

# From Compulsion to Change to Freedom to Grow

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] All right, let's go ahead and find our seats again. Thanks everybody for being here. My name is Anthony and I get to serve as one of the pastors here at the table. Again, if you're new, you know, even if you're not new, we're glad you're here. We're glad all of you are here. Thanks to everybody watching online. It's good to be here. We're in kind of the middle of a series talking about shifts in our faith and our theology. I was talking to somebody just a few minutes ago about how when they think of shift, they think about, you know, a clutch and a stick shift, a manual transmission. And, you know, I thought it was an appropriate analogy. The one time I was, somebody tried to teach me how to drive a stick shift. I was in a driveway and I hit their garage.

And I thought like, what an appropriate metaphor for like shifting your theology and how you just like run into stuff. God bless us, everyone. So we, tonight I want to talk about, just going to give you the main idea up top, a shift in my own life from the compulsion to change to the freedom to grow.

Compulsion to change to freedom to grow. And I've been doing ministry for, I don't know, 13, 14 years. And I've been obsessed with sort of the formational aspects of worship, worship and discipleship.

And there are things that I will say, things like, you know, grace in itself is transformative. This idea that just creating an environment where people are free to be themselves will, in fact, lead towards Christ-likeness or the fruit of the Spirit. And then there are things that I've actually watched myself implement that are counter to that. Where you try to set up these systems and spreadsheets and spreadsheets and pathways. Where you're trying to get somebody from one end of like the baby Christian spectrum to a more mature end. And the idea behind it is like, well, so we're more acceptable to God. And the only reason that I know that I have put it in those terms is that's often how I can perceive myself. So I'm going to start a little personal, a little raw. And then we'll move into some scripture and then a little bit of some modern psychology. And then into some application.

So over the past couple of years, I've been grappling with the fact that deep, deep down, I feel, and I wouldn't just say feel, I know that I am unlovable. And specifically, I'm dealing with the fact that my early childhood was really, really traumatic. It's what researchers, psychologists would call complex developmental trauma. Which I'm somebody who's like, ooh, goody, I have a label.

[ 2 : 57 ] Hooray. What it means is that early on in my life, I learned that the people who were meant to be a source of comfort and safety for me were instead a source of fear. And when that happens, some really, you know, wild things happen in a child's brain about what they think the world is supposed to be like, what it actually turns out to be like. And I find myself even in this moment, I'm using, you know, children, other kids. No, this was my story. And the reason I find it really hard to talk about myself personally this way is that, you know, from an early age, in my teenage years, I had a testimony. I had a story and it was dramatic and it was well packaged and I learned how to communicate it well and I could elicit cries and laughs from a crowd. And so my story very, very quickly didn't become my story. It became a presentation. And I became divorced from my own history as talking about myself as if I was, it was somebody else. But the reality is, and this is what I've been kind of doing the work on, is that it is my story and it is something that happened to me. And when you have this belief, when I had this belief that the people who are supposed to be the sources of comfort and safety became instead the sources of fear, then what it caused in me was to believe that I am inherently flawed and broken and unlovable. That meant as a teen and as an adult, while on the outside, I was pretty well perfectly behaved and attempting to achieve my best at all times, on the inside, I trusted no one.

At any point, those who were supposed to care for me could turn on me. And it wasn't theoretical, it had happened. I had few to no friends throughout most of my middle school years because getting close to someone could mean risking pain or neglect or abuse. In college, I would randomly vanish from social settings and I earned myself the nickname The Wanderer because I would get overwhelmed by friendships that were veering too close to discovering how broken I was. And all of this had profound effects on my spiritual life, which is what we want to talk about tonight. I knew, I thought I knew that I was unlovable and therefore I knew that God knew that I was unlovable too. Whatever shame I had, God agreed with me. So I had to do everything I could to prove to God that they should like and love me. I want to pause just for a second here. So, you know, we sang a song earlier tonight that said, God really loves us. And we copyright law be damned, kind of change some of the pronouns around God's gender because we're trying to wake up to the fact that God is not male. God contains and exceeds all genders. And we're trying to put that in some of our music as well.

And there's this, you know, some folks here in this room or everywhere have trouble calling God father because perhaps they had a bad father experience or no father at all. I kind of feel damned either way because I had no father in the early part of my life and my mother was the source of abuse. And so like all pronouns for God just sort of fail because they bring up the wrong thing for me.

