

# A God who changes us

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We were at some friends' house recently just to relax and spend a nice afternoon together. There were children everywhere. They were fun to watch. Children are cute when they act like children . . . but when adults act like children it is a whole other issue. Do you ever do that? Do you have times when you look at your life, your attitudes, the words that come out of your mouth, your emotional responses, and wonder how you could still be struggling with the same problems? When are we going to grow up? We feel bad and want to be better, but we just don't know how to change. Do you think people can change? Do you think you can change?

The Bible is all about change. Abraham. Jacob. Joseph. Moses. David. Rahab. Ruth. Esther. Matthew. Paul. The list goes on and on. Change is what God does. He comes into one's life and transforms them into the likeness of Christ. Yes, He loves us as we are, but He will never leave us that way.

As we look at the beginning of the new year, we are challenged to look back and evaluate the year we have just finished. Think about the changes that needed to be made in your faith, in your character, in your life this year. How did you do? Thumbs up? Thumbs down? Thumbs in the middle? Why do you think it was not better? Laziness? Apathy? Lack of self-discipline? Temptation? Circumstances beyond your control? Hopefully some of us had really good years in our spiritual growth, but I believe all of us would still admit that we have areas where changes need to be made, and situations where we still are not living as we should.

As the apostle Paul stated in Romans 7:15-20, *"I do what I don't want to do and don't do what I want to do."* We are weak. We are distracted. We are tempted. We are prone to urges, addictions, impulses, desires and passions. Without Christ, that is who we are. We are slaves to sin. Slaves to the flesh. Now, as Christians, we have been born again. We are new creations. We have been given a new name and a new nature. We have been transformed. **We are free.** We have gained the advantage, but still the battle wages between our spirit and our flesh. As Christ told His closest followers, *"The Spirit is willing, but the*

*flesh is weak*" (Matthew 26:41). Even when we finally recognize who we should be and what we should do, it often seems impossible to live in the "Should."

That is what we will focus on in the next few pages. How can we change? How is it possible to consistently "live in the should?"

In 2 Peter 1:3 we are told that, in Christ's divine power, **we have been given all we need for life and godliness**. So, if we have Christ, then why do we still struggle and not live the victorious Christian life in so many areas of our lives?

Let's begin by answering a question with a question. Would you be more likely to say, **"God has changed me"** or **"God is changing me?"** Many of us would choose the second. Because we are very familiar with our faults, we would say that "God is changing me." While this is true, it often ignores the essential truth that "God has changed me." Both statements are true. God has changed us and God is changing us.

2 Corinthians 5:17 tells us that, **"If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!"** We already are new creations. God has already changed us. Galatians 2:20 says, **"I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me."** We already have been crucified with Christ and Christ already lives in us. God has already changed us. Colossians 3:1-3 states, **"Since, then, you have been raised with Christ."** It has already been done. God has already changed us. 1 Corinthians 6:19 asks, **"Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God?"** The Holy Spirit already dwells in us. God has already changed us. Romans 6:22 says, **"You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to God, the benefit you reap leads to holiness, and the result is eternal life."** Yes, we still struggle with sin, but the reality is that we have been set free from it. God has already changed us.

We must understand that God has already changed our identity. We are a new creation, with a new nature. We have been born again and are now counted as innocent. For those who have repented of their sin and put their trust in Jesus Christ, when God looks at us He sees the righteousness of Christ. When we seek to be who we should and live like we should, it starts here, with who we already are in Christ. At the core of our identity we are in Christ. This is the starting point for all who seek to be changed and live a holy life.

We have been changed, but we are also being changed. We are already counted righteous in Christ. Now we are in the process of being equipped and empowered to live out this righteousness in our daily lives.

Philippians 2:12 gives us a phrase that is important when understanding this process of living out this righteousness. Paul writes to the Christians in Philippi, **"continue to work out your salvation."** But what does that mean?

