

Sermon: The Power to Change

Lloyd Stille

Scriptures: Ephesians 4:7-11

Introduction

Every year, around 45 percent of us in America seize upon the desire for a fresh start at New Year's and make one or more resolutions. Now we all know what a resolution is. It is a commitment that we make to ourselves regarding a project or a habit that usually calls for some kind of lifestyle change. We want to lose weight, exercise more, quit smoking or drinking, get out of debt. These make the top 10 resolves annually. We feel determined. We join a fitness center or a 12-step program or buy a book. We create a plan for change.

Yet every year, 97 percent of us with firm resolve fail. Early efforts prove to be a flash in the pan, and in the end, we don't lose weight, exercise more, stop smoking or drinking, or get out of debt. Usually by June, it's over and we are left unchanged. Why is that?

Even more significant, there are scores of people who claim Christ as their personal Lord and Savior, but whose lifestyle shows little difference from those who make no such claim. It's so common, we no longer think it all that strange that someone who says they are Christians routinely gets drunk like the world, talks like the world, engages in unmarried sex like the world, struggles with rage like the world, divorces at the same rate as the world, and does business like the world, yet all the while saying and believing that Jesus has delivered them from this world and that the sins they are persisting in are forgiven and they are heaven-bound.

Taking these patterns down to a personal level, there are some in this room who struggle and agonize to be free from a weaknesses, habits, and sinful patterns that took root in your pre-Christian days, yet years into your walk with Christ, after multiple tries and much prayer, you remain unchanged. Why is that? What's missing?

This morning, in the third in our series of studies on the topic "Changed from the Inside Out, we want to hear from God about "The Power to Change." I want to show you the resources that are already yours in Christ by which you can break free from those fleshly patterns that have a grip on you. If you've been with us lately, you know the address: Ephesians 4!

Two weeks ago, we opened to v. 1, which speaks of "walking worthy of the calling" we have received. That's phrase pictures a great scale on one side of which you put all that Jesus has done for you and is for you. Then you step on the other side of the scale. Walking worthy means both sides balance. In other words, my behavior, my attitudes, my words, even my inner thoughts are the outworking of His life in me.

Last week, v. 2 showed us what your life will look like when you're walking worthy. You will be humble rather than self-centered, gentle rather than argumentative, patient rather than reactionary, and forbearing rather than judgmental toward other people. We will be the sort of people who generate harmony with those around them, as v. 3-6 described. So many of the sinful habits and patterns we are losing the battle with have to do with these four attitudes. So how do we become like this?

To find your answer, you're going to have to take a little journey with Jesus. Verses 7-10 actually take us to one of the most mysterious points in Jesus' ministry: that period between His death and His resurrection. What was Jesus doing during those three days? And how can that help me break long-standing addictions or forgive someone who has deeply wounded me or stop cursing or break free from pornography? If you're ready for real life change in Christ, take a glimpse beyond the grave to find out:

"Now grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of the Messiah's gift. For it says: When He ascended on high, He took prisoners into captivity; He gave gifts to people. But what does "He ascended" mean except that He descended to the lower parts of the earth? The One who descended is the same as the One who ascended far above all the heavens, that He might fill all things." (Ephesians 4:7-10)

Let's establish some principles for lasting change from this passage.

I. Every Christian can change - v. 7

In Louisiana where I grew up, we learned the word *lagniappe*. It means "something extra" and refers to an unexpected gift that you didn't know was coming. When you were saved, Jesus threw some *lagniappe* your way. After showing you grace in saving your soul, He added something very special. Along with saving grace, He gives you serving grace.

Verse 7 reads, "Now grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of the Messiah's gift." To every true believer, Jesus gives the capacity, the enabling, the supernatural ability to pass on grace to others. He works in you so that you become a conduit of His goodness in the lives of others. He rewires your inner world so that you are a channel through whom He can work, passing grace on so that others are strengthened, encouraged, and given wisdom. When you were saved, Jesus reworked your inner world so that you can make an effective and significant impact for Jesus' sake.

And notice the personal touch in the last part of the verse. This grace "was given to each one of us according to the measure of the Messiah's gift." Jesus acts out of His own generosity, exactly tailoring this gift of grace to fit who you are. In other words, this serving grace will not be a strain on you. It meshes with your unique personality to bring about God's glory and great joy in your life!

And here it is again in Scripture: every Christian can change. A caterpillar doesn't get a vote of whether it will become a butterfly. It doesn't try on cocoon to see if it likes the idea before moving in. God has built this transformation into its very essence.

In the same way, true Christians are changed from the inside out. You are meant to fly! Jesus equipped you to experience the abundant life of glorifying God in all you do. So anytime you hear someone who claims to be a Christian say, "I can't help the way I am. I've tried, but it just doesn't work for me!," you know there's a disconnection somewhere. Either they are confused or they are unconverted.

So think of that place in your life where you struggled and repeatedly failed. Look at the person next to you and say, "God's not finished with me yet. I can change."

II. Jesus made change possible - v. 8-10

Lean in now and walk with me through some unfamiliar territory. You're going to think that we're off the point for a few minutes, but this is at the very heart of your transformation into Christlikeness.

