

SIGNING ON THE DOTTED LINE!

[I REALLY WANT TO CHANGE...SO, HELP ME GOD]

The story is told about a man living out on the edge of town who heard a commotion in his back yard. He investigated and discovered there was a very hostile gorilla up in his tree. He immediately called 911, and it wasn't long until an animal control officer was on the scene with a big ferocious dog, a pair of handcuffs, and a shotgun.

Turning to the homeowner the officer said, "Here's what we have to do. I'll climb up the tree and shake it as hard as I can. When the gorilla falls out, the dog will leap upon him and with his powerful jaws clamp down on the gorilla's neck and paralyze him. While he's paralyzed, you put the handcuffs on the gorilla and we'll have him."

"Okay," the man said. So the officer started climbing the tree. Suddenly the man hollered, "Wait a minute. You forgot to tell me what the shotgun is for." "Well," the officer said, "when I start shaking the tree, if I fall out instead of the gorilla, you shoot the dog."

I guess what we're going to do this morning is trying to shake some trees that might cause us to make some choices and change—like we talked about last week. And if something hostile or hurtful falls out, hopefully we'll get rid of it. But if you or I fall out, we will need to do something to see that our lives are what they ought to be.

As we continue our study from James MacDonald's book, I REALLY WANT TO CHANGE...SO, HELP ME GOD, today we add to last week's lesson about change and actually making the choice to do just that! I want you to think back three months ago to our study about success God's way and what our priority goal as a Christian should be: to know Christ and to be conformed to His likeness. But some of you are still asking HOW? Well, at the conclusion of last week's lesson, what two truths did we learn?

#1: ADMIT THAT **I** AM THE PROBLEM.

#2: TURN: ONLY GOD CAN CHANGE THE HEART

Open your Bible to **ROMANS 12:1-2 (NLT)** and let's begin there.

¹And so, dear brothers and sisters, I plead with you to give your bodies to God because of all he has done for you. Let them be a living and holy sacrifice—the kind he will find acceptable. This is truly the way to worship him. ²Don't copy the behavior and customs of this world, but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think. Then you will learn to know God's will for you, which is good and pleasing and perfect.

So let's begin by considering this question. "If you were to evaluate your spirituality and your closeness to God, how would you rate it?" Now please be honest. The answer is just between you and God. And God will know whether you're telling the truth or not. Would you answer, *"I believe in God with all my heart, & Jesus Christ is my Savior & Lord? I've committed myself to do the things He wants me to do. As a result, I feel at peace within, & at peace with others. I spend time pouring out my heart to Him in prayer, & in listening to Him by reading His Word. And I try to show my faith by what I do, & how I live before others."*

Or would you answer, *"Well, you would probably rate me as being weak or even dead spiritually because I'm really not much interested in the things of God? Frankly, I'm here, but I would rather be playing golf or doing something else."*

Then again, maybe you would answer, *"I'm someplace in-between. I guess you would say I have one foot in the world & one foot in the church. I vacillate back & forth. When it's appropriate to be seen as a Christian, then that's what I am. Otherwise, I'm mostly like all the other people around me."*

Now, what answer fits you? You see, I think a problem we have in our relationship with God is that many of us have kind of flirted with it most of our lives. And we live in a society that encourages that attitude. Most of us have never really been tested in our

faith. We've never been persecuted like Christians are persecuted in Communist China or Muslim Iraq, or in the First Century. We live in a country that tolerates us. **(VIVIAN GILMER STORY)**

People around us may not embrace our faith, or even much condone it. But they would say, "It's okay for you to have it, if you want. Just don't try to impose it on me." And they tolerate us going to church and doing Christian things whenever we feel like it. But we've never really been tested. And I guess the question in all our minds ought to be, "If I'm ever tested, will I pass the test?"

Just before I graduated from college, a friend and I enlisted in the military, the Air Force Reserve, and we began our training by going to "boot camp" in San Antonio, Texas. During that period of time they completely deprogram you. They cut your hair, give you a uniform so you look like everybody else, teach you to salute & to respond to your superiors in certain ways, and to obey commands instantly without question even though you may not understand why.

In effect, they deprogram you and then reprogram you to think and act effectively and efficiently as a confident member of the armed forces. As you well know, the U.S. Army seeks to enlist you in this by challenging you to "Be all that you can be." And the Marines dare you to become a part of "The Few – The Proud – The Marines!"

