

Back to the Basics

Changing Lives

My wife is a brilliant and savvy woman. She has mastered the art of marital peace over our years together. I am a planner and enjoy having everything in my life go according to my schedule. I have been known to tell people that spontaneity is just an excuse for poor planning and displays a weak and undisciplined character. No wonder I fit in so well in the Army. My wise wife has learned not to “surprise” me with changes of schedule or plans as these occurrences tend to evoke an automatic defensive reaction from me. The shields go up and I immediately start active and passive resistance measures to safeguard the sanctity of my plans and routines. So she skillfully and patiently guides me toward the desired end state. I am a work in progress...

I am here to tell you that I can change! I can change: clothes, diapers, tires, light bulbs, what I eat, what I drink (except coffee), locations, and, apparently, vocations. ...but can I change lives?

A few weeks ago I was talking to you about the topic of introductions and how we generally identify ourselves. One of the most common identifiers we use is our vocation. The “work” of our lives says a lot about who we are. In this room today, there is a Soldier, a teacher, a salesman, a stay-at-home mom, a mechanic, oh and One whose vocation is Changing Lives. Now there is a challenging vocation! I’ll tell you more about Him in a couple of minutes.

Generally speaking, most adults don’t like our lives changed! We get very comfortable with our routines and regimens and are, most usually, mightily

offended when someone tries to impose His will on us. We resist change because change generally gives us a feeling that we are not “in control.” Or, that, by accepting a change, we are admitting that our previous way of acting, believing, or thinking was...(GASP) WRONG! Yet, deep inside all of us there is an ongoing feeling that tells us we are lacking something and we need to change to get it. The problem is we are woefully incapable of making that change for ourselves.

We have neither the insight nor the ability to correct our misguided lives. This is why we need expert help - We need someone with both the power and desire to change our lives into what we were originally meant to be. In my last message to you I discussed “Who” Jesus Christ is. Today, I want to take a few minutes to discuss the topic of “What” Jesus does. You see, changing lives is His business and he is in this room today doing that very job.

All of us are familiar with job descriptions and every vocation has one. The theological word used most frequently to describe Jesus’ work is *atonement*. It is popularly explained by breaking the word down, *at-one-ment*. In a nutshell, Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection, enabled humans, who were estranged from God by sin, to be reconciled into right relationship with God. (become at-one-with God). {Slide 3} His job is to bridge the otherwise uncrossable chasm between sinful man and a Holy God. It is important to note here that this reconciliation was all GOD’s idea. God loves us so much that He felt the pain of our separation from Him and **He** took action to solve the sin problem. His action: change our lives to be reconciled to Him. His change agent: Jesus.

This morning I want to take a brief journey through the Old and New Testaments and trace the idea of changing lives. From this journey we will discover that the concept of change has always been of major significance to the Lord our God.

The OT

Let's look first at the 18th chapter of Jeremiah and consider the first four verses.

The Potter and the Clay

18 The word which came to Jeremiah from the Lord saying, ² "Arise and go down to the potter's house, and there I will announce My words to you." ³ Then I went down to the potter's house, and there he was, making something on the wheel. ⁴ But the vessel that he was making of clay was spoiled in the hand of the potter; so he remade it into another vessel, as it pleased the potter to make.

Drawing stick men is stretching my artistic abilities, but that doesn't mean I can't appreciate the work of a true craftsman and artist. I was forced to take a class in college called, "Art Appreciation" after my abbreviated foray into the world of philosophy (a story for another time for those of you who haven't heard it). As part of the Art appreciation course, we went to observe a potter who was making a vase and learn how that process worked. At first it is pretty unimpressive. Looks a bit like kids forming mud pies (I thought I might have a shot at this...). But the more we watched the more we could see the skill, patience, precision, and artistry which was required to produce a finished product. As the potter got close to the end of the process, he wasn't satisfied with the rim so he took a small tool and cut that section off and remade it. It had looked fine to me, but it wasn't up to his standard. He repeated this process a number of times until he got it just like he wanted. What we learned was that no detail was unimportant; the clay had to be just right. That's what Jeremiah witnessed when he saw the potter at work. Then the Lord drew an analogy for His prophet :

⁵ Then the word of the Lord came to me saying, ⁶ “Can I not, O house of Israel, deal with you as this potter does?” declares the Lord. “Behold, like the clay in the potter’s hand, so are you in My hand, O house of Israel.

You see change written there without even finding the word. “You’re like a lump of clay to Me, Israel. And I can shape you and hollow you out and thin your walls and flare the top. I can make you decorative, or I can reshape you and start all over again, because change is My specialty. And you are the object of My attention and affection!

Moving from Jeremiah to Isaiah we see again the potter analogy in Chapter 64, verse 8: *But now, O Lord, You are our Father, We are the clay, and You our potter; And all of us are the work of Your hand.*

Once again, it is the idea that our Lord’s shaping us and changing us whichever way He pleases.

