

The Challenge of Change
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GFC 4-19-2020

Can people really change?

Are we “hardwired” by our genetics to act or think a certain way?

Can we overcome the lessons we learned in our childhood?

Can we be healed of the wounds that affect our behavior?

Those are some big questions, but I believe that people really can change. If I didn't believe that – I need to change jobs because the gospel of Jesus Christ is all about change! It's all about life transformation.

We are in a 5-week sermon series called The Easter Challenge. Last week we looked at the evidence for the resurrection and how that challenges us to face the facts about who Jesus really is.

Today I'm speaking on The Challenge to Change. We'll talk in the coming weeks about some of the things God uses to change us – like His Word, His Spirit, His people, prayer, praise and worship, and here's a big one – circumstances!

But the first part of change is seeing the need for change. And then the second part is being willing to change!

Many people want changes to happen, they just don't want to change anything they're doing. But the way you think, believe and act must change if you want to see changes in your life.

I once heard leadership expert John Maxwell make this statement: People change when they learn enough that they want to change, or when they receive enough that they are able to change, or when they hurt enough that they have to change.

Now you can choose which motivation you respond to. You can change by revelation - you can change by impartation. Or you can change by devastation. You get to choose.

You can see this every time a hurricane hits the coast. Everyone is told by authorities to evacuate before the hurricane, but some choose to stay. Some die and some survive the storm, but afterwards there is no water, no food, no electricity, no phone. Now they are anxious to leave. The revelation that the storm was coming did not move them. The impartation of the government's help to leave did not move them. What caused change? Total devastation got their attention and now they're ready to move.

Too many Christians are like that: always choosing to learn the hard way. They refuse to change until they hurt so bad they have to.

They wait until their life is falling apart – their family is falling apart – their health is falling apart – their finances are falling apart. They wait until they hit bottom – until there's no other option – until there's no way out except through change. Unfortunately – many wait too long and the change comes too late to save the marriage or the family or the job. I would rather learn enough to want to change and receive enough that I'm able to change without having to hit bottom first.

What I want to propose to you today is this: with God's help, you can change now. I challenge you to choose change before the point of devastation.

God uses circumstances to get our attention and reveal what needs to change in us. We need to see God's hand in our circumstances and respond accordingly. Think about this – especially if you don't think people can change – look at all the changes that everyone in the world is having to make because of the coronavirus! We've all had to change the way we interact with people, the way we shop, the way we work, the way we attend church. Circumstances forced all that change!

So, people can change! And following Jesus is all about change! In the Bible we see people who encountered God and were totally changed by Him.

Moses – killed an Egyptian

Abraham – had a child with Hagar – a woman who was not his wife

David – committed adultery with Bathsheba and had her husband killed

Yet how are these men known?

Moses is called the friend of God

Abraham is called the father of faith

David is called a man after God's own heart.

This shows us that God radically changes people. It also shows us that failure is not final. Each of these men failed miserably. Yet each of them went on to become powerful men of God whom God restored and used in an even greater way after their failures.

The apostle Peter shows us how to use failure as a catalyst for change. I studied Peter's life and found 11 major failings! Included in those failings is rebuking Jesus to His face. Of course, Peter's most famous failure happened just before Jesus's crucifixion. It's the big one where he gets intimidated by a school-aged servant girl and denies he has ever met Jesus.

But Jesus wasn't surprised by Peter's failure - in fact He predicted it! And He's not surprised when you and I fail. If great people in the Bible could fail, why should we be surprised when we fail? Failure is a part of living and we should be prepared for it.

I'm not excusing failure today. I'm saying we must fail forward. We must learn from our failures and become whom God called us to be.

The great thing about Peter is that he failed frequently – yet he failed forward not backward. That's one of the greatest lessons we learn as we follow Christ.

Failure is one of the biggest catalysts for change. We all fail – we all make mistakes – but we can learn from them and grow from them. But if you keep failing over and over without any learning or growing – you are totally wasting the opportunity for change that failure brings.

In your journey with Jesus, you will encounter disappointments. You will slip. You'll even fail. Peter teaches us that as long as we keep getting up and keep walking with Jesus, failure is never final.

