperately need Your true wisdom in how we deal with one another. O Lord, please help us to live our lives in such a way that we may be true witnesses of Your light and love. Not only in what we do, but also in what we do not do. Amen.

Specific Sources

Constable’s Notes. Dr. Constable’s notes are freely available on the Internet. An easy to use and well formatted set of notes is at <https://soniclight.com/constable/>.

4 James 1:5–8

The Power to Change, Part 7

Log-jam!

John Botha, IT & Technical Director at Willows Methodist, 2026-06-30

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Introduction

In my previous devotion (of 4 June) we looked at 1 Corinthians 6:1–8, which addresses the quite serious case of Christians taking each other to court. Today we are looking at the famous parable of Jesus as recorded in Luke 6:41–42, which reads as follows:

Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, "Brother, let me take out the speck that is in your eye", when you yourself do not see the log that is in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take out the speck that is in your brother's eye.

It is quite clear what the primary meaning of this passage is, but there are a few deeper points that we will be addressing today as well.

Before we continue, however, let us pray.

*Thank You, Jesus, that You gave us this teaching in Your Word about how we are to live and interact with others. Please help us, O Lord, to open ourselves to Your Spirit so that we may learn from You in this regard.
Amen.*

Devotion

It is important to understand whom Jesus was addressing here. The way He framed it, Jesus addressed *fellow believers* wanting to help each other. But why only fellow believers; why not everyone in general? Surely we should be free to help anyone?

That is a valid question, so consider that while we can certainly *explain* our beliefs to non-Christians, because they do not believe the whole Truth, we cannot expect them to conform to what we believe. In other words, we cannot correct non-Christians on points where they believe differently. If we do so, they may — quite rightly — see us as judgemental of them, and that is why

this is addressed to fellow believers, because we believe the same, and part of that means helping one another to maintain the faith.

So why does Jesus say *not* to help the other person? Well ... He doesn't actually say that, but what He does say is under which circumstances *not* to help and when it *is* fine to help.

The immediate application here is clear: correction and assistance cannot be from the place of hypocrisy. Thus you need to sort yourself out urgently.

Spurgeon put it well:

The judging faculty is best employed at home. Our tendency is to spy out splinters in other men's eyes, and not to see the beam in our own. Instead of beholding, with gratified gaze, the small fault of another, we should act reasonably if we penitently considered the greater fault of ourselves. It is the beam in our own eye which blinds us to our own wrong doing, but such blindness does not suffice to excuse us, since it evidently does not shut our eyes to the little error of our brother. ...

Our reformations must begin with ourselves, or they are not true, and do not spring from a right motive. Sin we may rebuke, but not if we indulge it. We may protest against evil, but not if we wilfully practice it. The Pharisees were great at censuring, but slow at amending. Our Lord will not have His kingdom made up of hypocritical theorists, He calls for practical obedience to the rules of holiness.

It is tempting to stop here, having come to the obvious conclusion that we are not to be hypocrites by addressing some shortcoming in another Christian's life while having grave issues of our own, but there is more to this.

Firstly, the impact on our witness when we are hypocrites. How can we expect our words about the transforming power of Christ in our lives to be believed when the charge of hypocrite will stick?

Secondly, it *is possible* to remove the log from your own eye — Jesus says so. He also labels the person in mind as a hypocrite, so while criticism, correction, or offers of help might be valid, being hypocritical pretty much invalidates it at worst and waters it down at best. So there definitely is something (and it is big) that needs to be sorted out before you can help the person with the speck, which brings us to the next point.

While we need to make our own changes — others cannot change your life for you — we are not alone, and when it is a big thing we will definitely benefit from the help of others. (The first part of Galatians 6 is a prime example here.) It seems to me that this is a very neglected part of most Christian communities: seldom are those who are drifting away given warning and offered help. And sadly when it *is* done, it is often misconstrued and the person offering the correction and help becomes targeted for meddling in the other's life, being judgemental, not being accommodating, etc., etc.

