When You Believe in God but Don't Think You Can Change

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Date: 21 October 2018

Preacher: Archdeacon Adrian Youings

[0:00] And we're going to look together, I know that you're doing a series through this book, The Christian Atheist, by someone whose surname no one seems better to pronounce. I'm going to go with Craig Groeschel, and we're going to be looking at a chapter there, but I also particularly want to look at that passage from Romans chapter 6.

I don't know whether we can get the words up, but I particularly, if you can get them up, those last three or four verses of it would be great. But over my 14 years of preaching in my previous parishes down in Taunton, I discovered that there was one subject that time and again would create a great deal of discomfort.
And always, and I say always, guarantee that at least a couple of emails from men would come to me in the week asking if they might meet up with me for a coffee and a chat.
I wonder if you can imagine what the subject matter was. Clive's worked it out, I think. Pornography. In 2015, Premier Christianity magazine did a survey in which 50% of Christians, not just men, admitted viewing adult content online at least once a month.
And 42% saying that they had an addiction. Christians. It's exactly the same figure as it is for non-Christians in all the surveys.
[1:27] Of course, it's not the only issue that Christians struggle with. For some, it's overworking, verging on workaholism, if that's the right words.

For others, it will be anger, a temper that they can't control. For others, it will be greed, not just food greed, but materialism. Just that constant desire to have more, to have bigger, to have better, to have newer.
For others, it's simple lust, just that inability to keep looking and to entertain those unhelpful conversations in the office. That just lead you down paths that you know are not right.
Or just the words we say, the gossip that we get into, that negativity that we get into, the way we speak about people when they're not in the room. Patterns of behaviour in our lives that we know that are not of God.
And yet many of us feel powerless to change. And the point that Grosjeal is making in the chapter that we're looking at of his book is, it is a dangerous thing that can happen in a Christian.
[2:26] That they stop believing that change can happen. It is easy to surrender, in a sense to raise the white flag. And say, yes, God is changing me in all sorts of areas. But there are one or two things that persist.

That I seem to get nowhere. They seem to have a grip. And no matter what I do, nothing changes. Therefore, I stop believing that God can change me.
Yes, you can do it in lots of areas, but just not in this area. But I think there's an even bigger danger than even Grosjeal picks out, which I think our passage picks out.
Because it becomes easy then to swallow the lie that is based on a wonderful truth. It is easy to swallow a lie that is based on a wonderful truth. Because in Romans 6, the wonderful truth of Romans so far is that we are saved by grace.
I hope you know that. I hope you understand the gospel. That we are saved, we are put right by grace. Not by what we do. Not by perfect obedience to the rules.
[3:28] Christianity is not about being better. Being good. Even though most people think that's what it's about. It is not. It is that by faith in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, we are made right with God.

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We are forgiven. We are cleansed. We are washed clean. In chapter 5, verse 1. Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into his grace, in which we now stand.
It is all of grace. Unmerited. Undeserved. Unconditional love and forgiveness. But then there's a question at the start of chapter 6.
Which is this. Shall we sin then, so that grace may increase? Or in an old version I love. Shall we sin that grace may abound?
See, what it's saying is, if forgiveness and peace with God, if grace is always available, what does it matter then if we keep on sinning? In fact, logic tells us, and was beginning to tell some of Paul's readers, well, surely then, the more I sin, the more I get of God's grace.
[4:44] Therefore, hey, why don't we sin more and get more grace? That was the implication. And you know, it's not long before we find ourselves then perhaps saying, in the situations we face, well, this area of my life, this addiction that's got hold of me, this behaviour that's got a grip of me, this sin that's taken a hold, I start to convince myself, well, does it really matter that much?

