

“How to Change—Or Can I?” A Biblical Framework for Change**

Several years ago *Sports Illustrated* interviewed then Los Angeles Dodgers manager Tommy Lasorda. There Lasorda describes his battle with bad habits: "I took a pack of cigarettes from my pocket, stared at it and said, "Who's stronger, you or me?" The answer was me. I stopped smoking. Then I took a vodka martini and said to it, "Who's stronger, you or me?" Again the answer was me. I quit drinking. Then I went on a diet. I looked at a big plate of linguine with clam sauce and said, "Who's stronger, you or me?" And a little clam looked up at me and answered, "I am." I can't beat linguine.[\[2\]](#)

Can anybody here relate? Maybe not with linguine, but with any other foe that seems to be getting the best of you.

This past month on Wednesday evenings we've investigated 2 Peter 1:3-11 in a mini-series, "How Do People Change?" That's a critical issue, so critical in fact I'd like to devote our attention to it in a Sunday morning mini-series. My aim is to move beyond 2 Peter and see what the whole Bible has to say about the subject (in other words, to do a "biblical theology" of change)...

I believe this is an essential series for at least two important reasons...

First, you and I need to change. We all struggle with habits, attitudes, personality quirks, relationship challenges, and so on.

Secondly, people all around us need to change. They struggle just like we do. And we who know Christ and His power to change are responsible to help others change. But how? In order to be a disciple-maker (i.e. in order to help people come to know Christ and grow in His likeness), we must understand how biblical change works.

Here's where we're heading. This will be a topical study in which we will examine a host of biblical texts. We're going to consider what the Scriptures say concerning six issues related to personal change. We'll look at two issues this week and the rest next week, the Lord willing.

I. The Need to Change

The question is *why*? Why is change necessary? The Bible presents four foundational issues that establish the need for change.

A. God is Creator and wrote the Owner's Manual.

This is God's world. We are not here by random chance, but by divine purpose. Since God created the universe, everything in it belongs to Him and exists for His purposes. I do not create my meaning for existence. I already have a meaning and purpose for existence, one given to me by my Creator.

Colossians 1:16 For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created *by him and for him*.

How does the Creator expect me to live? Thankfully, I need not wonder for the Author of Life has given us a book, His self-revelation of how created life is supposed to work.

2 Timothy 3:16-17 All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be *thoroughly equipped for every good work*.

The Bible is like an owner's manual. When we live by the Book, life is good.

Joshua 1:8 Do not let this Book of the Law depart from your mouth; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful.

Jesus talked this. He made it clear that God's self-revelation in this book sums up the kind of life God requires of us.

Matthew 22:37-40 Jesus replied: "'*Love the Lord your God* with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: '*Love your neighbor* as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."

To summarize, here is what the Creator expects of us, an expectation that will be for our good and His glory.

By God's design, we are to love God first.

By God's design, we are to love others as ourselves.

That, according to the owner's manual, is the essence of human life. We are here to love God first and others next. Consequently, to the extent this is not true in our lives, we need to change. And that describes our predicament...

B. We are sinners and have missed the mark.

Contrary to popular notion, we are not "basically good people, with a few quirks perhaps, but basically good." If we believe that we will never change for we will refuse to admit the need to change. God's assessment is quite different from popular opinion.

Isaiah 53:6 We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way...

That's our problem as sinners. The next statement reveals God's solution.

Isaiah 53:6b ...and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

Yes, there is hope for sinners. We can change because of Jesus Christ. But first we must grasp the severity of our condition.

Romans 3:23 For all have sinned and come short of the glory of God.

Simply put, perfect people don't need to change. Everyone else does.

C. Jesus Christ is the one who makes change possible.

That's what His cross is all about.

2 Corinthians 5:21 God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

1 Peter 2:24 He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed.

Let the weight of these verses sink in. When Jesus went to the cross He accomplished two things that make change possible (and essential)...

☞At the cross, He took our sin.

☞At the cross, He gave us His righteousness.

Beloved, if Christ is your Savior, God has forgiven your sins and declared you to be righteous in His sight. If you are in Christ, you have the ability to change, *His* ability.

I have a check book. The reason I can write a check and hand it to someone and receive goods in return is because that piece of paper means something (or it better!). It means there are resources sufficient to

cover that expense tucked away in my bank.

