

Choosing to Change
[Who Am I... In Christ – Part 3]

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Ypsilanti Free Methodist Church

Change is never easy. I used to say that no one likes change, but I discovered that there are some people who actually thrive on it. So, I now believe that *most* people do not like change. The reasons why people resist or dislike change vary. Garrison Wynn, who is a change management consultant in Houston, Texas, has compiled a “Top Ten List” of reasons why most people resist change. Here is a look at that list:

1. The individual's personal predisposition to change.
2. Surprise and fear of the unknown.
3. Climate of mistrust.
4. Fear of failure.
5. Loss of status and/or job security.
6. Peer pressure.
7. Disruption of cultural traditions and/or group relationships.
8. Personality conflicts.
9. Lack of tact and/or poor timing.
10. Not seeing the benefits.

While this list is referring to changes in our outward environment or circumstances, it does seem to be a pretty good list for inward or personal change, as well. The many unknowns of what change will bring cause most people to resist changing. When change is thrust upon us, our backs tend to stiffen and our muscles tighten as we resolve to hold on to all the things with which we are familiar and comfortable. And, when change is “suggested,” we will often give mental assent without any true intention of following through.

So, here we are with Paul’s letter to the Ephesians and he has arrived at the point where he challenges his readers to change. He is not suggesting a change of location or a rearrangement of their environment. He is urging them (and us) to change their very attitudes and actions. He is calling for a change in character and he does so in the most intense fashion.

As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. [Ephesians 4:1 ~ NIV]

Referencing his own imprisonment for the Lord, Paul begins by indicating how serious he is about his request. Then, he says to them, “I *urge* you.” Other translations show the intensity found in the original Greek by using the terms “I *beseech* you” or “I *beg* you.” Paul wants his readers to know this is not to be taken lightly, but is to be considered a priority, if not *the* priority.

In the first half of his letter, Paul has laid out the foundation of who believers *are* in Christ. Paul now moves to this call for action, this urging to *be* the person we are in Christ, and *being* in Christ means *becoming* more like Him, which means *changing*. So, as we look at the fourth chapter of Ephesians...

We Are Challenged to Change (Ephesians 4:1 ff)

Let’s look together at the first six verses of Ephesians, chapter 4.

¹As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. ²Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. ³Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. ⁴There is one body and one Spirit – just as you were called to one hope when you were called – ⁵one Lord, one faith, one baptism; ⁶one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all.

What Paul urges his readers to do is to live in a way that is worthy of Christ. The word Paul used that we translate “to live” comes from a compound Greek word - παραπατεω (per-a-pa-*teh*-oh) – which literally means to walk or “tramp” around. It conjures up a picture of someone on a long hike or journey. It was used to convey the idea of how someone conducts their life. So, Paul was begging his readers to live in a way that best represented this Jesus in whom they had committed their lives.

Paul’s words are so pertinent to us today. We live in a time when there seems to be a dichotomy – a split – between our thoughts and our beliefs. I don’t say between our thoughts and our actions because we do tend to act based on what we really believe. But, people do have a tendency to express thoughts that do not align with their true beliefs, and, therefore their actions.

Let me give you a common example. If you watch an awards show on television, you will often hear a performer say something in their acceptance speech like, “I want to thank Jesus for making this possible. It’s because of him that I was able to do this.” Yet, the person making

that very statement was receiving an award for a song that included extremely immoral content or for a movie in which they were portraying extremely sinful behaviors. Unfortunately, the way the musician or actor lived everyday would often look more like the song's content or their movie character than the kind of morality you would ascribe to Jesus! Yet, in their *thinking* it was right to give Jesus credit even though they didn't really *believe* in Him to the degree that it would change how they lived.

As Christians, we would think that such a dichotomy wasn't possible, yet it happens quite regularly. We might profess we are Christians, members of this local church, and think that by being a part of the church then we are doing all the right things. But, if some of our "thinking" doesn't translate into "believing" – if we don't live out the "thoughts" we absorb from the Word of God and make them a part of our very fiber – then we can end up acting just like we would if we were not abiding in Christ. That is the kind of behavior that Paul later addresses in Ephesians 4: 17 and the verses that follow. While we will not have time to look at all of these verses right now, I encourage you to look at Ephesians 4:17 and following, and to do a self-check to see if any of these behaviors have crept into your own way of living, regardless how little. While we may think it's not a big thing, especially compared to what *others* do, if we find the Bible telling us not to do or live a certain way because it is destructive, then we need to accept the challenge to change.

We can begin correcting the split between our thoughts and our beliefs (and, consequently, our behaviors) by acknowledging the areas in which we struggle and by making a commitment to stop allowing these thoughts, attitudes and behaviors to continue.

Paul, in the first six verses of Ephesians 4, gives us a pattern or template to help us mentally make the switch. In verse one, he gives us the challenge to change: *I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received.* Then, he lays out the needed attitudes, actions and motivation.

