

Are We Ready For Change?

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We have heard a great deal lately about change. Politicians tell the nation that it needs a change of leadership, a change of ideas, and change in outlook. And we do not just need change for the sake of change, but we need "change we can believe in." While they promise blue skies and rainbows in exchange for votes, very little change actually happens. As the saying goes, "The more things change, the more they remain the same."

The apostle Paul writes to the church—those he considered to be true Christians—in Ephesians 4:22-24:

[P]ut off, concerning your former conduct, the old man which grows corrupt according to the deceitful lusts, and be renewed in the spirit of your mind, and that you put on the new man which was created according to God, in true righteousness and holiness.

Paul tells us that Christians must change—but the change he advocates is not just any change. He qualifies the change by stating, "Put off . . . the old man . . . and . . . put on the new man." The change he commands is a complete change of heart, a change from corruption toward inward purity.

This change is so severe that it is as if we have been totally renewed or become a completely new person. We are to have new attitudes, new desires, new habits, and new behaviors. The apostle further clarifies for us that the goal of this radical change is to be modeled after God's righteous and holy character. It is a transformation that is a fundamental part of God's purpose: creating sons and daughters in His image (Genesis 1:26).

To change is to cause to be different. In its simplest form, a change can fall into one of four categories:

1. We can *start* doing something that we should already be doing, say, fasting or serving.
2. We can *do more* of something that we are already doing but currently not doing enough of, for instance, Bible study or prayer.
3. We can *stop* doing something that we currently do but should not be doing at all, for example, gossiping or stealing office supplies.
4. We can *do less* of something that we are already doing and that is fine to do but not if done in excess. Perhaps it is something we are currently doing too much of, like watching television.

The Biggest Change

With that backdrop, let us imagine for a moment that we can hear God's thoughts, and right now He is looking at each of us individually and evaluating our hearts, just as He tells us He does. We hear Him say to us, "I sure do love you, and I want you in my Family. However, before you can enter My Family, you must make changes, and the biggest change you need to make is"

Now we need to complete that sentence using one of the four possible changes—start doing, do more, stop doing, or do less of something—and hold that thought for a minute. While we all have many changes to make, we should be focusing now on the number-one change, the top-priority change that we need to make. Envision for a minute what it would be like—what would be different—when we have successfully completed this change.

We certainly cannot assume that we are thinking as God thinks, for we know that even the wisest of men are but fools when compared to the wisdom of God (I Corinthians 1:25). More likely than not, the particular change that we are thinking about right now is nothing new to us. We all need to make changes, and we know what many of those changes are. In many instances we have been trying to make this exact change for some time, but for whatever reason, we have been unsuccessful thus far.

Why? Why is change so difficult?

To answer this question, we must each turn back the clock. From the time we were born, all of our experiences have been shaping and molding our hearts and minds. Our personalities and habits have gradually formed and been cast as a result of our own personal histories. None of us has experienced exactly the same things, and we are all somewhat unique in our behaviors. This is why it is so difficult to know someone unless we know his life's story: where he grew up, what his childhood was like, what school he went to, how often he moved, what his father or mother did for a living, and so on.

It is during this process of living that people develop behavior patterns and habits. These patterns are performed so often that they become almost involuntary responses. They are deeply entrenched and therefore difficult to break. We can think of them as being like a 5-inch strip of a rubber tire. We can stretch, twist, or compress it, but as soon as we let it go, it snaps back to its original shape. The harder we stretch one of these patterns, the more uncomfortable we become, and likewise the more resistance we feel.

Herein lies the difficulty with change. Often, we think we want to change, yet inwardly our human nature, our carnality, suggests that we really want to remain the same. This is our internal resistance to change. It is like a spring stretched out, struggling to return to its former shape—in our case, to the old man. Our resistance to putting on the new man of Ephesians 4 is indeed our carnality. Our carnal minds have a proclivity to embrace any other option rather than changing what is comfortable to us.

In Romans 7:15, Paul relates his struggle with change: "For what I am doing, I do not understand. For what I will to do, that I do not practice; but what I hate, that I do." The things we hate are habits or behaviors that resist change, even when we know that we should have discarded them long ago.

The power of longstanding habits and behaviors can be overwhelming. We try with all of our might to establish a new way of doing things, while the cognitive processes, which are now automatic, are working behind the scenes to undermine our efforts. They continuously work against us to create and promote an emotional drive that urges us to behave in the familiar, albeit undesired way.