Galatians 6:1 is a command; here it is: "Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be

tempted.” So yes, you are your brother’s keeper. What kind of family would you have if, when you were in mortal danger, your siblings would not come to your aid if they knew about it? That is what being caught in sin *is* — it is *mortal danger*, for the wages of sin is death! I believe that this is clear enough to leave it here, other than to say that if you do believe that someone is caught in a transgression, then you need to pray for guidance and gentleness, then confirm before stepping in to help. Also, be sure that you don’t have a log in your own eye.

Conclusion

There is another aspect to this, however, and I am going to use myself as the example. Before I do so I want to say this to clear things up: In general, I don’t want to use myself as positive example, because in no way do I want to elevate myself. Also, when I need to use a negative example and I believe it would be beneficial to do so, I use myself because a personal example can be far more powerful than a generic one. The following example is a blend of the two. So with that out of the way, here goes.

Some years ago someone told me “John, I know you well enough to know that your heart is good, but sometimes I really wish you could hear yourself.” That was a wake-up call for me. I knew that I sometimes rubbed people up the wrong way, but in my mind it was not me, but them that led to that. I was unaware of the impact not so much of *what* I said, but of *how* I said it. So not only did someone have the guts to tell me, effectively, “John, take care how you speak.”, but I listened, and I started changing.

The thing is, if I had not been told, I would have remained unaware of the incredibly negative impact I was having on others, and I would have continued with the log in my eye. My intentions were good, but my methods were not. Given where I was coming from, however, I had little idea, and I needed someone else’s help.

My point is this: We *are* our brother’s keeper, and we should bear one another’s burdens as Galatians 6:2 commands. Part of that is gentle correction when required, and the correction might not be of an obvious sin, but of actions which impact the Christian community and the person’s witness, for even that opens us up to the charge of hypocrite.

I want to close with this quote. I have no idea who said it, but it is so true: “Be patient with the faults of others; they have to be patient with yours.”

Let us pray.

Dear God, You give us such riches in Your Word. Help us to come to You with our shortcomings and to accept help from others, so that we may, in turn, help others from a position of holiness. Amen.

Specific Resources

Spurgeon: <https://www.spurgeongems.org/sermon/chs3096.pdf>. Also see <https://spurgeon.org>.

The Power to Change, Part 8

Injustice, or a Price to be Paid?

John Botha, IT & Technical Director at Willows Methodist, 2026-07-21

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Introduction

This devotion series concentrates on the changes that we should undergo as a result of our new life in Christ. The true *power* to change, however, is not ours, because even our righteous deeds are as filthy rags before The Lord⁵. Instead, we depend on God and He helps us as we submit to His Will.

Today's devotion is titled "Injustice, or a Price to be Paid?" and we will be looking at the tension between verses such as these: In Isaiah 1:17 we read "seek justice", yet 1 Peter 4:19 says "Therefore let those who suffer according to God's will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good."

For the immediate context of 1 Peter 4:19, start at verse 12, but the essence of the suffering spoken of here is that which we endure because of the Gospel. The Bible and its Gospel are not merely a self-improvement plan, or more crudely, fire insurance. No, it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes⁶. At the same time, we are engaged in the biggest war there is — the fight for souls. Satan is real, and is committed to doing everything he can in order to oppose God. When we are engaged in God's work, we *will* face opposition — that is a guarantee⁷ — and it will be fierce. One of the most effective ways to limit our influence is to keep us divided, and that brings us to the core of today's devotion: when do we demand justice and when do we submit to suffering?

Before we continue, however, let us pray.

*Dear Father God, thank You that You have given us Your Word and Your Spirit to guide us continually, and the example of Jesus to follow. Help us now to hear what You are saying to us, God.
Amen.*

⁵ See Isaiah 64:6.

⁶ See Romans 1:16.

⁷ See John 15:18–21.

Devotion

I asked “when do we demand justice and when do we submit to suffering?” but that is not actually a good way of putting it, as it implies not only one or the other, but also that the one is contrary to the other, if not its opposite. Yet that is not the case. You see, what we do should be done with eternity in mind, which immediately puts things into their proper perspective. As a simple example, when a child is unhappy about being told to go to bed, from their perspective the parent is being unreasonable by disallowing them to enjoy, say, a TV programme. Reality, however, is far bigger than that child’s reasoning, as the parent knows that unless the child goes to bed soon, the following day at school will be a very unpleasant time indeed. The eternal perspective is put well in 2 Corinthians 4:17–18, which reads

For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.