Verse 8 takes us to an Old Testament quotation from Psalm 68: "For (based on God's eternal intention to give the gift of grace to each believer through Christ) it says, "When He ascended on high, He led the captives; He gave gifts to people." We cannot understand what this means unless we grasp what Psalm 68 meant its context. David wrote it, and drew from his knowledge of military strategy in celebrating the triumph of God over Israel's enemies.

In ancient times when a nation conquered its enemy, the victorious king would lead a great procession through the streets of his home city. Behind him marched all of his troops in shining battle array. Along with the soldiers there were the prisoners of war who had been captured by the enemy, but were now freed by their victorious king.

Next in line are the conquered enemy armies, led by their vanquished king. They are in chains, humiliated in their utter defeat. Finally, there are livestock and wagon loads of gold, silver, jewelry, and valuables captured from the enemy. When the procession arrived at the palace, the king would order the distribution of the spoils of war. One by one, the people would be given some token of the king's victory, which serves as a constant reminder of the triumph over a formidable foe.

Now, take into Ephesians 4. Verse 8 describes a procession led by Jesus: "When He ascended on high, He led the captives, and He gave gifts to men." A tremendous battle has been won by our Lord. He took on the full force of a world's sin, allied as it was with death, and contended with the one behind both: Satan himself and his armies.

The final battle ensued atop a hill outside Jerusalem. There, suspended above the earth on a cross, Jesus unfolded the most surprising and unusual strategy ever conceived, so thoroughly taking our sin in His body that the Bible says He became sin, along with the curse of God sin brings, and then paying the penalty in full by His willing and innocent death in our place.

In response to this, Colossians 2:15 tells us that God "disarmed the rulers and authorities (a reference to powerful demonic forces) and disgraced them publicly; He triumphed over them by Him."

So King Jesus has in His processional ascension to heaven the shattered forces of the enemy. He also leads "a host of captives." We'll explain more on that in a moment. Finally, "He gave gifts to people." Along with the gift of the Holy Spirit, Jesus gave serving grace to each believer as a token reminder of His triumph.

But don't miss what happened after the battle. Verse 9 tells us that He "descended to the lower parts of the earth." Between His death and resurrection, Jesus went to a specific place for a specific purpose. While we don't know the geography in mind, we do get a hint about what He was doing there in I Peter 3:18-19, where we read that He was "put to death in the fleshly realm but made alive in the spiritual realm. In that state He also went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison."

So while they were burying His dead body on earth, His Spirit was very active. In the days of the OT and the Gospels, the Bible gives us brief glimpses into a place where the dead go while they await the final judgment of God. Jesus referred to this in Luke 16 as He focused on the deaths of the rich man and Lazarus. When the rich man died, he went to a place of torment called Hades, which is the place of those lost in sin. Lazarus died and went to what Jesus called "Abraham's side" or "Paradise," the place of those made righteous by God.

Peter says it was to this place that Jesus went and proclaimed what had happened. He announced His credentials. He declared His victory! This was the rest of what His "it is finished!" on the cross meant. He had fulfilled God's will. He had broken sin's power. He had won the battle! He makes this proclamation to those who had believed in God's promise of provision for sin in a coming Messiah. And He declares His triumph to those who had rejected God.

To some, it was a message of unspeakable joy; to others, it sealed their doom. Jesus went to the place of the dead, but not to stay, but to tear the gates of death off their hinges. The implication here and elsewhere is that He emptied Paradise of those who trusted in God's coming Messiah/Savior. And led them home in His processional. (I Peter 4:6)

"Okay, I get it. Jesus won! But how does that help me?" That leads us to the last principle.

III. It's time to act on the truth

All of us have seen what happens when it rains hard. Water finds the path of least resistance by which to flow to the lowest point. Let it rain enough and water runoff enough, and it will cut a groove into the dirt. Years of that and the groove can become a trench. Hundreds of years of that, and the trench can become a riverbed.

How do you stop water from flowing down the path of least resistance? You dam it up. How do you stop temptation from traveling down the well-worn path to sin it has found in you? You dam it up. With what?

Let me show you something that directly connects this account to your life. Romans 6:1-4:

"What should we say then? Should we continue in sin in order that grace may multiply? Absolutely not! How can we who died to sin still live in it? Or are you unaware that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? Therefore we were buried with Him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too may walk in a new way of life."

Breaking free from dominate power of sin is not an option for me as a Christian because everything Jesus accomplished on the cross and in the resurrection applies to me. He died for sin; I died to sin. He was raised victorious; I am raised victorious.

You say, "My head hurts pastor! Can you cut to the bottom line on this? How does all this enable me to change, to become more like Christ?" Just this way: You are totally linked to Christ in what He has won. Eph. 4:7-10 describes the moment in objective history when your spiritual freedom and transformation was accomplished. It's a done deal.

"Well, if that's so, why do I still lose more than I win?" One of two reasons: you either aren't a true Christian or you have not believed that the victory Jesus gained was also your victory. The question either way is, "Do you believe?" The fight against sin is called the fight of faith. You win by trusting that Jesus has already beaten your worst enemy! Do you believe?"