In a real sense I have a spiritual bank account. When Christ became my Savior He placed in my spiritual bank account “a billion dollars of spiritual resources,” indeed His very righteousness was placed in my account. That’s why I can change. And so can you if you know Christ.

But there’s more. In addition to making change possible...

D. Jesus Christ is the model for change.

Granted, Jesus is more than merely our example (and in fact He must be our Savior before we have the ability to follow His example). But He is, indeed, to be the pattern, the model for us. He is what we are to change *into*. He is the standard, the prototype.

We should never say, “Well, I don’t know what I’m supposed to become as I’m changing. It’s subjective, isn’t it? The goal for me isn’t the same for you.” Actually, God’s goal IS the same, and here it is...

1 Peter 2:21 To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, *leaving you an example*, that you should follow in his steps.

Philippians 2:5 Your attitude should be *the same as that of Christ Jesus*:

Last week I was trying to hook up a DSL connection at the house. I plugged in my modem but couldn’t get it to work. One of my challenges was I didn’t know what it was *supposed* to do. I’d never seen one work before. The green light was flashing. I didn’t know that was a problem until the tech support fellow told me, “When it’s connect, it will stop flashing.”

One of the reasons some folks struggle with change is they don’t know what they’re supposed to change *into*. They don’t know the model for change. They don’t know what Christ is really like.

That’s God’s intent for us, *to be like Jesus*—to respond like Him, to think like Him, to talk like Him. *WWJD* is a good question for every true Christian, in every situation.

If Jesus was having this conversation I’m in with my hard-to-live-next-to neighbor, what would He say right now, and how would He say it? Then I need to do likewise.

You say, “Well, if God says that change is necessary, and if God has given us everything we need to change, why don’t some people change, or if they do change, why doesn’t it last?” We’ll address that more fully in a moment, but for now, in light of what we’ve just seen let’s draw some preliminary conclusions...

Make It Personal: In order to change in ways that will last...

Five things must occur...

1. *You must agree you need to change.*

James 1:22-25 Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. *Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says* is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. But the man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it—he will be blessed in what he does.

James indicates it's possible for a person to see their condition, yet refuse to face the gravity of the situation, just like a person who looks in a mirror and sees tangled hair but refuses to get a comb and remedy the confusion. To change, one must agree that change is needed.

Discuss: We mustn't assume this admission is easy to get. It's not. Why not? What are some reasons? Here's a big one...

2. *You must put on biblical humility.*

Only the humble really change. Why is that? Because only the humble receive God's help (James uses the word "grace")...

James 4:6 "But he gives us more grace. That is why Scripture says: 'God opposes the proud but *gives grace to the humble.*'"

James 4:10 "Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up."

God is not interested in helping people who think they don't need His help, nor those who have an inflated view of themselves. In fact, at times He allows the proud to experience problems so that they might admit the truth about their weakness, then humble themselves, and call on Him for help. Let the following statement sink in...

**A prerequisite to change is humility. My pride must go.

This is a vital point and it's one of the main reasons why people don't change. Proud people don't think they need to change. Stuart Scott explains:

Stuart Scott: “When someone is proud they are focused on self. This is a form of self-worship. A person is prideful who believes that they, in and of themselves, are or should be the *source* of what is good, right and worthy of praise. They also believe that they, by themselves, are (or should be) the *accomplisher* of anything that is worthwhile to accomplish, and that they should certainly be the *benefactor* of all these things. In essence, they are believing that all things should be *from* them, *through* them, and *to* them or *for* them....Thomas Watson is quoted to have said, ‘Pride seeks to ungod God.’”[\[3\]](#)

Ask the average person on the street to describe himself. His response? “Oh, I’m basically a good person.” His marriage could be crumbling, his temper a tiger he can’t control, his dependence on alcohol putting a wedge between him and the kids, but still he affirms, “I’m basically a good person.” He defines himself based on a standard he has created, one that he always meets. That’s pride.