I mean, after all, God is gracious. Grace means I'll still be forgiven. So actually, maybe I don't really need to worry about it. Maybe I don't really need to deal with it.
Because I'm going to be forgiven anyway. And then we don't take it seriously. We convince ourselves it's okay. And I love Paul's response. And if you saw it there, if you go to the next verse, I love his response.
By no means, exclamation mark. He's going, no! No way! You've got it wrong. If that's the kind of thinking you've got, no! Disaster lies down that way of thinking.
And he goes on to say, as Christians, he says in verse 2, we are those who have died to sin. How can we live in it anymore? Sin is no longer to have control of our lives.
[6:05] Sin is part of the old life, the banished life. Verse 3, he uses the symbol of baptism. So he pictures that when we're baptised, do you have a Baptist Paul baptistry in here? So you kind of do the down and the up.

Great! Well, you know the symbolism of when people go down into the water, it is being as if we are dying with Christ, the old self, the old me, with all its behaviours going down into the water, and then I rise again, like Jesus rising from the dead.
But with a new life, with new priorities, with a new master of my life. Baptism symbolises that moment of coming to faith, which is decisive.
The old ways have gone, the old ways to have no more part of my life. So instead of thinking, I can't change, or worse, it's okay if I don't change, Paul says, by no means.
Verse 11, count yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Jesus Christ. You see, Paul is really clear with us. But also Paul is honest.
[7:11] Because I think Paul was a bloke. I know he was a bloke. And therefore he was a bloke who struggled with the stuff blokes struggle with. And if Paul had been Pauline writing, then Pauline would have known the stuff that women struggle with.

That is, Paul is also realistic. And if you go into chapter 7 of Romans, you discover him talking about the stuff I want to do, that's the stuff I can't do.
The stuff I don't want to do, I keep on doing. I'm a complete mess, is my kind of translation of what he's saying in verse 7. And so Paul then gives us what I think is like a spiritual CT scan.
He kind of shows us what is really going on inside of us. And unless you understand what's going on inside of you, you won't be equipped to deal with what's going on. You will always end up a victim to all of this stuff.
And it comes in verses 12 to 13 of Romans 6. And he basically says this. You've got to picture your body, what he describes, your mortal body, as being like a castle or a fortified city.
[8:17] Can you imagine that? That's the kind of imagery he's using. Imagine that your body is like a castle or a fortified city. And you need to wise up to what's going on right here, right now, on a Sunday morning in Clevedon inside your body.

And he tells us three or four key things. The first thing he says in verse 12 is this. There is a throne at the heart of your life. There is a throne at the heart of your life. In verse 12 he says, don't let sin reign.
The word reign is just a verb that goes with king. And the throne is that on which a king sits. The question is, who sits on the throne in your life?

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In your mortal body, who is sitting on the throne? Who is master? Who or what is actually in control of your life? You see, is it Jesus Christ, the rightful king?
Or is it actually something else? Groeschel, in his book, poses some questions that might help you to work out if something other than Jesus Christ is actually sitting on the throne in your mortal body?
[9:27] And he asks some of these questions. Firstly, do those closest to you, your family and friends, see that there are some real issues that you are struggling with in your life? You may not see it, but do they spot something?

Habits? Things that are going on? Secondly, do the behaviours that you're struggling with continue even though you know they're hurting you and maybe sometimes hurting others?
You know the consequences, but still you keep doing the same things. Thirdly, do you actually find yourself arranging your daily schedule, your weekly schedule around those things?
Do they start to take control of your diary? Fourthly, can you go weak without it? Are these patterns, these behaviours, things that you see coming up week after week after week?
And then lastly, are you denying or trying to keep it secret? Are these things hidden away that you don't let anyone else around you see? Good questions that you have to ask yourself to know who is actually sitting on the throne?
[10:41] Because Paul then says, secondly, there is a challenger to the throne. Verse 12, don't let sin reign. There is a rebel who wants to lead a coup and gain the throne and take control of your life.