The only way out of this trap is the same way we got into it, and that happened oh-so-gradually. We must consciously retrain our minds and develop new habits, new behaviors.

But how?

Making Change Happen

Before we can begin to go down the road of making successful changes, we must recognize and be convicted of the need to change. As Paul tells us in Ephesians 4, we must evaluate ourselves against God's righteousness and true holiness to identify the specific changes we need to make.

However, we cannot stop there. We need to write them down, and we should categorize them into one of the four actions identified above: Start, Do More, Stop, Do Less.

We also must understand and truly believe the reasons for making the change. We need to envision what life will be like—what *we* will be like—when we have made this change. What differences will we notice in ourselves and in our relationships with our mates, our families, our coworkers, and our friends?

The biggest barrier to change is a lack of motivation or conviction to start the change process. But as Christians in God's church, we have an incredible motivation in the prospect of the future inheritance as sons of God. For instance, Paul writes in Romans 8:18, "For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us" (see I John 3:1-2). We have an awesome potential!

So, the first attribute of successful change is *change readiness*. We must be ready to change, and we must ask God to help us identify changes that need to be made. If we have the willingness to improve, the understanding of the changes that we need to make, and the underlying reasons why we need to make them, then we have a solid start towards making change happen.

However, human nature is impatient when it comes to change. Change is uncomfortable, and research indicates that it takes on average 21 days to create or change habits. The human mind wants to see instantaneous results, but we must remember that change is hard work. There are no short cuts to successful change.

After all, God created time for our benefit. He is outside of the constraints of time, and with His speed of thought, He could certainly transform us instantly. However, in His wisdom our Almighty Creator knows that instantaneous change would come too easy for us, and it would probably not be everlasting. He is not willing to take this risk.

The changing-over-time part of this equation for man is crucial. It takes time for us to overcome our weaknesses and to put on the new man. Realizing that it takes time, we must stay the course of change. Notice Paul's encouragement in II Corinthians 4:16-18:

Therefore we do not lose heart. Even though our outward man is perishing, yet the inward man is being renewed day by day. For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory, while we do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal.

We must stay focused on the need for change. We will need endurance and commitment, not just to change, but to *complete the change*—to take the process all the way to the end. While the outward, physical man may be growing weak, the inward, spiritual man—our hearts—will be renewed. The trials, the difficulties of our changes, while severe, will produce for us a far more exceeding and eternal joy and glory.

The final and most important attribute of successful change is *maintaining faith* in God the Father and Jesus Christ. It is through them and with them that all change is possible. Our carnal minds provide the greatest resistance to spiritual change, and therefore we cannot go it alone.

Successful change requires our Helper, God's Holy Spirit (John 14:16, 26; 15:26; 16:7). We must ask for God's help, His strength, to keep our hearts and minds focused on positive change even though we are in the midst of trials. The apostle Paul declares in Philippians 4:13, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." And so can we. Our need for change and our need for the strength and guidance to change should be a part of our daily prayer. Through constant contact with God—who is driving these necessary, spiritual changes—we will maintain our faith in Him.

Called to Change

In Ephesians 4:22-24, Paul instructs us to change: to put off the old man and to put on the new man. We must change our heart. We need to develop new attitudes, desires, and behaviors modeled after God's holy character.

God is creating us in His image, and this process of change to this end is difficult and uncomfortable for our carnal minds. Yet, to continue without change is, in effect, to ensure failure! God has given us incredible motivation in the prospect of being His heirs and joint-heirs with Christ. What an astounding goal!

Before we can start to change, we must recognize the need to change through self-evaluation. We should ask God for help in identifying the changes that we need to make. Whatever the change—Start, Do More, Stop, Do Less—we should write it down and the reasons why we need to change it. We should vividly envision what will be different when the change is made.

No change happens overnight, and we must with endurance and commitment remain focused on our need for change—our need to put off the old man and put on the new one—because our carnality vigorously resists spiritual change. To overcome, we must work diligently, asking God daily for His help. For us, successful change is a requirement, not just an option: God has called us to this process of spiritual preparation for His Kingdom.

Paul proclaims in II Corinthians 5:17, "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new." To be in Christ is to be united to Him by faith. If we are united to Christ by faith, we will live like Him. Of necessity, changes will be produced in our renewed hearts, and we will become new, a work of God's divine, creative power even more magnificent than when He created the universe out of nothing.