So, you know, sometimes we refer to God as they, not because we're like polytheists, but because like God, you know, is beyond gender. Anyway, we're trying, all right? We're trying. Now, I knew I was unlovable.

I knew that God knew that I was unlovable. I had shame that I knew was right, that I deserved. God agreed with me. We would sing the songs in church, right? Amazing Grace has saved a wretch like me. So I had to do everything I could to prove to God that they should like and love me. And now I'm paid to be a professional Christian. Look at me now, God. A primary force sort of pushing me along in life has been this deep sense of a compulsion to change, to transform myself from the inside out, as one song says, to be better. And for years, I was convinced, I knew, I could argue, systematic theology, biblical theology, you name it, I could prove that that force pushing me along was God. It was what I was trained to believe. Any voice of conviction, any feeling of guilt or shame, that had to be God, right? As psychologist and researcher,

[ 7 : 58 ] Dr. Hillary McBride says, spiritual trauma is someone handing you an inner critic and telling you it's the voice of God. But what I'm waking up to ever so, ever so slowly, is that shame and condemnation and that compulsion to change is not God. It's a symptom of my childhood that I can heal from, but it is not God. What God offers instead is freedom. Not compulsion to change, but freedom to grow and to heal and freedom to not. As one researcher puts it, there are lots of reasons to heal and grow and even change, but none of them have to do with connecting with God. Now, not everyone here has had the same childhood as me. Some were probably far worse and some were probably far better, but I suspect that many of us, perhaps most of us, were handed lessons and scripts from our childhood and our adolescence to various forms of anxiety and stress or shutdown behaviors when it came to how we handle people and how we handle our relationship with God. And so what I want to do today is I want to look at a saying of Jesus, connect that to some psychology, and then offer a path forward. So tonight I have the words on the screen. This is from the Gospel of Matthew chapter 11. You can feel free to follow along on the screen or in your Bibles. This is from Matthew chapter 11, verse 28 through 30. This is what Jesus says.

Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.

For my yoke is easy and my burden is light. I want to read that again. I want us to pay attention to the words that sort of sparkle or jump out at you and try to hear this passage afresh if it's one that's maybe familiar to you. I'm going to slow down my reading. If you're comfortable, you can close your eyes or find a fixed point to look at. And again, just hear these words of Jesus.

Jesus, come to me. All you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.

Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle. And humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.

[ 11 : 17 ] For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light. Spirit of God, would you break every chain of every lie that we have believed about ourselves and you.

Amen. Amen. What I want to say to myself and to you tonight is that Jesus offers this to you without condition.

There is no state that you must get to first to have this sort of relationship with Jesus, with God.

And this can be frustratingly difficult to believe. Perhaps you've heard it said, sin separates you from God.

And I can think of no piece of theology that has been more destructive to people's souls.

[ 12 : 26 ] But this saying of Jesus, come to me, and I will give you rest, is a promise that we all can have if we would but believe it.

But we've been told so many ways to not believe it. Now, specifically, there's not only the sort of theologies that may have been handed on to us to say not to believe it.

But there's also the things that happen in our lives, in our relationships, particularly those crucial early relationships from birth, that may make it harder for us to believe these things.

And so I want to introduce or reintroduce for some of us something called attachment science or attachment theory. Now, I want to do just a little bit of, oh, I don't know, preamble for myself here.

I don't want to oversell or undersell my sort of state of expertness on this, okay? I don't want to oversell. I am not a licensed clinician. This sermon is not a replacement for therapy.

[ 13 : 34 ] And, yeah, this is, I don't have, like, graduate-level sort of information on this. So take that for what it's worth.

On the other hand, I don't want to undersell what I am going to talk about tonight either. I didn't just get this from a couple repeat TikToks. I have studied this in depth.

I have received a course on advanced trauma-competent care. I have studied attachment science. So I think it's, you know, worth more than just a quick Google search, all right? Okay.

All right. So attachment science is the study and research on the effects of connection and relationships on our brains and how we interact with the world. And each of us has a way that we are attached to our early parents or caretakers that is set pretty early on from the prenatal stage.

So while we're still in the womb into early childhood. And there are going to be both disruptive and healing events that happen thereafter. Most of us have had some sort of negative experience with our parents or caretakers or those that we expect to offer a safety and a help.