Now in a very real sense, as Christians, we need this too - to be deprogrammed and then reprogrammed so that we can honestly say, "I believe in God with all my heart, and I've committed myself to do the things He wants me to do." With that answer in mind, look again at the words of Paul from several translations of the second verse we just read in Romans 12:2:

²And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God. (KJV)

²Don't become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You'll be changed from the inside out. Readily recognize what he wants from you, and quickly respond to it. Unlike the culture around you, always dragging you down to its level of immaturity, God brings the best out of you, develops well-formed maturity in you. (The Message)

²Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect. (NASB)

Obviously, the Apostle Paul thinks that what he urges is possible. But how? How can we change from being the kind of person who vacillates, who lives with one foot in the world and one foot in the church, to being “all you can be” in God’s sight?

Well, first of all, I’m convinced there is no way we can do it by ourselves. It will only be as we allow the Holy Spirit to work in our lives that there is any hope for such a change to occur. But that is exactly what the Holy Spirit is doing today. Recall one of our memory verses over the past few weeks—**Philippians 4:13**: *“I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.”*

The Bible says that He is convicting the world of sin and righteousness, and of our need for Jesus. When we respond to that, He continues the work of transforming our hearts and our minds. And that is what I want us to look at a little this morning. This process of changing between our conversion and our glorification is called what? Remember? **SANCTIFICATION**. What is that? (BEING MADE HOLY-THE PROCESS OF BECOMING MORE LIKE CHRIST AND BEING TRANSFORMED INTO HIS LIKENESS).

First, we have to **CHANGE OUR MINDS**. A few moments ago we read Romans 12:1-2. Look at those verses and notice that we are challenged to change our mind about 3 different things.

A. First of all, we're challenged to **change our mind about God**. Verse 1 says, "I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy..." By the way, how do you perceive God? Do you see Him as a tyrant, one who is just waiting for you to make a mistake so He can pounce on you? Or do you see Him as a loving, gentle, heavenly Father who lifts you up, encourages & embraces you? Psychologists tell us that usually our perception of God is molded by our relationship with our earthly father. If your earthly father was a harsh disciplinarian, and he insisted that you toe the line all the time; then probably your perception of God is much like that.

But they say that if your earthly father was loving and gentle and tender, then probably your perception of God is more like that. And when Jesus pictures God to us, He tells of a father waiting anxiously for his son who had gone astray, and who welcomed him with open arms when he came home again. Remember our story last week about the prodigal son in Luke 15?

Jesus said, "**God is like that.**" Now if you have trouble seeing God like that, let me suggest that you do 2 things: #1, take a long, hard look at the cross. If you do, it will remind you of how horrible our sins are, and how deep is God's love for us.

#2, take a long, hard look at God's Word because it tells us again & again of God's love. Listen to these words, *"...let us love one another, for love comes from God. ...This is how God showed His love among us: He sent His one & only Son into the world that we might live through Him. ...Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another"* [1 John 4:7a, 9, 11].

So the first thing is to change your mind about God. For if your perception of God is wrong everything else will be wrong, too.

B. Here is the second change. **Change your mind about your body**. In Romans 12:1 Paul continues on saying, *"I urge you...to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God..."*

We've been programmed to think that our bodies belong only to us. So we hear such slogans as: "It's your body, and you have the right to choose," and "If it feels good, go ahead and do it." That's basically the attitude of the world. That's even the Nike slogan—*"Just Do It!"*

But God's Word teaches that our bodies don't belong to us alone. Not only are we God's creation, but **1 Corinthians 6:19-20** says, *"Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body."*

C. Thirdly, **change your mind about the world**. Verse 2 says, *"Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test & approve what God's will is – His good, pleasing & perfect will."*

Now the ways of the world have always been in conflict with the ways of God. But the difference, it seems to me, is getting greater. And it is so real that almost everyone can sense it. The world sees things one way, and God sees them in another. Can you think of any examples? What about movies or events we see or hear about that years ago would have created outrage and shock?

As I was flipping the TV channels a few weeks ago looking for something entertaining, I came across a movie with Robin Williams and Nathan Lane in it. The TV Guide Channel said it was a *"warm, humorous, family film"* and it was called "The Birdcage." Though I've never seen this movie, the movie is based on the plot of Williams and Lane playing a homosexual couple, and Gene Hackman playing a conservative politician who messes up their gay lifestyle. Yet, the review said it was a *"warm, humorous, family film."* Now wait a minute. The world's thinking has become so skewed that it can take a perverted script and interpret it as a *"warm, humorous, family film."* You see, if you

walk in the ways of the world long enough, you get all twisted around and begin to think that sin is normal, and what used to be evil is good, and what used to be good is evil.