When we study The Bible a pattern emerges in this regard, and it is that while we do have the right to expect justice (and we *will* get it), it is in the light of both eternity and our surrender to God.

An image that we repeatedly find of Christians is that of a bond-servant. This comes from Exodus 21, where instead of being set free in the seventh year, a slave could decide to become a bond-servant, willingly laying down his right to freedom in order to continue serving his master⁸. That came not only with responsibilities, but also with rights, and from those, benefits. As Christians, God demands from us surrender to Him, and in the New Testament we frequently see Christians referred to as exactly this kind of willing servant—serving out of love, bound to their master for ever.

With that in mind, it becomes clear that we can no longer look at our lives from the limited perspective of our time on earth. Neither can we do so when we look at the lives of others. The Gospel is clear: the good news is that people can be saved from Hell and instead spend their eternity with The Lord. While Jesus has paid the price, we need to repent and believe⁹.

Conclusion

This eternal perspective means that with the knowledge that our life is eternally secure, what happens to us in our current bodies is actually of no lasting concern. This is clear when we read 1 Corinthians 15:50–58 in conjunction with both 1 Peter 4:19 and 2 Corinthians 4:17–18. Jesus put it even stronger in Matthew 10:28–33. Verse 28 reads “And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell.” We need not fear Man, nor Satan, but only God Himself. And since we are His bond-servants, we need not *fear* Him, but rather be in *awe* of Him and to *respect* Him utterly.

⁸ See Exodus 21:5–6.

⁹ Many verses, but start with Mark 1:15 and Acts 19:4.

I need to wrap up by saying it clearly: when it relates to eternity, be willing to lay down your so-called rights if it is in God's Will to do so. When it relates to the here and now, again, be clear about God's Will and know that in general you are not to be a doormat. When we look at Jesus, this summary from Philippians 2:5–11 says it all.

5 Have this mind among yourselves, which was also in Christ Jesus 6 who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, 7 but made himself nothing, taking the form of a bond-servant, being born in the likeness of men. 8 And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. 9 Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, 10 so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, 11 and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Galatians 6:9 says “And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up.” That is a promise, but the only true *expectation* that we can have, is that this “due season” might only be in Heaven.

This is a good summary: The question is not whether the end justifies the means; it is rather faithfully doing the will of God and entrusting the outcome to Him.

Let us pray.

Thank You, Jesus, that You have set us the supreme example. Help us to live our lives with eternity in mind, and Your justice as aim, so that we may do Your Will as we submit ourselves to You as true bond-servants.

Amen.

The Power to Change, Part 9

Biblical Expectations

John Botha, IT & Technical Director at Willows Methodist, 2026-08-13

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Introduction

2 Corinthians 5:17 says:

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.

While our salvation is secure in Christ, we still have a lot to figure out and to change, and that is our focus here. The point, though, is that while we are the ones who need to do the changing (also called growth), this kind of change is impossible on our own — the power to change comes from God.

There is one major stumbling block along the way, and that is the impact of dashed expectations — when what we expected from God did not happen. The bigger the disappointment, the bigger the chance of stumbling over it.

There is only one antidote to this kind of disappointment, this kind of utter destruction of our expectations, and that is *knowledge*. God even tells us so in Hosea 4:6, where we read “My people are destroyed for lack of *knowledge*...” [my emphasis], and in 2 Peter 1:3 we read “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...” [my emphasis].

Before we continue, however, let us pray.

Dear God, thank You for providing us with Your Word. Thank You that in Your Word we find the knowledge that we need for life and for godliness. Help us to hear what You are saying to us through Your Spirit, O Lord. Help us to turn to You for the guidance we need.

Amen.

Devotion

Some disappointments are trivial, such as your favourite ice-cream flavour being out of stock, while others can change your life. In each case what is more important than the disappointment is our

reaction. On the life-changing side, if your response is to turn away from God, then your reaction to the disappointment causes you to change your eternity. *This* is how serious disappointment can be.