And that rebel is sin. Sin wants control of your life and we are called on to resist it. But third, there are loyal servants who if not careful will defect to the other side.
See, instead of being servants of you as you seek to live under the kingship of Jesus, they will jump over the wall, team up with the enemy and they will cause havoc. Verse 12, don't let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires.
It's that word desires. See, our desires are normally loyal servants of ours, aren't they? We have lives full of desires. These are the things that lead us to do what we do.
We have lots of good desires. We have desires for food, desires for drink, desires for love and companionship, desire for sex, desire for justice, desire for rest and sleep, a desire for coffee.
[11:58] And they're all good desires. They serve us well. They are our loyal servants. They lead us to do the stuff we do day in, day out.

But Paul is saying if you're not careful, your desires, those loyal servants, can be taken captive by the enemy, by sin. And what were once good desires easily become evil desires.
So the desire for food, which has served us well, easily becomes a desire for greed, for more. Whether it's physical greed or materialism, wanting more, wanting what others have got, covetousness.
A desire for drink serves us well until it takes us captive. And we want to drink too much. A desire for sex serves well until that desire for sex with someone who's not our spouse starts to take over. A desire for love and companionship is a great desire until that desire becomes a desire that comes out of lust and an addiction to pornography. A desire for rest and sleep actually becomes slothfulness and laziness.
[13:07] A desire for justice and fairness easily becomes a desire to get even that leads to anger and gossip and bitterness. Do you see, good desires, which were meant to be loyal servants, suddenly, when taken hold of, when they defect to the enemy, the devil, when they defect to sin, or suddenly they become dangerous.

And the reason why they're so dangerous is this, is that they offer a false promise. They offer you the false promise that if you pursue your longings, life will be so much better.
If I get even, I'll be so much better. If I pursue that relationship, which is not the one with my husband or wife, actually that's where I'll find fulfillment. It is a false promise.
We need to take seriously our desires and our longings. We need to monitor them and watch them and take account of what's really going on. Which then leads to the fourth thing that I think Paul says.
That there are also battles in this, sorry, there are also weapons in this battle. Verse 13. Do not offer any part of yourself as an instrument of wickedness.

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[14:22] That word instrument is the same word that's used for weapon in other parts of the New Testament. Same word. And what he's saying is this, that the parts of your body, your tongue, your mouth, your stomach, your eyes, your sexual organs, when desires are captured by sin, they start to turn your body parts into weapons of sin.

If you want to know a great example of that, go to the book of James. In the book of James, it talks about this thing in your mouth. Turn to your neighbour and stick your tongue out. You're allowed to do that. Turn to your neighbour and stick your tongue out.
Show them your tongue. If you know the book of James, the book of James will tell you that this tiny little bit of floppiness in our mouth has extraordinary power.
It has power to build up and to encourage and to make someone's day, doesn't it? This little thing here. But if we have a desire suddenly to hurt and not heal, our tongue becomes the most destructive weapon known to mankind.
We can destroy people with this floppy thing in our mouth, can't we? Do you see how when your desires are taken captive by sin, suddenly bits of your body become dangerous weapons?
[15:46] Do you see, suddenly it all looks a bit different, doesn't it? Paul says, wake up. Wake up to the reality. You are in a fierce battle.

A battle for who will be king of your mortal body. Be clear, he says. God is the true king. He has the rightful place on the throne.
My desires, my body parts are meant to be used for his glory. It is simply not right for us to say, okay, as long as some of my desires, some of my body parts are being used for God, well, it doesn't matter too much if one or two are being used for sin.
It'll be okay. Paul says, by no means, exclamation mark. No, it won't because the key is this. Sin wants control.
You see, sin is not just an act. It's a power. It is not the thing I do. It is a power that takes over. Sin wants to reign. And sin is not satisfied to just have control of one bit of your life.
[16:51] You see, when you've got a castle, the danger is, if you leave one window open or one ladder out at night, it'll come in and it won't just take over one room.