So we need to turn our “eyes upon Jesus. Look full in His wonderful face. Then the things of the world will grow strangely dim as we look at His love & His grace.”

II. CHANGING OUR HEARTS

A. Now here’s the second part – **“Changing our hearts.”** You see, if we change our minds and don’t change our hearts, then it just won’t work.

The Bible talks about all kinds of spiritual heart problems. There are hard hearts & troubled hearts & selfish, divided, boastful, unrepentant, lying, callous, doubting, lustful, slow to believe hearts. So the real need is for us to change our hearts. When David faced up to his sin in **Psalm 51**, he realized his need. So he wrote, *“Create in me a pure heart, O God.”*

A lot of times in the church we’re frustrated because we think we’re doing a bad job of teaching people, and people don’t know what to do. But I’m convinced, the older I get, that’s not the problem. The problem is not teaching. Most people know what to do. The problem is a heart that doesn’t want to do the right thing.

C. So the important question is: “How do we get a new heart?” Here are 4 steps:

1. First of all, “Humble yourselves before God.” Jesus said, “Unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.” So first of all, we have to humble ourselves before God.

Jeremiah 13:23 says, “Can the Ethiopian change his skin or the leopard its spots? Neither can you do good who are accustomed to doing evil.”

In other words, if you have lived a life of rebellion against God, and the sins are deep inside, you are not going to change overnight, and you just can't do it by yourself. So humble yourself before God and ask for His help. Before the alcoholic can begin to break his addiction he must finally admit, "I can't do this by myself, I need help from above. I need God to help me."

And the Christian is the same way. Neither our minds nor our hearts will be changed until we humble ourselves before God. The Bible calls that repentance, or "changing your direction, and going a different way." So do that. Grit your teeth and say, "I'm going to change my direction."

2. Secondly, decide to obey God. In the military they're taught to obey orders even though they don't understand the reason for them. In Christ it is pretty much the same way. You may not understand why God asks you to do certain things, but He is the Commander in Chief, & if He has commanded it you will do it because your heart & mind have been changed.

What does Jesus say in The Great Commission, **Matthew 28:19**? *"Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."* And Ezekiel says, "I will remove from them their heart of stone and I will give them a heart of flesh."

3. Thirdly, "Do the right thing regardless of your feelings." If you wait until you feel like doing it, you may wait a long time. I've discovered that most times our feelings will follow our actions. So do the right thing when you know the right thing to do, even though you may not feel like doing it.

Dr. W. A. Criswell was pastor of First Baptist Church in Dallas, Texas for over 55 years. After being married 50 years to his wife, he said *"Sometimes I love her so much I could just eat her up. At other times I wish I had eaten her up."* So it is not always easy.

4. Now here is #4, "Expect progress, but not perfection." One of our problems is we think that when we do the right things, God will just make us into perfect little saints who never think wrong thoughts or want to do the wrong things again. But that's not true. As long as we're residents of this world Satan is going to be seeking to entice us to slip back into his grasp again.

So expect to be making progress, to be getting closer to God, but don't expect perfection. We'll never be perfect this side of heaven. But we can be forgiven, and be growing upward in Christ as long as we live.

As we move along this course of sanctification and growing more like Christ, we need to be mindful that it's going to be a hard journey. Turn to **HEBREWS 12:5-23 (NLT)** and listen to these words: *⁵And you have forgotten that word of encouragement that addresses you as sons: "My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, ⁶because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son." ⁷Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father? ⁸If you are not disciplined (and everyone undergoes discipline), then you are illegitimate children and not true sons. ⁹Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of our spirits and live! ¹⁰Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness. ¹¹No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it. ¹²Therefore, strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees. ¹³"Make level paths for your feet," so that the lame may not be disabled, but rather healed.*

So, what is God's ultimate goal for you and I as His children again? (TO LOOK LIKE HIS SON). Turn to **1 Corinthians 3:18 (NLT)**: *¹⁸Stop deceiving yourselves. If you think you are wise by this world's standards, you need to become a fool to be truly wise.*

Are you so committed that you would stand up for Jesus regardless of the circumstances that surround you? Is your heart and mind in tune with the Lord? Or are you just kind of someplace in-between? Or maybe you are way over here somewhere, completely separated from God.

You're the only one who can answer those questions. If you need to make some changes today, humble yourself before the Lord, be obedient to Him, to His commands whatever they might be for you today. Make those decisions. We urge you to do that. Begin to do the right thing even though you might not feel like it, and you'll notice some real progress in your life. Are you ready to sign on the dotted line for Christ?

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