I repeat what I said in the introduction: there is only one antidote to this kind of disappointment, this kind of utter destruction of our expectations, and that is *knowledge*. Knowledge of these matters needs to be assimilated, to become part of the fibre of your being. If not, you will fall victim to what is written in Ephesians 4:14 (the context is verses 11–16 and it speaks of becoming mature when we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God). Verse 14 reads:

Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming.

It is not easy to be blown here and there by every wind of teaching when you have the knowledge to counter such teaching; when you know the Truth.

How does teaching come into this? For an example, consider what is commonly known as the prosperity gospel, which frequently teaches that those who claim to be Christians yet are living in conditions one cannot describe as prosperous have a fundamental problem with their faith. If you believe that, then if you are *not* in a prosperous situation, you will logically have to conclude that there is a problem with your faith — or you will have to change what you believe. You would also have a problem to explain quite a bit of The Bible. For example, the life experiences of every single one of the Apostles.

The point is to highlight the importance of knowledge, and in the context of this devotion, knowledge of what God promised. Promises have conditions. Even salvation has conditions: a sacrifice for humanity's sin *had* to be made because its price had to be paid; even though salvation is available to all, not all will be saved.

So, if you are holding on to what you believe is a promise that God made and things don't go how you expected they would, who is wrong about the 'promise': you or God? Putting it that starkly can be uncomfortable, especially if the belief was strong, but our fervent belief in something does not make it so.

It is a big problem when people in authority make proclamations which are simply not true, and we are warned about this in James 3:1, which says "Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness." What if your (or my, for that matter) wrong teaching misled someone into believing that God promised something which He did not and when that so-called promise did not materialise in their life they were so devastated that they gave up on their faith? It's not one-sided, of course, as people should do their own reading, just like the Bereans who were commended for searching the Scriptures to see whether Paul's teaching was true¹⁰. But the fact remains, James 3:1 is there for a reason.

¹⁰ See Acts 17:11.

Conclusion

I want to conclude by looking at two types of disappointment, how they can be stumbling blocks, and how I believe we should deal with them.

The first (the ice-cream flavour example) is what I called ‘trivial’, and while at the level of the disappointment it is trivial, what is not trivial — in fact, it is extremely important — is our reaction, because it impacts our Christian witness. If your reaction is to explode, then others will notice. And what do you expect their reaction will be when at some other point you want to speak to them about peace and love in the family of Christ? Our lives speak louder than our words, and our intentions need to be evidenced in order to carry any weight.

There is another reason these ‘trivial’ disappointments are anything but: the wrong reaction is often the result of selfishness. You see, we become disappointed when things did not go as we wanted them to. There is nothing inherently wrong with being disappointed, but we really do need to keep perspective about how important our desires are. We have seen that our reaction to disappointment is very important, but there is another thing: in our reaction we can rise above the norm and so become that city on the hill or the lamp on the stand from Christ’s parable¹¹.

Take the ice-cream flavour as an example. You promised your child to go for an ice-cream as a treat, and when you get there they don’t have *your* favourite, pistachio. They do, however, have bubblegum flavour, which is your child’s favourite. Each of you knows the other’s favourite, and I can guarantee you that your child is watching you. *Whatever your reaction is, is what you are modelling for your child.* You are effectively telling your child: “*This* is how you behave when things don’t go your way.”

Think about that for a bit, especially when you think about how you want them to behave when *you* are the one who is dashing their expectations about something.

On the life-changing side of the scale of disappointment, there are many examples, almost all of them tragic. The fact is that people die, people get maimed in accidents, people develop conditions or illnesses which can only, at best, be managed, if at all — to name but a few. This devotion is not the place to go further into this kind of disappointment, but if your faith is shattered because of any of these, then the problem is most likely not your faith, but that you need help to cope.

CS Lewis is known mainly for his books on presenting and defending Christianity, as well as some of his works of fiction (the Narnia Chronicles comes to mind), but he wrote a profound book on loss and associated grief, called “A Grief Observed”. It is based on his journals as his wife contracted cancer and then died from it. I recommend it if your faith feels like it is being buffeted from every side.