In verse two, Paul tells his readers what *attitudes* they need to develop in order to change their way of living: *Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love.* Now, for many of us, humility, gentleness and patience may not be three attitudes or characteristics that we naturally experience. However, in Galatians 5:22, when Paul describes the fruit of the Spirit – the new nature that God seeks to develop in every believer – these

characteristics are listed. They are characteristics that *God* can develop in us, a process that we will look at in a little bit.

As we have already noted, though, Paul never stops with our attitudes or ways of thinking. He always moves on to our corresponding *actions*. In this case, he doesn't begin with any specific action, but rather a call to action in Ephesians 4:3 – *Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace*. He is telling his readers that these attitudes or characteristics – humility, gentleness, and patience – need to be used to guide our behavior toward one another. We are to do whatever it takes to maintain and develop true unity in the Body of Christ.

Why? Paul gives us our motivation in the following three verses: ⁴*There is one body and one Spirit – just as you were called to one hope when you were called –* ⁵*one Lord, one faith, one baptism;* ⁶*one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all*. Our God is not a God of division and strife. He has called us to live in unity with Him and with one another. Therefore, if we are going to accept the challenge to change that Paul gives in Ephesians 1 - *to live a life worthy of the calling you have received* – then we must develop the attitudes and characteristics of humility, gentleness and patience deeply enough in our hearts so that our actions will flow from them.

I know the biggest question that arises from this is *HOW?* How can we overcome our natural tendencies and change the attitudes and characteristics that are already so engrained in us? It's true that some changes we can make in ourselves, while others, try as we might, we can't seem to alter. Concerning such characteristics and attitudes, there is good news. Our Lord is not interested in merely helping us conform to certain expectations. Rather He is most interested in transforming our hearts and minds and, knowing that we cannot do this on our own, He provides all that is necessary for us to change.

We Are Empowered by God to Change (Eph. 4:7ff)

In all of Paul's letters, you will find a firm belief that God will not ask or expect anything of His children that He is not ready to provide the resources needed by them to do it. Here, in Ephesians 4:7, Paul states, *But to each of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it*. God's grace is not only the means by which we are saved (Eph. 2:8) but also the means by which

we can live the Christian life. In His grace, God empowers us – He provides the motivation and the means – to change.

Paul had experienced this over and over in His walk with Christ, and the resulting change in Him was amazing. Before Christ, you might have described Paul’s lifestyle as frenetic. His intense personality and internal turmoil led him to be a point person for persecuting the new Christian movement. He was the one at Stephen’s stoning (recorded in Acts 7) who urged the mob on and was the “overseer” of that first century lynching. But, after Paul was confronted with the risen Jesus on the road to Damascus (in Acts 9) and after God transformed Paul’s heart and mind, Paul was truly a different person. Where he had once been a self-motivated, “self-sufficient” kind of guy who was never satisfied, Paul became secure in knowing that he was always in God’s care – whether he was organizing a new group of Christians or was sitting, chained to a guard, in a Roman prison! That led to his ability to declare in Philippians 4:13 that, regardless of his circumstances, *“I can do everything through him who gives me strength.”*

Motivated by the knowledge that God would always provide exactly what he needed in any situation, Paul’s trust in God grew and he found the means to change, becoming the greatest human influence in the first century Church. We, too, can be motivated with knowing that God will provide the means for us to change, but what are some of those means?

First of all, in His grace, God empowers us to change through His Word. Mankind has always been affected by the power of the word. Whether spoken or written, words have always influenced the lives and actions of people. Inspiring speeches have served as motivation for individuals and nations to both change and to do unbelievable things. The written word has been equally powerful to inspire change. However, there is no word ever spoken – no word ever recorded or printed – that has had the enduring transformational power of the Word of God.

In Hebrews 4:12, the writer of Hebrews declared, *“For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.”*

Over the years, I have had the privilege of knowing men who have been involved in the ministry of the Gideons. This organization has been involved in distributing Bibles for many, many years and they have recorded innumerable stories of the transformational power of God’s Word. People who have read the Scriptures, many for the first time, have personally experienced

the truth of Hebrew 4:12 as God's Word has penetrated their soul, challenged their deepest held beliefs, and guided them to a new life in Christ.

As Christians, God has provided His Word for us as a means to change. No matter what the needed change is, we will find the principles and guidance needed for it in the Word. Yet, it is far too common for people to leave their Bible by their bedside or on a shelf all week long, only to crack it open on a Sunday morning, leaving our souls for most of the week grumbling like an empty stomach hungry for nourishment.

Do you want to be empowered to change? Make the Bible a part of your daily routine. Spend time reading it and thinking about how it applies to your life. Pray for God's guidance and understanding as you read. Discuss it with others and seek for ways to apply it. This is how God uses His Word in our lives.

In tandem with His Word, in His grace, God also empowers us to change through His Holy Spirit. Before His death and resurrection, Jesus shared these words with His disciples that are recorded in John 14:15-17: ¹⁵ *"If you love me, you will obey what I command. ¹⁶And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor to be with you forever – ¹⁷the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you."*

Later, in the same conversation (in John 14:25-26), Jesus went on to say, ²⁵ *"All this I have spoken while still with you. ²⁶But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you."* From Jesus' words here, we can see that the Holy Spirit is more than just a renewed "conscience." He is more than our personal "Jiminy Cricket," if you will. He is the One that Jesus tells us in John 16:13, will guide us in all truth. He will guide us in the process of *changing* as we seek to be more like Christ.