[ 14 : 47 ] But whatever our attachment style is, it's not fixed. We can be healed through relationship and through positive experiences as well. So I'm going to offer some categories of different forms of attachment styles.

And as one researcher says, categories are great for research. They're not great for people, all right? So you may relate to zero to all of these categories that I'm about to present to you.

That's fine. You're a person, not a textbook. Okay? There are basically four main words that you're going to come across when it comes to attachment styles.

There's actually far, far, far more, but we're simplifying for the sake of time. But it begins with secure. A secure attachment style is one where the child is receiving care and comfort and safety from their parent or caretaker on a fairly consistent and predictable basis.

And consistent and predictable, according to the research, only needs to be 30% to 50% of the time. Okay? So the parent or caretaker could get it wrong half the time.

[ 16 : 00 ] But that can still lead to a secure sense of attachment from the child to the parent or caretaker. Meaning that when they get a boo-boo, are hungry, have somebody hurt their feelings, they can turn towards their caretaker and re-expect to be cared for and receive unconditional love from that person.

So that's secure attachment style. Now, there are three kinds of insecure attachment styles. Okay? So there's secure and insecure.

Let me try to gesture with the screen here. Secure and insecure. And within insecure, there are three types. Type number one is anxious. In an anxious attachment style, the kid is looking for comfort or care or concern from their parent or caretaker.

But it's inconsistent. The parent will maybe pay the child some attention, offer some love, but maybe just as often not.

And so over time, this child is learning to be a little anxious or uncertain about the quality of relationship. When I turn to you, do I know that I can expect comfort or care or concern from you, regardless of conditions?

[ 17 : 21 ] And so that sets an anxious attachment style where the child doesn't really know if they're really connected. And so it creates an either need to prove themselves. They can be clingy or needy, though every needy person, behind every needy person, is an unmet need.

It can create somebody who's very performance-driven, who's always looking to impress because they're anxious that if they don't, then they will not receive that unconditional love from the people who ought to love them.

So that's anxious. Number two is ambivalent or avoidant. An avoidant attachment style. What happens with an avoidant attachment style for the child is that they turn to their parent or caretaker when they scratch their knee, when somebody hurts their feelings, and the caretaker's response is, your emotions are too big for me.

Please shut them down. One of the most profound memories that I have from my childhood is being six years old, standing at the graveside of my grandmother, crying, and my biological mom yelling at me, do not cry, you're embarrassing me.

At a funeral, of all places. So if you receive that sort of message over and over again, the ambivalent or avoidant attachment style, the person learns to push down their emotions, to not even feel their emotions, to hide their emotions.

[ 18 : 49 ] They learn that their pain is a problem for other people. Their big feelings, as we tell our kids, their big feelings, well, they're too much to handle. And so often these folks can prioritize logic and reason.

Reason can fix any problem. It can get us out of any bind because feelings won't help. Or the third kind is a different kind of style to itself, and that is disorganized.

Secure, anxious, and avoidant are at least organized and somewhat predictable in their patterns. But disorganized kind of doesn't fit any of the categories. And this is what happens when a child turns to their caretaker or their parent, and instead of receiving love, care, concern, instead of being told your feelings are too much, instead they are wounded or neglected or abused.

As Taylor Swift would say, hi, it's me. That was my story, and that is what I am waking up to in my adulthood, that my source of connection and comfort in my early childhood was deeply broken, and I wasn't just uncertain.

I wasn't just told to not cry at a funeral. I was wounded for those actions. And so it creates a deep sense of shame and brokenness.

[ 20 : 16 ] And so the person with a disorganized attachment style will try basically anything they can to try to attach to somebody in ways that may not make sense to the outside perspective, because their attempts to attach may look like violence.

It may look like disconnection. But deep inside, it's a, I don't deserve to be connected. I will try whatever it takes. Now, I know that we tend to love, like, assessments and stuff like that.

And I was really, really hesitant to, like, tell you to go online, to go to such and such assessments. But I also know that you all have, like, Google in your pockets. So I was at least going to point you towards a decent assessment if you want to do this yourself and discover your attachment style.

And that is [theattachmentproject.com](https://theattachmentproject.com). Attachmentproject.com will give you a decent assessment. But again, it is no replacement for a licensed counselor or therapist, you know, actually walking this through with you.

I also highly recommend the book Attached to God by Crispin Mayfield, who is a licensed counselor and psychologist and uses attachment theory to connect it to our relationship with God, which is also what we're doing tonight.