11 See Matthew 5:14–16.

We need to acknowledge that loss and pain are real and stop trying to “overcome” them based on dubious teaching. We also need to acknowledge that how we react to ‘lesser’ disappointments impacts our witness and can even impact how the lives of others are shaped.

Let us pray.

Lord Jesus, thank You that You understand our weaknesses, that You understand loss and pain, that You bore our sins on the cross. Please help us to bear witness to Your power in our lives by how we react to disappointments in our lives.

Amen.

The Power to Change, Part 10

Are You Load-Bearing?

John Botha, IT & Technical Director at Willows Methodist, 2026-09-03

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Introduction

This past Sunday I preached at Willows, and there was one point I mentioned that I want to go into a bit more deeply, so if you want the context, take a look at the sermons page on our web site, where you can get the video, audio, and PDF of the sermon.

The main idea of the sermon was that the goal of our *communal* lives as Christians is encapsulated in Ephesians 4:15–16 and then I looked at how Galatians 6:1–5 shows us a few important ways in which we are to achieve that goal.

Here is the goal:

Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into Him Who is the head, into Christ, from Whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.

— Ephesians 4:15–16 (ESV)

And here is Galatians 6:1–5

Brothers and sisters, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted. Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ. For if anyone thinks he is something, when he is nothing, he deceives himself. But let each one test his own work, and then his reason to boast will be in himself alone and not in his neighbour. For each will have to bear his own load.

You can refer to the sermon for a quick explanation of how bearing each other's burdens and bearing your own load is not a contradiction, but today I want to look at verses 1–4, and especially how it is a two-way street.

Before we continue, however, a quick prayer.

Thank You, Lord, that Your heart is for us to live in harmony, and that You give us rich and deep instruction in Your Word about how to do that. Help us to hear what You are saying to us today through this devotion.
Amen.

Devotion

The first point of the Ephesians quote is that we are to speak the truth in love, and from the first two verses of Galatians 6 we get not only that restoration is to be done in a spirit of gentleness, but also that we are to “Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ.” We get Christ’s commandment in John 13:34–35, where He says

A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.

and also in John 15:12, where He says “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.” Repetition in The Bible is usually an indication that something is important.

These are the only two recorded places we have where Jesus was not merely using the imperative in grammar, but actually used words along the lines of “This is a command”, which is about as strong as you can get.

So we see that gentleness and love will go hand in hand here. Sometimes love can be experienced as uncomfortable (see Hebrews 12:1–17, but especially verse 11 for a very good example), but in this context there needs to be gentleness.

What I want to look into more deeply, however, is verse two: “Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ.” On the surface that seems like not too much work: help others where they struggle, and you’re set! but it’s not that simple.

When I was studying this I discovered that the Greek which is here translated as “one another’s” (from “Bear *one another’s* burdens”), is what is called a *reflexive pronoun*. One’s reaction to that grammatical insight could easily be “So what?”, but it gives the sentence an incredible meaning. You see, in Greek a reflexive pronoun means that the action it describes — which here is bearing a burden — is performed *by each on each*: it is a two-way street. The implication is not that A helps B, C helps D, ... and then eventually someone else help A. No, it is that A helps B *and that* B helps A. Also note that it’s not a case of a shared burden, such as together carrying a heavy piece of furniture, but that it’s A carrying a burden that B has, and B carrying a burden that A has.

In some cases it may be that one of the parties has very limited resources, whether these be physical, emotional, spiritual, or whatever, but that does not mean that meaningful assistance cannot be given. If all you can do is to pray for someone, then definitely pray!

Conclusion

This is just a devotion, and not a sermon, so I'm going to wrap up now. I made the point that it's not simply a matter of helping a few people with some burdens, and then you've fulfilled Christ's law. We see more when we read further. Verses 3–4 tell us this:

For if anyone thinks he is something, when he is nothing, he deceives himself. But let each one test his own work, and then his reason to boast will be in himself alone and not in his neighbour.

