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moderator of the 27th General Assembly of the
Evangelical Presbyterian Church

“Jerry Bridges has marvelously, attractively, and clearly communicated in this informative and inspirational treatise that God’s saving grace in Christ invites us to come just as we are. This book should be not only read and absorbed personally but also used to share with others as an excellent instrument of life-changing disciple-making.”

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“If you cut Jerry Bridges, he bleeds Bible. In a day when there is so much confusion about grace, Jerry shows how a true understanding of grace is the only sure foundation for spiritual transformation. This book is essential reading for those who want to know how to pursue holiness and live by grace without resorting to legalistic self-effort. As a pastor, this is the book I want my people to read in order to get a biblical view of how to grow in holiness and joy.”

— Reverend Mark Bates, senior pastor, Village Seven Presbyterian Church,
Colorado Springs, Colorado

The
TRANSFORMING
POWER
of the
GOSPEL

For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin,
so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

2 CORINTHIANS 5:21

JERRY BRIDGES

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Dedicated to the memory of

William Jackson Bridges

1926–2005

Faithful Servant of Jesus Christ

and a

True Older Brother

“He served his own generation by the will of God.”

ACTS 13:36

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Preface

Spiritual transformation is the process through which we grow more and more into the likeness of Christ. Since 1951, when I first came in contact with The Navigators ministry, I have sought to understand and live out the principles of that process. I have by no means “arrived,” either in understanding or application, but I have learned a lot and hopefully have grown some over these sixty years.

Early in the 1970s, God opened opportunities to teach informally what I was learning, first with The Navigators and later to a wider audience in the United States. Then I was invited to teach at several seminaries and Christian colleges. These opportunities required a more disciplined approach to what I was teaching, and I eventually developed a curriculum of twenty to twenty-five lectures, depending on the requirements of the school. In order to reach a wider audience, I condensed that material into ten lectures to be given during a two-day seminar. This book is essentially that seminar in written form.

I do not submit this book as a comprehensive work on spiritual transformation. For one thing, it does not include all that I have written in other books such as *The Pursuit of Holiness* or *Transforming Grace*. And there are other contemporary writers who have approached this subject from different angles and have much to say to us.

Why then this book? The answer is to teach what I have learned more deeply in the last twenty-five years about the

importance of the gospel in our transformation and the vital necessity of the work of the Holy Spirit in the process.

I gladly acknowledge that I stand on the shoulders (though somewhat precariously) of some of the great giants of the faith of previous centuries. That is why you will find numerous quotations from them. I hope their words, in addition to the many Scriptures cited, will give you confidence that what I have written is not new and novel but is essentially the teaching of Scripture and is consistent with the teachings of these respected men of the last four centuries.

I want to acknowledge with gratitude the help of several people. First is my wife, Jane, who patiently endured many occasions of frustration as I struggled to put into concise words the thoughts in my head. Then Don Simpson, a personal friend and senior editor at NavPress, who has worked with me chapter by chapter as the book was being written with both helpful suggestions and the encouragement I so often needed.

Connie Trautman, my part-time administrative assistant, typed and retyped my handwritten copy into digital format on the computer. Bob Bevington, Chris Thifault, and the Reverend Bill Vogler read the initial draft of the manuscript and offered helpful suggestions. Bob also wrote the discussion questions at the end of each chapter. Finally, but by no means least in importance, a number of friends prayed for me during the months of the writing process.

Most of all, I thank God the Father who, by His grace and through the Lord Jesus Christ and with the help of the Holy Spirit, gave me the privilege of writing this book. To the triune God be all the glory for any usefulness this book may have among God's people.

Too Soon Old, Too Late Smart

Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

PHILIPPIANS 3:12-14

God has predestined all believers to be conformed to the image of His Son (see Romans 8:29). The process toward that goal is called by various names such as sanctification, growth in grace, or transformation (see 1 Thessalonians 5:23-24; 2 Peter 3:18; 2 Corinthians 3:18). This process of transformation into the image of Christ begins at our new birth (see John 3:3-5) and continues until we die and enter into the presence of the Lord. At that time, according to Hebrews 12:23, our spirits will be made perfect. The transformation process will be completed.