It's OK to catch your breath or grab your bearings after a failure. But if you want to keep going with Jesus, you've always got to get back in the game. Proverbs 24:16 says: *Though a righteous man falls seven times, he rises again.*

Falling down does not make you a failure – staying down does!

After his big failure when he denied Christ, Peter was in a strange, awkward place. He had been called to follow Jesus and he had failed miserably. And we see what Peter does in John 21:3, when he said, *"I'm going out to fish."*

Maybe he was just clearing his head. But if Peter is anything like us, I can imagine the inner dialogue he had:

"I was never very good at being a disciple anyway."

"I was fishing when He first found me. I *told* him, 'Go away from me; I'm a sinful man.' He was warned, and He still kept calling me to Him."

"I'm going to stick with what I know and what I'm good at."

"There are ten other guys who can be His fishers of men. I'll just be a fisher of fish."

Listen closely: on your journey with Jesus, when you fail or when it gets really hard, you're going to be tempted to go back to the way it was. There will be something inside of you that calls you to go back to what was comfortable before you took a risk, to go back to what you knew before you tried something new.

Fortunately, Romans 11:29 stands in the way for many of us who want to go back to the way it was. It says, *God's gifts and His call are irrevocable.*

Peter wanted to be a fisherman again, but the problem was that he was called by God to be a leader in the church. I believe Jesus had invested too much into Peter up to that point to just let him go back to fishing. In all those failures, Peter had way too much firsthand education to go back to the old ways.

Even if I wanted to stop, I've had way too many failures to stop being a pastor now. I've discovered too many ways to not preach effectively! I've found too many ways not to counsel people through their problems!

I've learned way too many ways to *not* do ministry to quit now! That's the awesome thing about God! He doesn't reject us when we fail and He won't let failures go to waste. His call and gifts are irrevocable.

Think about that. Something that God calls irrevocable doesn't get taken back. The call on Peter to be an apostle of Jesus Christ couldn't just go away. Likewise - you are called to minister God's truth, life, and grace wherever you go. You can try to just go fishing, but God still has a call on your life.

Some of you might have thought that when things didn't work out as you hoped, it was all over. On your journey with Jesus, things didn't work out as you planned in your family. Your ministry didn't go where you hoped. Your job took a strange turn. But your setback was actually a step-up into the future that God has for you.

The future context of the call may be different.
The expression may not be what you expected.
The place it happens maybe somewhere different.
But if you keep walking with Jesus on this one, He will bring it out of you again.

God is a God of second chances! He gave Jonah a second chance. Jesus gave Peter a second chance. It's found in that wonderful passage of restoration in John 21:15-19 where Jesus and Peter are talking, and Jesus asks Peter three times, "*Simon son of John, do you truly love me?*" He answered, "*Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.*"

Every time Peter said that, Jesus brings him back to the irrevocable call: "*Feed my lambs, take care of my sheep, feed my sheep.*" Do you see what Jesus is doing? He's telling Peter, You can fish, but you can't just be a fisherman. Be the pastor, the shepherd, and the Rock I've called you to be."

Even after all his failures, Jesus restored Peter to ministry. Peter went on to become one of the greatest influences in the early church. He was the one who preached on the day of Pentecost when 3000 were saved. He was the one who received the vision to take the gospel to the Gentiles. He wrote 2 books of the Bible. He was a success because he learned from his failures, he changed and he became a great man of God. Peter experienced an amazing transformation in his life!

One of my favorite things about our journey with Jesus is that only He can make you what you aren't. Only He can see what you truly are and bring you into what you can truly become. Peter saw himself as a fisherman. Jesus saw Peter as a fisher of men. Despite all of Peter's failures, Peter became what God had in mind.

On your journey with Jesus, if you just keep walking with Him, you will become all that God has in mind for you. I challenge you to keep walking with Him on this journey to change.

God wants to totally change you from the inside out! Romans 12:2 says: *Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.*

Satan wants to conform us through his words. God wants to transform us through His Word. 2 Corinthians 3:18 says: *But we all, with unveiled face,*

beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord.