That may sound a bit strange, but bear [!] with me. Self-importance — especially when actually unfounded — is a trap. Not only do others generally see right through you (and thus your witness is impacted), but you easily end up in the trap that Christ spoke of when He taught about the log in your own eye and the speck in your brother's.

The key to dealing with this is humility. If you're not humble, you will struggle to accept input from someone whose burden you are bearing, and there goes your chance to fulfil the law of Christ ... because the pronoun is reflexive!

I don't know how you can be in God's Will for your life and not be humble.

Let us pray.

*Lord Jesus, thank You for giving us Your commandment. Help us to follow it closely, so that we can be true witnesses to the transformational work You do in our lives.
Amen.*

The Power to Change, Part 11

To the Point

John Botha, IT & Technical Director at Willows Methodist, 2026-09-29

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Introduction

I have titled today's devotion "To the Point", as I want us to look at what the point of all this change is, because it is easy to look at it from a distance and see little difference between these devotions and a bunch of self-help articles.

Before we continue, however, a quick prayer.

Father God, thank You for the gift of Your Son, Jesus, Who is the only Way, Truth, and Life, and also that You sent the Holy Spirit, to guide us into all the truth. Please speak to us now through this devotion, and may Your guidance be all that it contains.

Amen.

Devotion

What does this power to change achieve? What *is* the point? In Mark 12:30 Jesus says "And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength." In the next verse Jesus says "You shall love your neighbour as yourself."

The first aspect is loving God, followed by loving ourselves and our neighbour. Read Mark 12 for the context, but the point here is that these are *commands* — things which God Himself tells us *have* to be done. We are given free will — whether or not to keep God's commandments — but we don't get to choose the consequences. So actually our freedom is to choose the consequences, but the point is that our focus is to be Christ, not the consequences. In John 14:15 Jesus says "If you love me, you will keep my commandments.", but that is not an isolated verse; immediately following it Jesus says "And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you for ever — the Spirit of truth." [NIV] So we see that it is in the context of keeping Jesus's commandments out of our love for Him that Jesus speaks of sending the Holy Spirit.

The power to change is granted us by God's Spirit, and we are to love The Lord with *all* of our heart, our soul, our mind, and our strength. In addition, we need to love ourselves, and then our neighbour *in the same way*.

The first devotion of this series was simply titled "Sin". It is the original problem, it is what separates us from God, and we cannot solve it.

Romans 10:9–13 and Ephesians 2:8–9 are the big sections about coming to salvation, and yes, it *is* "with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved", but that speaks only to *our* part of the *how* aspect of salvation. It does not at all address what follows. There is one very important point a myopic focus on those few verses will miss: repentance.

I said that the original problem is sin, and that we cannot solve it. This is not a popular teaching, but it remains the truth, popular or not: we need to *repent* of our sin. That means we need to stop doing it. Are we perfect? No, of course not. Can we attain to salvation by our own means? No, of course not. Can we depend upon God to give us power to live holy lives? I believe we can, but it does require on-going submission to Him. Consider what Jesus said in Luke 9:23, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me."

So now we have that we are saved through grace (not works), by belief and confession, and that we then need to lay down our lives daily, and follow Christ. That all speaks to our individual salvation. Now you may ask why we still have to be here; why we are not translated into glory upon accepting salvation; why we continue to struggle here. The answer is in the last few verses of Matthew, where Christ gives the Great Commission. We are to be His *witnesses* everywhere, and from this there flows a whole lot more.

In John 13:35 Jesus says, "By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." There it is! That is how we will bear witness to the world: the love we have for one another.

Why is this so important? How come this is the core of our witness? It is very simple: *we* are the proof of the transforming power of Christ. We can argue all we like to try to prove Christianity intellectually, but at the end of the day it is exactly as per the above quotes from Romans 10 and from Ephesians 2; the clincher remains how people will *know*, and *that* is by the love that we have for one another.

That love is an expression of a changed life — in fact, it is an expression of *life*!