[ 21 : 38 ] Now, all of us have something in common with these four attachment styles. Many of us grew up with a secure attachment style. We could predictably turn towards our parents or our caretakers.

We could get the love and care and concern that we needed without condition, without any sort of, like, you need to change first before I will love you. That's great.

But there are also other people in our life who don't do that. And so it can create small insecurities within us, even though basically we have a secure attachment style.

And then those other three categories, like I said, we're people, not textbooks. And so we may relate to any or all of those, given the person or the circumstance. And so what I want to do is I want to spend a little bit more time in Matthew 11, exploring what it may look like for each attachment style, each of the insecure attachment styles, to hear a verse like that from Jesus.

So Jesus says, take my yoke upon you. And even though the passage says to me, lay down your burdens, I'm going to give you rest. I'm gentle and humble.

[ 22 : 45 ] An anxious attachment style hears take my yoke upon you and thinks, oh, thank goodness. There's still a yoke. There's still things I can do. An anxiously attached Christian can be deeply pious.

They can be passionate worshipers. They can write worship music, which sounds really sort of like Jesus is my boyfriend, loving sort of music. God, I just need to know you're there. I need to know that you're listening.

Here I am. Here I am. I'm here. Look at me, God. Sort of the anxious attachment style for a Christian who is so happy to know that there's a list of things that I can do to make sure that God is paying attention to me so that I can know that God loves me.

Because so much of our theology made God's love and affection conditional. You know, we were offered the example of like a Mr. Rogers. I like you just the way you are.

But then we were handed, often many of us, handed a God who says, I love you, but until you change, I cannot like you yet. Or I love you, but I only love you because when I see you, I see Jesus.

[ 23 : 52 ] I don't have to see the ugliness of your sin. So it creates this anxiety. Does God actually like me? Does God actually love me? So an anxious attachment style will hear a verse like this and say, there is a yoke.

Thank goodness. Tell me what it is. Tell me what I need to do. The avoidant or the ambivalent attachment style hears this passage from Jesus and they'll hear a verse like, all who are heavy laden and burdened down and they'll think to themselves, ah, not me then.

I've never had a bad emotion in my life. Good thing. I've never been heavy laden or burdened down because that's not possible because those emotions are for the weaklings. Bad emotions don't get me anywhere.

I will instead just logic myself into belief in God because reason can save the world and mysticism is for people whose brains are underdeveloped.

This is maybe something you've heard before. The avoidant, ambivalent attachment style is really suspicious of all those emotional folks who are having a really passionate worship time or having visions or dreams of God and they don't want to get too close because either they know that they have bad emotions deep down and they'd really rather not talk about them thank you very much or they're not even aware of what's really going on underneath the surface and so there's nothing to talk about in the first place.

[ 25 : 23 ] Let's move on. A disorganized attachment style will hear a verse like for I am gentle and humble in heart and they'll think, oh, thank God, a deity I can finally trust.

Except no, God is actually a tyrant. I want no part of that. I am dirty and broken. Oh, but God can fix me few. I need to prove to God how unfixable I am. God saved a wretch like me but I'm still a wretch so God save me and you can hear the disorganization and the sort of franticness within that response that they hear about a God who might love them but they can't trust it and so they will bounce between a sort of an anxious response where they will do everything they possibly can to an avoidant response where they will just give up completely.

But the thing I want to say to each of us and especially to myself is that sin is not separation from God and the God who comes down to the world and says things like come to me and I will give you rest offers those promises without condition.

There is no compulsion to change. There is no need for you to get yourself cleaned up first in order to show up in God's presence. The anxiety that we may not know how God will respond is answered by a God who says I am with you always even to the end of the age.

Our avoidance our ambivalence our inability to deal with the deep things the hard things inside is responded to by a God who shows up at the tomb of a friend and weeps or at the deathbed of a little girl and groans deeply within himself.

[ 27 : 27 ] the disorganized attachment style who just can't know if God is trustworthy and is just so certain inside that they are broken and shameful and dirty is responded to by a God who kneels down takes you by the hand and says neither do I condemn you.

This is the sort of God revealed in Christ and any theology that tells you that you need to shape up or change or hide some part of yourself first to be known by this God has lied to you.

Have any of you ever felt like God cared more about expanding the kingdom than caring for your heart? Have you ever felt like God cared more about you exhausting yourself for God's sake than your well-being and your rest?