By the way, don’t think that the proud are only people who are powerful folks, the big talkers who boast of their abilities. The weak can be proud, too. Indeed, people who struggle can be very proud (which is part of the reason their struggle continues). Listen to Scott again:

Stuart Scott: “What about those who are caught up in self-pity, who are self-absorbed with a sense of failure? This too is pride. They are just on the flip side of the pride ‘coin.’ People who are consumed with self-pity are focusing on their own selves too much. They are not concerned with the glory of God and with being thankful for what good gifts and talents the Lord has given them, but instead are focused on how they think they have gotten a ‘raw deal,’ or how they are not ‘as good as’ someone else. Self-pitying people desperately *want* to be good, not for the glory of God, but for themselves...To sum it all up, a proud person believes that life is all about *them*—their happiness, their accomplishments, and their worth.”[\[4\]](#)

Right on. It is possible to want to change, NOT for the glory of God but for self-focused reasons. That’s pride, and that can be a reason that change doesn’t last.

For instance, suppose a person says he wants to stop smoking. The fundamental question is *why*. What are some examples of motivating factors that really are rooted in pride? He could want to quit smoking for lots of reasons: so people will stop nagging him about his habit, so he’ll feel better physically, so he’ll have more money to spend, and so on. Those reasons aren’t bad, just insufficient. What’s the right motive, not just for the person trying to kick a bad habit but for anyone trying to change? It’s this...

3. *You must want to be what God wants.*

And just what is that God wants for us?

Matthew 6:33 But *seek first his kingdom* and his righteousness...

And note what happens if we put God’s agenda first...

Matthew 6:33b ...and all these things will be given to you as well.

Paul used different words to express the same ambition...

2 Corinthians 5:9 So we make it *our goal to please him*, whether we are at home in the body or away from it.

That's God's agenda for us, that we become people who live *for His kingdom*. And how does it happen that a person who enters this world walking on the path of going his own way and building his own empire—which, as we've seen, is everyone's condition—how does that person become a God's-kingdom-seeker? There's only one way...

4. *You must know Christ.*

Why? For many reasons, but as far as change goes, only those who know Christ have the ability to change as God intends.

John 17:3 Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.

Eternal life, that is the good life, the kind of life God the Creator originally intended and now offers, is available only to those who know Christ. The Lord Himself put it this way...

John 15:4 Remain in me, and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.

At this point you may be thinking, "Hold on. You say that people who don't know Christ can't change. But I know folks who've quit smoking, stopped drinking, cleaned up their mouths, and kicked a lot of other bad habits...and they DON'T KNOW CHRIST. How do you explain that?"

Good question. Let me clarify something. Moments ago I said that apart from knowing Christ a person cannot change *in a way that pleases God*. Answer this. If a person kicks a sinful habit but refuses to acknowledge His need for Christ, is God impressed? Is God more pleased with a drunken self-focused person or a dry one? Both fall short of His standard and both are still in need of true change. Indeed, the "dry" sinner now faces an even greater danger. What's that? He's inclined to think he DOESN'T NEED Christ. After all, he kicked the habit all on his own effort.

Satan is perfectly content if a sinner kicks a habit or two yet refuses to submit to Christ. It's possible that Satan may even *help* such a person kick a habit. You say, "Why would Satan help someone?" In order to enslave that person in his prideful self-sufficiency. Now the person thinks, "I

don't need the Lord, not really, not like weak people. Look what I did with my life! Oh, I may go to church, but it's not because I'm a desperate sinner. I'm a good person. God's pleased with me."

To use Thomas Watson's quote again, that person has tried to "ungod God." Beloved, Christ said that without Him NO BRANCH can produce the kind of fruit that pleased God.

Have you come to grips with the reality of your condition? "Good" people don't go to heaven because good people won't admit their desperate condition and ask Jesus to save them. And "good" people won't change in ways that please God, for the same reason, because they refuse to admit their desperate need for the Savior.

There's something else you must grasp if you're going to change...

5. *You must realize that change is a process.*

A life-long process. We will not accomplish the ultimate desired result this side of heaven.

1 John 1:8-10 If we *claim to be without sin* [i.e. that we don't need to change], we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word has no place in our lives.

We don't arrive in this life. The Bible does not teach sinless perfectionism. Rather, the Bible emphasizes our responsibility in the process of sanctification.

Philippians 2:12-13 "Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to *work out your salvation* [i.e. KEEP CHANGING!]with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose."

Don't excuse sin with the notion, "Well, that's just the way I am." Work out your salvation, all the while recognizing that the power comes from God who is working in you. Thankfully, the day is coming when the process will end and the goal attained.