Conclusion

While the *power* to change comes from God Himself, *we* are the ones changing, and there are two points I wish to make here. Firstly, as with coming to faith, we have a choice, and the choice comes with consequences which we cannot choose. Secondly, this change requires stopping what is wrong and doing what is right.

2 Corinthians 5 has a few very well known verses; think of “...if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.” Another is “...we walk by faith, not by sight.” That second one is in the same paragraph which ends with these words: “For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each of us may receive what is due to us for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.” [NIV]. That is far more sobering, and note that it was written to Christians. So yes, even though we are saved, we have things to do, and they have consequences.

When our lives make our words a lie, why are we surprised that our words do not convince the unsaved?

To help with this, read Ephesians chapters 4, 5, and 6 in a single sitting, ignoring headings and chapter and verse demarcations. Read it as a unit, so that you can follow the flow of the argument. That will not only help you to see what the point of it is, but will also show you the (very important) context of the sections speaking about family relationships and about slavery.

While you may wish to read a paraphrase to get the general idea (possibly “The Message”, or “The Living Bible”), you will miss a lot, including anything that the person(s) doing the paraphrase left out or did not even see. A good on-line resource for this is <https://biblegateway.com>, where you can choose from various Bibles and have more than one open in parallel for easy comparison.

So much for the mechanics! The reason I recommend reading Ephesians chapters four through six is that it addresses both *why* and *how* regarding the changes we are to make. If you want to know more, then reading Galatians, Philippians, and Colossians is a good place to start. Each is both easier to read and shorter than heavier books such as Corinthians, Romans, or Hebrews, for example.

So the point of living changed lives is that, having come to salvation, our lives may prove the Gospel message.

Let us pray.

Dear Lord God, thank You for giving us Your Son so that we may live. Help us to live our lives to the full, so that the love we have for one another may prove Your power in us.

Amen.

General Bible Resources

[Most of the original language information (including Strong’s concordance) is via the Bible Hub site.]

This list is alive in that I update it as I go along — I just don’t update all the instances of it, so see my latest devotion has the then-current one. At some point I’ll probably put it on the web somewhere and update that, but for now this is it. Also note that I don’t check each link for its continued existence... .

There are some points in these resources where you (and I) may think differently. Just don’t throw the baby out with the bath water — consider what is said, read widely in The Word, and pray to God that He would keep you from heresy as you continue in your study of His Word. Though I find the following resources useful

in many ways, *each* has its points where at the very least I go, ‘Mmm. Not so sure about that. I need to look into that more deeply.’

<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Genesis+1%3A1&version=ESVUK> is a brilliant collection of Bible translations. I tend to use the ESV-UK version: a solid translation in English.

<https://biblehub.com> is an enormous collection of resources. They have commentaries, concordances, Bible dictionaries, and more. Unless otherwise specified, this is where I get the information on the original languages. They have of late been encouraging people not to use ad blockers.

<https://www.blueletterbible.org/> packages of the same resources as biblehub.com, but has a completely different approach. They are also (currently) free.

<https://www.stepbible.org/> is an incredible resource if you want to look at the original language. When you use it on a PC and you hover over certain links you get more information without having to click.

<https://www.thebibleunpacked.net> is a rather unusual set of resources. At its core is a free book exploring core concepts of Christianity, but the book is available in seven editions. The smallest is just four ‘pages’ (each the size of a credit card) while the largest is 2,424 pages of A4 material. The two main areas are ‘What to Know’ and ‘What to Do’, which is an excellent balance. You can get an overview of the structure and topics at <https://www.thebibleunpacked.net/whats-inside>.

<https://www.preceptaustin.org/> is an enormous resource of commentaries by Dr. Bruce Hurt, a medical doctor. His work includes copious references, easing further study.

<https://soniclight.com/constable/> is the official site of the Bible commentary of theologian Dr. Thomas Constable, where that material is freely available.

<https://www.gotquestions.org> intends to provide answers to common questions about The Bible. While there is a core doctrinal point (predestination) on which I differ, there are many insightful answers.

These should be sufficient to get you going, but a word of warning: many ‘fringe’ sites (and some sects) go to great lengths to make their public / introductory material seem completely main-stream, so you really need to be on your guard.