Usually, changes take time and pain on our part – and much patience on God’s part. But God is committed to our being changed, no matter how long or how painful the process. While being changed we may feel like a shapeless mass. We can’t understand His reasons, like I couldn’t understand the potter as he worked on his vase. But trust the Father. He’s changing you. He knows what He is doing. When God is ready to change a heart, it gets changed, whether it’s a proud king, a stubborn husband, a strong-willed athlete, one of your own family members, or you. He turns it WHEREVER He wishes. No one is an impossible case to God.

The NT

In the NT we have more familiar passages of Scripture. Let’s look at just a couple of these. There is no way we can bypass Romans 8:26-29:

²⁶ In the same way the Spirit also helps our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we should, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words; ²⁷ and He who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is, because He intercedes for the^l saints according to the will of God.

²⁸ And we know that^l God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose. ²⁹ For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren.

God is committed to the task of conforming you and me to the image of His Son. Not physically – He’s not making us look like Jesus looked physically – but inwardly: in character, in patience, in gentleness, in goodness, in grace, in truth, in discipline. He’s committed to conforming our lives to the inner character of His Son.

There is a wonderfully talented group of ladies who meet at the fellowship hall every week to do quilting. I have had the pleasure of watching them over the past few months and am amazed by both their skills and the capabilities of their machines. I had never seen a sewing machine that used an internet connection before. One of the marvelous things their machines can do is to automatically sew a pattern displayed on their screen. They just select “dog” and the machine starts sewing an exact replica of the picture on the screen. When it is finished you have a precise recreation of the template.

Again, that is the Father’s specialty. He places His finger on the template – His Son. And He watches over His workmanship. At times the tool pierces and makes us uncomfortable. We squirm and may even try to get away. But we are His workmanship and the Father won’t let us go. He holds us tightly to the pattern of

His will. His goal is that we bear the image of His Son. That's the Father's task. He's committed to it. He's changing us.

And lest you believe that God is going to give up on you, let's take a look at one more passage; Philippians 1:6, *⁶ For I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus.*

What God starts, He finishes. He's never been known to walk away from a person and say, "He's just too stubborn for me." Kind of like some do with their teenagers. "They're just too much. I'll just leave 'em with the Lord." God's never met a teenager that's His match. God has never met anyone that is His match. God will complete what He starts – including you. It may seem unfair, it may be painful, it may involve changes that cause you to question His goodness. But He knows what is necessary.

As we contemplate this process of changing lives, have you noticed who is at the center of the change? Who is the template, the role model after Whom we are being fashioned? Into Whom we are being conformed? Yes, the common denominator in all of this change is Jesus.

Changing lives is His business. The Bible ascribes a three-fold office to Christ, speaking of Him as Prophet, Priest, and King. In Jesus' office as Priest we find His Life-changing or at-one-ing work. The priestly work of Christ was, first of all, to bring a sacrifice for sin. The OT sacrifices were types pointing forward to the great sacrifice of Christ. Hence, Christ is also called the "Lamb of God", and "our Passover."

Besides being the great sacrifice for sins, Christ as priest also makes intercession for His people. 1 John 2: 1-2, discusses **Christ as Our Advocate**

2 My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; ² and He Himself is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world.

The NT refers to Christ as our intercessor in Romans, Hebrews, and 1 John. His intercessory work is based on His sacrifice. He presents His sacrifice to God, on the grounds of that He claims all spiritual blessings for His people, defends them against Satan, the law, and conscience, secures forgiveness for everything justly charged against them, and sanctifies their worship and service through the operation of the Holy Spirit. This is the work Jesus Christ does for us.

While His life, death, and resurrection provided the path – the ONLY path – to mankind’s reconciliation to God and allowed us the opportunity of eternal life in Heaven instead of Hell, His atoning work should not be thought of only in the past tense. You see, Jesus is alive today and still hard at work. Jesus is here today just as much as He was here over two thousand years ago when He walked the streets of Jerusalem. He is still at work doing now what He did then - changing lives. Being our sacrifice, our advocate, our only Hope.

His heart yearns for you to be reconciled to God. Accept His offer of salvation. Submit to His calling of service. The old hymns provide a beautiful message which is often far more eloquent and compelling than I. Today, as I close my message to you, I want to read you just one verse of the lyrics of the 1898 hymn, His way with Thee, and ask that you prayerfully consider the offer.

Would you have Him make you free, and follow at His call?

Would you know the peace that comes by giving all?

Would you have Him save you, so that you can never fall?

Let Him have His way with thee.

His power can make you what you ought to be;

His blood can cleanse your heart and make you free;

His love can fill your soul, and you will see

'Twas best for Him to have His way with thee.

I am going to ask the music team to come back up as we close our service with an invitational hymn. If you have a decision you need to make today, please feel free to come up and we'll pray about it. Hymn number 134, Jesus Paid it All.

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References:

1. Swindoll, Growing Deep in the Christian Life, Ch 9
2. Edgemon, The Doctrines Baptists Believe, Ch 5
3. Berkhof, Summary of Christian Doctrine, Ch 16