It won't be long before it's knocking down and knocking down the rooms in the rest of the palace because its aim is not to have control of one room. It wants control of a city. So it's not good to say, well, it doesn't matter as long as there's only one area of my life where sin seems to have a grip because it won't be long before it's taken over others and I've seen it time and time again in parish ministry.
Where people struggle in one area become less and less frequent on a Sunday, I've seen it time and time and time again. So how then do we fight the battle?
How do we begin to see change in these areas? These areas that become very difficult for us. Well, Grosje will just give some very quick advice that I'm going to give you as I finish. The first is this, you need to admit it.
You see, when in sermons I mention the word pornography, I've discovered I never have to preach on pornography, I just have to say the word. I always say you need to bring it out of the darkness into the light.
[18:04] It's true of all sin. You have to bring it out of the darkness into the light. That means you have to admit it to yourself, to God. But the danger is all of those things you can fool yourself in, I think.

Even with God. And I always say you need to admit it to another person. You need to speak out loud to somebody I have a problem with. Dot, dot, dot.
I have an accountability group, two other vicars that I meet with, three times a year for two days. They have permission to ask me every question that I don't want them to ask.
And in fact, we have a thing at the end which is where someone will ask me, Adrian, what question do you not want me to ask you today? So I have to tell them everything.
Sex life, what I'm looking at online, about how I'm being a parent, a husband, all of those things. And we've been doing this for 20 years. They know when I'm lying.
[19:06] Admit it. Secondly, seek the power of God. The context of this passage is not that we are ever on the throne. It is not that we're on the throne and therefore we have to have the power to deal with what's going on.

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The power doesn't lie with us. No, God is on the throne. Power comes from him. Which is why when you get to chapter 8 of Romans, we're told about the Holy Spirit. In chapter 8, verse 13, if you live according to the flesh, you'll die.
But if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live. So the message I want to make sure you hear today is not just try harder. Because if you just try harder, you won't get anywhere.
So that is not my message. If that's what you're hearing, that is not the message I'm bringing. You need the Spirit of God. Indeed, in chapter 8, verse 11, we're told that the power available to us in the Spirit is the same power that raised Jesus from the dead.
That is the kind of power you need. You will not overcome these things unless you have the power that raised Jesus from the dead. But the joy is that power is available to each and every one of us.
[20:14] Thirdly, ditch the excuses. I think these are the words actually that come from Groschel. Before you begin your journey towards change, brace yourself.

The excuse monster is waiting in the shadows. And if you've ever had to tackle anything like this, you will know how easily that comes because it is so tough.
So what you start to do is you start to justify or play down how important this area of your life is. It doesn't really matter. It's not such a big deal. Or we justify it.
Sin, I think the devil, because the devil is the master of lies, is the one who whispers to try and talk you out of the change. And I think you have to capture those lies and confront them and say, no, that's not true.
It does matter. And then finally, cut the ties. That's what Groschel talks about. Paul once wrote, do not be misled. Bad company cuts good ties.
[21:21] Are you putting yourself in places and situations and company that feed the wrong desires and lead you into the things that you're doing, that you know a lot of God? If you are, take drastic action.

Jesus said, if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out. And we go, oh, he didn't really mean that. No, what he meant was take drastic action. So one guy who after a sermon like this came and saw me to talk about the problem he had with pornography, he did two things as a result.
The first thing was he loaded on his computer software that meant a list of all the sites he looked at were emailed to a friend of his every single week. And secondly, he moved his computer into the living room so it was always in a public place where the rest of the family were.
That was his equipment of plucking out his eye. He made drastic change to try and cut the ties. So as I finish, I want to be honest and tell you, my hope this week is that Clive is going to become very busy indeed.
Because my hope is that he will receive some emails asking for people to come and see him and say, Clive, I've got a problem with whatever it is.
[22:35] And I know I can't go on like this. And I need to admit it. And I need someone to pray with me and then help me to do the practical things that you're going to need to start to break the chain and start to break the cycle.

And if you're serious about dealing with whatever that issue is, if that is you, I want to leave you with the words of Groschel that come right at the end of his chapter. You can't change in your own power.
If you feel overwhelmed by something bigger than you, let the one who is bigger than all things be the power you need in weakness. from the other that happens.
The way to the other is in your own power

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