The phrase "work out" was at times used for mining as one worked out or brought out the riches that were in the rock. At other times "work out" was used when describing the act of bringing in the crops during the harvest. In either case the person would try to "work out" the greatest result possible from

what was already there. The valuable stones or crops ripe for harvest were already there. They just needed to be “worked out.” In this case the similar idea would be realizing the full benefit from one’s salvation. Once we are in Christ the Holy Spirit now lives in us. The Spirit’s work results in greater righteous living as our “flesh” dies more and more each day.

It is like a sculptor who sees a block of granite or marble or stone and sees the image that is already within. He or she then begins to chip away the excess, until the image that is within now becomes visible to all who look upon the sculpture. This is similar to salvation in Christ. At the point when one repents of their sin and puts their trust in Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit comes to live in them. As the Christian learns to walk in faith, sin is removed and the work of the Spirit will gradually become more and more visible. In Christ change becomes possible.

2 Peter 1:3-4 tells us that, *“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.”*

These words were written by Simon Peter, who had been one of Jesus’ 12 disciples and was now one of the prominent leaders of the early Christian church. If we had known him before, we would have thought him an unlikely follower of Christ. He had been an impulsive, strong-willed fisherman, most of his life, until he met Jesus Christ. He had seen Christ heal the blind, cleanse the leper, calm the storm, and even bring the dead back to life. He and others had lived with Jesus. He knew Jesus intimately. Now his life was surrendered to Jesus Christ and had been changed dramatically by the Holy Spirit. He was a totally different person and it was all because of Jesus. It is from this personal experience with Jesus Christ that He writes to encourage other believers.

**God has given us everything that we need.** We often feel that we are desperate, needy, helpless and defeated, but that is not the life that God intended for us. In Him we have found all that we need. His grace is sufficient. His love is unconditional. His power is almighty. His knowledge includes all things. It is as we grow to “know” Him more that we finally understand His goodness and His glory. It is similar to a son who walks without fear when he is with his father, because based on his experience he knows that his father will protect, provide, guide and love him. There is nothing to fear when he is with His father. As we walk with Christ we begin to experience life as it was meant to be.

This phrase, *“through the knowledge of Him”* is referring to an intimate relational knowing, not just a knowledge of the details of his life with no personal relationship. If you want to experience God’s provision for life and godliness, you must come to know Him more, but how does that personal knowledge take place? God reveals Himself to us through His word and His faithfulness as we trust in Him. Throughout scripture we read of the names of Christ, the stories of Christ and the words of Christ. As we begin to trust in His words and who He is, we begin to experience Him personally through faith, obedience and prayer. Each time we experience Christ’s work in our lives we grow to know Him more and are moved towards greater godliness.

Do you believe that God is big enough to bring about the needed changes in your life?

Your answers to this question will greatly affect how you live your life. If we believe that God is able to change our lives, then we will run to Him, submit to Him, trust in Him, call out to Him, obey Him, as we seek for Him to accomplish change in us. If we do not believe that God has the power to change us, then we will either continue to tolerate and be enslaved by our sin and our faults, or we will turn to self-help and insufficient strategies of the world as we search for a way to change ourselves.

When a person becomes a believer and follower of Jesus Christ, scripture tells us of multiple changes that occur in that individual's life. They are changed from guilty to innocent, wicked to righteous, dead in sin to alive in Christ, from a life of futility to a life of purpose, from despair to hope, from uncertainty to eternal security, from being separated from God by sin to now having an open invitation to the throne of God, at any time. One who was at enmity with God has now been reconciled to God. Those who were bitter are now able to forgive. The proud have now been made humble.

Galatians 5:22-23 tell us about the fruit of the Spirit that we each have access to once we are in Christ. ***"The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law."*** In Christ we have the power to change and to live in the "should."

Let us pray for a holy discontentment. A contentment in Christ for the change that He has brought in our lives, but at the same time longing for more of His changing power, to make us holy as we live moment by moment.