Not only has God predestined us to be transformed into the image of His Son, He has commanded us to be transformed. Through the apostle Paul, God said, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind”

(Romans 12:2). In a similar way, the apostle Peter wrote, “As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, since it is written, ‘You shall be holy, for I am holy’” (1 Peter 1:14-16).

To be transformed into the image of God’s Son and to be holy as God is holy are essentially synonymous expressions. But what I want us to see through these similar expressions is that what God has predestined for us, He commands us to pursue. There is no conflict between God’s sovereign will, which He will certainly accomplish, and His moral will for us, which we are to pursue.

This transformation into the image of Jesus is much more than a change of outward conduct; it is rather a deep penetrating work of the Holy Spirit in the very core of our being, what the Bible calls the heart — the center of our intellect, affections, and will. It is what is sometimes called “a change from the inside out.”

But though the transformation process is primarily the work of the Holy Spirit, it very much involves our earnest, active pursuit of that holiness without which no one will see the Lord (see Hebrews 12:14). So what is it that will engage our affections or desires to earnestly pursue transformation into the likeness of Jesus? What is it that will inspire us to *want* to do what we *ought* to do? This is a major question that we’ll seek to answer in chapter 6. Its answer is one of the key lessons I have learned in my own journey toward spiritual transformation.

MY JOURNEY

My journey began at age eighteen when I asked Jesus to be my Savior. Having grown up in church, and even considering myself to be a Christian, I was essentially a good kid and never strayed beyond the moral boundaries of my church. I had no major sins

that I needed to put away, so the transformation process in my life was at first slow and almost imperceptible. In fact, looking back after sixty years, I now realize I did not know I needed to be transformed. After all, I was living a decent moral life and was not committing the more obvious sins of many of my fellow students at college.

An event one night in January 1952 changed that dramatically. That night, due to a statement I heard at Bible study, I realized that the Bible was meant to be applied in a practical way to my daily life. As a result, on the way back to my ship (I was a young officer in the U.S. Navy at the time), I prayed a simple prayer: “God, starting tonight, would You use the Bible to guide my conduct?” That was the day my own spiritual transformation really got under way.

There is an old proverb that says, “Too soon old, too late smart.” That proverb describes my transformation journey. I think I’ve made most of the theological mistakes in the realm of spiritual transformation, due to my own ignorance and the lack of solid Bible teaching in those early days. (I was at sea most of the time and, to my knowledge, the only Christian aboard my ship.)

The first mistake I made was assuming I could live the Christian life by my own moral willpower. “Just read what the Bible says and do it.” I was used to obeying orders from my superior officers, and I approached the moral commands of the Bible the same way. I knew nothing of the internal fighting between the flesh and the Spirit. I did not realize the necessity of relying on the Holy Spirit to enable me to apply the Scriptures to my life. After several years of this self-effort approach, I grew discouraged over the prospects of seeing significant change in my life. While still not involved in any of the so-called “major” sins, I was seeing the subtle, often hidden sins of the heart. I seemed to be getting worse, not better. This set me up for the next mistake, the embracing of a passive approach to spiritual transformation.

Known by various descriptive phrases such as “higher life” and “deeper life” and by slogans such as “Let go and let God” and “Just trust Jesus to live His life through you,” this totally passive approach taught that just as you can do nothing for your salvation but trust in Jesus, so you can do nothing for your transformation but trust in Jesus. Obviously after the discouragement of the “Do it yourself” approach, this seemed to be good news, almost a second chapter to the gospel of salvation. Instead it turned out to be even more discouraging because over time it was quite obvious to me that Jesus was not living His life through me. Instead I found myself battling the same old sins of the heart that I had struggled with before.