We are all being transformed by the Spirit of God from glory to glory. The Greek for word for transform is metamorphosis. Metamorphosis is best seen in nature in the transformation of a caterpillar to a butterfly. The caterpillar wraps itself in a cocoon and emerges weeks later as a beautiful butterfly. This is metamorphosis – total transformation. But it takes a process and it takes time.

Many Christians have a major misunderstanding about what happens when they get saved – when they choose to follow Christ. Some of this misunderstanding comes from misinterpreting verses like 2 Corinthians 5:17 which says: *Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!*

People read this and think when I become a Christian everything instantly changes. Not true. Some very marvelous and wonderful things do happen when you get saved. You have a new heart and a new destiny. But many things about you are still the same.

You see we are tripartite beings – which means we are made of 3 basic parts: spirit, soul and body.

Our body is the physical part of us that we see of each other.

The soul is composed of the mind, will and emotions.

The spirit is the innermost part of us where the Holy Spirit lives.

It is the part that lives forever. It is where the Holy Spirit indwells us.

When we are born again, the instantaneous changes are all spiritual changes. But you still have the same body and the same soul. When we are born again, our spirit is saved. But not our soul. It is in the process of being saved.

Our souls are the place where we think, feel and decide. That means we still have thoughts that are sinful. We have emotions that can get out of control. When our will is weak - we give in to things like selfishness or addiction.

That makes some people wonder if they ever really got saved! What we've not realized is this: getting saved is not the end – it's the beginning of a life of change. Just as physical birth is the beginning of a life characterized by growth, so when we are born again, that is just the beginning of a new spiritual life.

We begin as spiritual infants who spend a lifetime growing and changing as we are transformed – literally morphed – into the image of Christ.

Yet – many of us wonder why it's taking so long.

Why is it so hard for me to change?

Why am I so selfish at times?

Why do I struggle with faith or unforgiveness or anger or overeating or lust or addictions other sins?

We know we are supposed to be overcomers, but we forget that means there are things we must overcome. There are things in us that need to change!

There are parts of us that need saving!

Our minds need to be renewed by the word of God.
 Our wills need to be submitted to the will of God.
 Our emotions need to be led by the Spirit of God.

That takes time and effort. What is happening to us is this: we are becoming who we really are. Hebrews 10:14 says: *For by one offering He has perfected forever those who are being sanctified.*

The Living Bible says: *For by that one offering He made forever perfect in the sight of God all those whom He is making holy.*

What? If we are already made forever perfect, why do we need to be made holy? Because our spirits are already changed, already perfect, totally right with God. That's who we really are. But our souls have a lot of changing to do. That's why God has us all in this rebuilding process. 1 Thessalonians 5:23-24 says:

Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you completely; and may your whole spirit, soul, and body be preserved blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls you is faithful, who also will do it.

God wants to save us – spirit, soul and body!
 Some of us are saved spiritually, but not mentally or emotionally.
 If you are going to live like you're saved, you must first think saved thoughts.
 You know what I mean? You can be saved and think lost thoughts!
 You need your mind saved. Some of us need our attitudes saved or our perspectives saved.

You see - our spirits are saved in an instant when we are born again. Our souls are being saved as we are conformed to the image of Christ. In order for your soul to be saved – your spirit must be saved first! But then our souls need saving!

James 1:21 says - *Receive with meekness the engrafted word, which is able to save your souls.*

James is not talking about getting saved or born again here. He was writing to people who were already believers. Yet he tells people who are already saved that they need saving.

And wherever you are in your journey with Christ, you still need saving!

Our spirits are saved because Jesus died on the cross for our sins.
 Our souls are saved when we take up our cross and follow Him.

Our spirits are saved by the blood of Jesus.
 Our souls are saved by the word of God!

Our spirits are saved because Jesus laid down His life for us.
 Our souls are saved when we lay down our lives for Him.

Our spirits are saved on the basis of faith in Christ.
Our souls are saved on the basis of following Christ.

God has saved us, God is saving us and God will save us!
He will never give up on us and He will finish what He started in us!
What did He start? Total life transformation.

So, I want to end by challenging you to walk with Jesus every day.

Starting today, let's not have Jesus as part of our lives—let's make Him the center of our lives every day and allow Him to change us from the inside out!

He who called you is faithful and He will do it!