How is this change possible? Paul continues in Galatians 5:20, ***"I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me."***

Does that mean that Paul was also crucified with Christ physically? No. Then what does it mean? It becomes clearer when we say it in these words: "The old me" has been crucified with Christ (Romans 6:6). Do you remember "the old you"? We were self-centered. In love with the world. Lovers of sin. Unaware of our sin. Our hearts were hardened to God. Even in our pursuit of God we were doing it in our own power, driven by guilt, condemnation, the insecurity of trying to look good enough to others and to be good enough for God. Now that we are in Christ, all of that "old" life has been put away because of what Christ did for us on the cross.

The old "me" no longer lives, but Christ now lives in me. It is no longer about my strength or my goodness or my effort or my will power. I have died. Christ now lives in me. In total submission I lay myself before Him and marvel in the transition He brings about in my life. He is the one who stirs me to righteousness and has made me a new creature, with a new nature, and born again into a new life. Before we were spiritually dead in sin and now for the first time we are alive . . . in Christ.

Christ lives in us. Colossians 1:27 says, ***"Christ in you, the hope of glory."*** Though we are not perfect in temptation, we have access to His strength. In failure we find mercy. In our hearts we find intimacy with Christ. We no longer search for holiness because of our fear of punishment. Now we are propelled towards holiness by the awe-inspiring love of Jesus Christ.

In our death, His spirit is now alive in us. We are fully submitted to His will and His methods. Day at a time we die more completely to the flesh and become more alive to the Spirit. At times He empowers our initiative, at other times He comes against us to strip us of our idols and anything else that we have put our trust in instead of Him.

Do you really want to change? Then you must know this. Proverbs 4:23 instructs us to **guard our hearts for it is the wellspring of life**. Our heart is the origin of what comes out of our lives. Because of this, every true, long-term change must involve the heart, and thus must involve God, because only He can change the heart of man. Some would prefer just to obey rules and relate with God from a distance, from time-to-time, but God does not relate to His children in this manner. He calls them to love Him with all their heart, soul and mind. He calls them to draw near and abide with Him. The spirit of Christ now dwells in each believer. He is our intimate Savior, who settles for nothing less than being the very center of our lives.

As all else becomes secondary to the supremacy of Christ in our lives, the desires of our hearts are changed and our behavior follows suit. Our words, emotions, and actions begin to flow out of our growing love and respect for Christ, even in our unguarded moments. The holy standard of God's Word that we once viewed as rules from a fearful God, have now been transformed into loving commands from a personal Savior who loves us with an unending love.

This loving relationship with Christ now becomes our "safe place" that we turn to in the midst of our need for change. We no longer run away and hide in the midst of our sin like Adam and Eve did in the garden. Our identity in Christ is secure. There is no longer any fear of rejection or judgment. With confidence we can now draw near to His throne of grace and receive mercy and find grace in our time of need (Hebrews 4:16). As we humble ourselves before God our sins are exposed, our hearts are humbled and our sins are forgiven. In our weakness we submit to God's strength. Our hearts are turned Godward and our desires for the things of the world are eclipsed by our growing desire for Christ. Change begins to take place as we become more aware of our sin, and more captured by a greater love for Christ as our Savior and Lord.

Today be reminded of Christ's love for you. Be convicted of your sin. Be overwhelmed by His grace. Be dependent on His provision. Be moldable in His hands as He changes you into the person He has prepared you to be.

### **Discussion questions:**

- 1) Do you believe people can change? Why do you answer in this way?
- 2) Who is a person in the Bible who was greatly changed by God? What happened?
- 3) In your own words explain the difference between "I have been changed" and "I am being changed."

- 4) How would you put the following quote in your own words? *“The holy standard of God’s Word that we once viewed as rules from a fearful God, have now been transformed into loving commands from a personal Savior who loves us with an unending love.”*
- 5) What do you think you need to remember from this sermon?
- 6) What do you think God wants you to do about it?
- 7) How can we pray for you?