God in His mercy rescued me from this passive approach and enabled me to see what I now believe to be the biblical approach, and of course that is what this book is all about. But in the course of those years of struggle, I learned three valuable lessons:

1. The internal warfare between the flesh and the Spirit that Paul described in Galatians 5:17 is the normal Christian life. Regardless of how much we grow spiritually, we will all our lives experience the conflict between the desires of the flesh and the desires of the Spirit.
2. The more we grow in Christlikeness, the more sin we will see in our lives. It isn't that we are sinning more; rather we are growing more aware of and more sensitive to sin that has been there all along. The Holy Spirit does not reveal all our sins of the heart to us at once. Instead He brings us along gradually as He works to transform us into the image of Christ.
3. Spiritual transformation requires of us what I call dependent responsibility. All the moral commands and exhortations of Scripture assume our responsibility. We cannot “just let Jesus live His life through me.” No, we

are responsible. At the same time, we are dependent on the Holy Spirit to both do His own work and enable us through His power to do the work we must do.

In 1978, my first book, *The Pursuit of Holiness*, was published. The three valuable lessons I just described were incorporated into that book, and God has graciously blessed its ministry far beyond anything I could have imagined. But I still had more to learn.

If it is true that the more we grow, the more sin we see in our lives, what will keep us from becoming discouraged? The answer is the realization that both our eternal salvation and our day-to-day standing with God are based not on our own performance but upon the sinless life and sin-bearing death of Jesus. (This will be developed more fully in chapter 5 of this book.)

As I began to pursue this truth, I saw to a greater extent how the gospel (that is, the message of what Christ has done for us and continues to do) provides both the foundation and motivation for our role in spiritual transformation, what I call our “pursuit of holiness.” As I studied the Scriptures regarding the role of the gospel in our transformation, God also graciously brought to my attention, through various means, the writings of some of the great teachers of earlier centuries, dating back to the days of the Reformation. I saw how consistently these men taught that the gospel is the foundation for our transformation. This, then, has become a major theme in my ministry.

Before I understood the gospel’s important role in our transformation, I thought it was only for unbelievers. Once we became believers, we didn’t need it anymore except to share with those who still were unbelievers. I thought all we needed as Christians were the challenges and “how to” of discipleship. After all, Jesus said to go and make disciples of all nations (see Matthew 28:19).

We do need challenge and instruction in discipleship, but we also need the gospel every day in our lives because we still sin every day of our lives. And, as I have already said, the more we grow, the

more we see our sin. But because we are performance oriented by nature and our culture enforces that orientation, we want to somehow relate to God every day on the basis of our perceived performance. If we've been good, as we would define goodness, we feel reasonably secure in our relationship with God. If, on the other hand, we've had a "bad day" spiritually, we tend to feel insecure. In fact, that insecurity may cause us to live in denial of how bad our bad days really are.

But we cannot grow spiritually if we do not see our need to grow. And if our insecurity about our day-to-day relationship with God causes us to live in denial about our sin, we will not grow. This is one reason we still need the gospel every day. It helps us move from a performance relationship with God to one based on the sinless life and sin-bearing death of Jesus Christ. It daily reminds us that from God's point of view, our relationship with Him is not based on how good or bad we've been but upon the perfect goodness and death of our Lord Jesus Christ. Thus, the gospel frees us up to honestly face our sin, knowing that because of Christ's death, God no longer counts that sin against us (see Romans 4:7-8).

The aim of this book is to serve God's goal that we become more conformed to the image of His Son. The structure of the book basically is two parts. In the second part, we will look at the work of the Holy Spirit in our transformation and how we are to relate to Him in our "dependent responsibility." In the first part, we will look more closely at the role of the gospel. However, because the gospel is only for sinners, yes even for us who are still practicing sinners, we will consider the seriousness of even our more subtle or "refined" sins. But the seriousness of our sin can be seen only in the light of the infinite holiness of God. So we will begin our studies in spiritual transformation with a look at God's holiness and the implications of that holiness for us.

FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

1. Spiritual transformation requires dependent responsibility. How does this differ from living by the concept of “Let go and let God”?
2. If we live in denial about our sin, we will not grow. How does the gospel free us up to honestly face our sin?
3. Why do believers in Christ still need the gospel every day?