I want to offer you a gospel that says no. Come to me Jesus says and I will give you rest.

Now some of you you're still sort of fixated on that line take my yoke upon you my yoke is easy there's a condition Anthony I know there is I know there is what's the string?

[ 29 : 06 ] So in the first century the rabbis would speak often of the Torah as a yoke and the Hebrew Bible a yoke was often spoken of in a negative sense a yoke of slavery a yoke of oppression by the time of Jesus the early Jewish rabbis sort of changed their language around the yoke that it was one that we are meant to take on joyfully that it was a yoke that would help us be even more fruitful and productive in the economy of God and so Jesus is using the language of the teachers of his day and he turns it on its head and if we were to keep reading if we were to ignore the chapter break as we so often should in scripture and go on to Matthew 12 we would see this story of Jesus on the Sabbath on the day of rest feeding his disciples by taking a leisurely walk through a field and picking some heads of grain and then healing someone who desired to be healed and then being yelled at and condemned for those actions of leisure and eating and healing and so we're shown an image of

I will give you rest take my yoke upon you and the sort of yoke of bondage and burden that his friends and neighbors were living under that you could not feed yourself that you should not be healed and so the contrast is what we need to pay attention to not the what's the condition what's the yoke tell me where the the list and the terms and conditions that I will check the box no no no it's rather yes you've heard of the yoke let me tell you about mine it's rest that's the yoke the yoke is rest which is to say lay down there is no yoke it's done the apostle Paul put it like this in Galatians chapter 5 it is it is for freedom that Christ has set us free therefore do not be enslaved again to the yoke of bondage and slavery it is for freedom that Christ has set us free therefore do not be put under bondage again it is for what that Christ has set us free that's the gospel friends that's the good news that is the thing that will get us out of these lies that we have been told that you must hide yourself that you must accomplish and do or that you are deep down broken that God wants nothing to do with you it is for freedom that Christ has set past tense it's done it's over has set you free now there's this anxiety within myself and probably within you of like but but but don't we don't we have to don't we have to grow don't we have to change don't we have to and this is the last thing

I'll say tonight hearing that you are loved even liked just the way that you are is the only condition in which you can grow with health healthily is with secure attachment the belief that you can crawl into the lap of God put your head against his or her bosom and rest knowing that there's nothing that you can do to be kicked out of that lap the only environment which you can change and grow for health's sake is one in which you know that your acceptance is unconditional and everything else is hogwash everything else is a lie everything else will lead to toxic growth that cannot be sustained and so set that all aside and begin with

I know that I am loved and liked by God so I want to end with some reflection questions Anna in Spotify there's a playlist called instrumental we're just going to play some music on and I want you to get out your phones if you have like a note taking app or if you got some paper and pen even better and just ask a couple questions before we move into communion let's give you some time to reflect question number one is what do you hope is true of God what do you hope is true of God so many of us have been told lies or misconceptions about God's character and quality and so our prayer lives get messed up our worship lives get messed up our religious lives get messed up because we're approaching a God that deep down we know either doesn't like us or love us or is we don't like either and so I want you to think instead what do you hope is true of

God that in the end when all fades away and all that is left is reality what do you hope is true of God and secondly what do you want to say to the part of you that doubts that God loves you just the way you are because I believe that probably in most of us there is some voice that's saying that the guy on the stage is just you know telling us what we want to believe but it isn't actually true and so just with some gentleness I want you to talk back to that voice talk back to that voice of doubt and uncertainty talk back to the voice that tells you that you're not good enough talk back to the voice that says you need to hide some part of yourself talk back to that voice and just very gently tell them what is true that God does love you just the way you are that God Christ has called you to rest that it is for freedom that you have been set free so if you can play that music we'll spend a few minutes just reflecting on that and then we'll move into communion

[ 35 : 45 ] God Father Son and Spirit Mother of us all would you help us break agreement with the lies we have been told about ourselves and of you would you help us to trust a more beautiful gospel where love truly is unconditional without exception without limits where transformation is not done at risk of loss of community or friendship but rather where we grow and where we heal because of the power of acceptance and God even in the days and the weeks and the years where we feel stuck and maybe a little unput together and undone may we still know that you are a good heavenly parent who will not turn us away who will not offer us a sharp word or a stone or a snake when we ask for care we believe



God help our unbelief amen or believe of people how to love not a e who are going to love  
let us