1 Corinthians 13:12 Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.

The story is told of a young girl who accepted Christ as her Savior and applied for membership in a local church. "Were you a sinner before you received the Lord Jesus into your Life?" inquired an old deacon. "Yes, sir," she replied. "Well, are you still a sinner?" "To tell you the truth, I feel I'm a greater sinner than ever." "Then what real change have you experienced?" "I don't quite know how to explain it," she said, "except I used to be a sinner running after sin, but now that I am saved. I'm a

sinner running from sin!" She was received into the fellowship of the church.[\[5\]](#)

Thus far we've seen what the Bible teaches about *the necessity of change*. It seems pretty clear, doesn't it? *We need to change*. We need to be changing today.

Why then don't we (and now I'm speaking to those who know Christ as Savior) see more change occurring in our lives? One key reason has to do with common unbiblical notions people (even people who profess Christ) hold.

II. Some Faulty Views about How We Change

People who believe false notions about change *won't change*. Our *thinking* affects our *behavior*. If I am thinking wrongly it will show up in my life. Here are three common, faulty views about how we change...

The "Holy Zap" view

This approach agrees that God is the solution to change, but ignores the biblical passages that emphasize that change is a *process* (we'll develop this more fully next time). "I want to change NOW, and I want to change COMPLETELY," they say. There are many versions of the "holy zap" view. It goes like this:

**Walk an aisle, pray a prayer, get the Spirit...and you'll change.

The reason you still struggle with sin is that you weren't sincere enough when you went forward last time. Go forward again, pray harder, and then you'll change.

Here's another popular version of holy-zap thinking. It's the way some folks view Christian camp in the summer (this goes for campers as well as staff, not at Scioto Hills of course!). You see it at the Friday night bon fire service at testimony time.

A camper says, "I'm fed up with my life. I want to change."

"Okay," says his counselor. "You know what you need to do. Go up front, throw a stick in the campfire, tell God you really mean it this time, and you'll change because He will zap you with Holy Spirit strength."

Does the Bible endorse that approach to change?

Certain denominations actually teach perfectionism, the notion that once a person receives the Holy Spirit (at a subsequent time to conversion) the person is infused with spiritual strength and able to live on a different plane than before. Once that happens, the habit is kicked.

The next two views are two sides of an erroneous coin.

The “Let go and let God” view

**This view says it’s all up to God.

If you are trying to change and yet still struggle it’s because you don’t have enough faith. You haven’t gone to the altar and truly surrendered to God. You’re holding back. Let go and God will take over. Then you’ll change.

There is a sense in which the fail to surrender to God keeps people from changing. There are passages that emphasize we need to “let go and let God.” In fact, some of us may need to repent and turn over the controls of our lives to Him right now.

However, the problem with this view is that it leaves out the rest of the story. Change begins “by letting go and letting God,” but it doesn’t end there. We must take heed to other biblical instruction, like “work out your salvation...” and “Put off the old man and put on the new man,” passages that again emphasize that change involves a *process* in which we have ongoing responsibility.

The “Pull up your bootstraps” view

Contrary to the “Let go and let God” approach...

**This view says it’s all up to me.

God helps those who help themselves. If you’re going to kick that habit, you must believe in yourself. Show some self-respect. You’ve got what it takes within yourself, now make it happen. YOU can do it.

What’s wrong with this view? Yes, I have responsibility when it comes to change. Yes, I must do something if I am going to change. But no, I cannot change in *my strength*. I need Christ. I need Christ *moment by moment*.

Have you bought into any of these notions? To the degree that we have, we won’t change. The good news is that when we believe and act upon God’s Word, we can change.

Next time we’ll develop the process of change in greater detail. But let’s finish pondering a statement attributed to John Flavel:

“It is easier to cry against one-thousand sins of others than to kill one of your own.”

Let’s get serious today about the need to change, not for *others* to change, but for *us*. What is it that God is wanting to change in *your life*? Let’s spend time in prayer even now...

****Note:** This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

[2] Ron Fimrite in *Sports Illustrated*.

[3] Stuart Scott, *From Pride to Humility*, p. 5.

[4] Scott, p. 5.

[5] *Our Daily Bread*.