This empowering by the Holy Spirit is also what Paul is referring to in Ephesians 3:16-17a, where he writes, *"I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith."* God's Holy Spirit supernaturally strengthens us so that we *can* change; we *can* overcome the attitudes and actions that we seek to change; we *can* experience the life in the Spirit that Paul describes in Galatians chapter 5.

What do *we* have to do? Invite Him into our lives. We need to be willing to ask the Holy Spirit to fill us with His presence and to then guide us every step of the way! For some of us, this requires breaking our will. It will mean consciously stepping down from being the one in charge of our lives and turning the reins over to God. Oh, we may have thought we did that when we first believed in Christ, but too often we have found ourselves still calling the shots at times when it would have been much better to yield to the Holy Spirit's guidance! But, being the gentleman that He is, God does not force His will upon us. *We* have to consciously surrender to His Will and, in that process, trust the Holy Spirit to guide and change us.

For some people, this kind of talk seems too "mystical". Some people relate to the little girl in the story who was scared in the night. When she called out, her mother came to her side and reassured her that she had nothing to fear because God was always with her. The little girl, after giving this some thought, said to her mother, "I know that. But right now, I need someone with skin on!"

So, if you are thinking you need "someone with skin on" to help you really change, you'll be glad to know that God has provided this, too! God knows our human needs and abilities, so He does provide the additional help we need to change.

We Are Helped to Change (Ephesians 4:11ff)

Look with me at Ephesians 4:11-16, where Paul writes,

¹¹It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, ¹²to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up ¹³until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. ¹⁴Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming. ¹⁵Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. ¹⁶From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.

Paul is telling his readers that they are not left on their own to change. In fact, they are not left to only the Word of God and the Holy Spirit, although, these would be sufficient for change. No, Paul lets us know that God goes the extra mile and provides additional help for us to change.

First, God provides instructors and “personal trainers” to help us. When you look at the list of gifted people God provides – apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers – it probably reminds you of specific people that God has brought into your life. I am talking about those people that have been there when you’ve needed someone to teach you, to encourage you, to challenge you, to correct you, and to spur you on toward the things of God. These are the “someones with skin on” that God uses to help us change!

These are also the people who work together within the Body of Christ to accomplish God’s greater goal for the Church. Paul points out in Ephesians 4:16 how God helps us to change as we participate in the ministries of the church. He writes, *From him (Christ) the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.* We are not only to be recipients of the help from others in the Church, but we are to participate in the building up of God’s Body through the various ministries in which we are involved. Throughout the month of November, we will be considering how this happens. We will see the practical ways that we can be positive change makers in both our lives and the lives of others in the church.

For this change – for any change to happen in us, though, - there is a pivotal stand alone statement of Paul’s that we need to look at. It is found in Ephesians 5:21 and it tells us that God helps us to change as we learn to submit. In the midst of practical instruction and examples of how we are to “live a life worthy of the calling you have received,” Paul almost seems to stop in mid-sentence and declare, *“Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.”*

Submission is never easy. There is a part of us that hopes and wishes for others to submit to us – to our will and our desires – but, the idea of submitting to someone else almost seems like we are surrendering and giving in, and that runs counter to our nature. Nonetheless, our counter-culture God declares through His servant Paul that we are to do what we would rather not do. But, again, He leaves the choice up to us.

We Must Choose to Change.

I said it earlier and I’ll say it again: God is a gentleman and he will not force you to do anything. Rather, God invites us to change. He does not make us change. Jesus gave this invitation in Matthew 11:28-30 when He said, ²⁸ *“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. ²⁹Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle*

and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”

At the time that Jesus said this, it was common for young men to seek out a rabbi with whom they wished to study and model their lives after. The entirety of a rabbi’s teaching was called his “yoke.” So, Jesus was inviting His listeners to come and become His disciples – His students and followers – who would learn from Him and model their lives after Him. Those who accepted His invitation became the foundation or the original members of the Church. It was through them that the message of Christ was spread and the message has continued to spread through His disciples – the Church – ever since.

What that means for you and me is this: Choosing to really change and become like Christ will mean living it out in the context of The Church. Again, I refer you to Ephesians 4:17 and the verses that follow where Paul gives specific instructions on how to live within the context of the Body of Christ. I challenge you to spend time on your own in this passage and to hold it up as a standard to see how you compare. Let God use His word to direct you in the needed areas of change and begin working with God to make those changes.

By choosing to change, we accept God’s standard as our guide to living. By choosing to change, we recognize the need for both God’s supernatural intervention and the help of His people to become more like Christ. When we choose to change, we recognize that *being* precedes *doing*. In other words, the actions Paul points to result from and proceed from who we *are* in Christ. You *are* significant, sufficient, secure, and you are set free in Christ to live a holy life. Therefore, don’t conform to the world’s ways, but *be* holy, because God is holy [*I Peter 1:13-16*]... and *change* as God empowers and helps you to change.