

“Is God’s Love Changing You?”

1 Peter 1:18-23, Mark 1:15, Acts 2:14a, 28, 32-33, 37-41

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Peter wrote. **1 Peter 1:18-23** “For you know that God paid a ransom to save you from the empty life you inherited from your ancestors. And the ransom God paid was not mere gold or silver. It was the precious blood of Christ, the sinless, spotless Lamb of God. God chose Jesus as your ransom long before the world began, but God has now revealed Jesus to you in these last days. Through Christ you have come to trust in God. And you have placed your faith and hope in God because God raised Christ from the dead and gave him great glory. You were cleansed from your sins when you obeyed the truth, so now you must show sincere love to each other as brothers and sisters. Love each other deeply with all your heart. For you have been born again, but not to a life that will quickly end. Your new life will last forever because it comes from the eternal, living word of God.

The secular study of human behavior has always seemed to be hopeless to me. It amazes me how little hope non-Christians have for change and a better life. There are many experts who tell us that change is almost impossible. They study one’s birth order, parents, education, class etc. From that, they are fairly certain that a person will react in a certain way. They confidently predict the type of life the person will live. Perhaps you know someone who lives like this and they are unsatisfied with their life, career, marriage, relationships etc. They still feel that they are powerless to change for the better. Some people view their life as if they were a puppet controlled by circumstances.

One of God’s great gifts to us is the gift of change. The Bible is full of people who were changed by God’s love. The fancy Biblical word for change is “repent.” This literally means “to turn”. In repentance, one turns from sin and turns towards God. In a more general sense it means a change of mind. Biblical scholar Robert Wall writes, “repentance is the internal and intellectual act of exchanging old beliefs for new ones.”

Jesus said from the very beginning he came to change us. Jesus very first words in the gospel of Mark are; **Mark 1:15** “**The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.**” On this second Sunday of Easter we continue to celebration God changing death into life and hate into love.

Encounters with Jesus change us. God changes our feelings, thoughts, perspective, choices, actions, words, even the direction of our life’s journey. Is Jesus daily changing you? Are you changing more and more into the likeness of Christ with every passing

moment? We should enjoy and welcome this type of change. Yet change of any kind is difficult and often change is feared, resisted and sometimes avoided at all costs.

Systems theory is the study of how people interact in different settings. It has been discovered that no matter the context most people's first reaction to change even if it is a positive and needed change is "You are wrong" the second reaction is "Change back" and the third is "Change back or I will ...". Now sometimes change can be presented in a manner that a person quickly works through these three responses sub-consciously but experts maintain that our typical response to change is your wrong, change back and change back or I will. Mark Twain realized this long before all this research and said, "The only thing that likes change is a wet baby".

Peter had a hard time changing. The first time Jesus told Peter about his death and resurrection. Peter took Jesus aside and told Jesus you shouldn't say things like that and began to correct Jesus. In essence Peter reacted "Your wrong" When Jesus told Peter and the disciples a second time about his death and resurrection they were afraid. Upon his third prediction the disciples started arguing over who would be in the place of honor. They reacted. Jesus you are wrong. Jesus change back were are afraid. Jesus change back or we will argue among ourselves.

Peter couldn't even muster up a significant change after Jesus resurrection and appearance to him. John chapter 21 tells how the resurrected Jesus ate a breakfast of bread and fish with Peter and seven of the disciples. After the meal Jesus asked Peter, do you agape me. Agape is the Greek word for sacrificial love. Peter replied, Jesus I phileo you. Phileo is the Greek word for friendship love perhaps a good English equivalent is I like you. Jesus asks him a second time do you agape me? Do you deeply love me? Again Peter replied Jesus I like you. The third time Jesus asked Peter do you like me and Peter said, Jesus I do like you. God's love for Peter and us is so amazing. Peter could not bring himself to change, to deeply love, Jesus so Jesus meet Peter where he was at, then God worked at changing Peter. God is the agent of change in our lives and in the world.

Luke explains in Acts how the Holy Spirit changed Peter from a terrified denier of Jesus to a bold public preacher. Peter's language and understanding of scripture changed to a level far superior to his education. Peter's reluctant pledge of like for Jesus changed into passionate witnessing and deep love for Jesus. Peter's impulsive and abrupt speech changed into an eloquent sermon on the history of Israel and its culmination in the resurrection of Christ. Listen to excerpts from Peter's sermon. **Acts 2:14a, 28, 32-33, 37-41** **"Then Peter stepped forward with the eleven other apostles and shouted to the crowd...God has shown me the way of life, and God will fill me with the joy of God's presence. God raised Jesus from the dead, and we are all witnesses of this. Now Jesus is exalted to the place of highest honor in heaven, at God's right hand. And the Father, as God had promised, gave Jesus the Holy Spirit to pour out upon us, just as you see and hear today. Peter's words pierced their hearts, and they said to him and to the other apostles, "Brothers, what should we do?" Peter replied,**

“Each of you must repent of your sins and turn to God, and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. Then you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. This promise is to you, and to your children, and even to the Gentiles—all who have been called by the Lord our God.” Then Peter continued preaching for a long time, strongly urging all his listeners, “Save yourselves from this crooked generation!” Those who believed what Peter said were baptized and added to the church that day—about 3,000 in all.”

Peter delivered a sound sermon however I suspect to change the lives of 3,000 people it must have been Peter’s changed life that really demonstrated the power of God’s love to change, forgive and resurrect.

Peter continued to change the rest of his life. Change was never easy for Peter. When God wanted to show Peter that Jesus came for all people Jews and Gentiles those who followed Jewish laws and those who did not. God gave Peter a vision of a sheet filled with forbidden food and told Peter to eat. Peter replied, Never Lord this food is forbidden. Peter heard a voice that said if God says something is acceptable don’t say it isn’t. This vision was repeated three times before Peter finally was willing to change. Then he was guided to the home of Cornelius a Gentile. After Peter told him about Jesus he believed and was baptized. When the other believers heard this they realized that God doesn’t show partiality and all people have the privilege of baptism. All people are offered the gift of change.

In the end Peter’s like of Jesus changed into sacrificial love. Peter’s passionate preaching, witnessing, baptizing in Jesus name and bold extravagantly love lead to his own crucifixion.

Baptism is a visible sign of God changing us. The Holy Spirit washes away our sins. We begin to die to our old sinful life and change to a new life full of love. None of us are perfect. None of us fully love God, everyone in the world and ourselves; therefore all of us need to be intentionally striving to change. How open are you to letting God change you? Do you arrive for worship with the expectation that something significant will occur that will invite you to change? Do you open the Bible with prayerful hope that God will encounter you there and change you? Are you expecting the Holy Spirit to sculpt you like the potter sculpts the clay? Are your habits, thoughts and life soft and playable to the movement of the Holy Spirit? Are you anticipating that God will have some unexpected detours, turns and stops on your life journey? Does your faith change you, make you different, impact your life and your choices? Does it bring chills to your spine, move you to love, wonder and joy?

Do you expect your prayer life to change you? One of my seminary professors, Brian Blunt, said “Prayer is not about getting what we want or even what we often times are sure is right for us and those around us; prayer is about unleashing the frightening, unstable uncontrollable power of God.” In my study hangs a description of my 5 theological rocks. My fourth rock is prayer. I end my description of prayer by stating.

“Prayer is a primary way that God molds and changes our lives in accordance to God’s will.” God changes those who welcome God’s love into their life.

God has been the agent of change in the world since the beginning of time. Jesus reveals that God has the power to change everything, even a brutal death into glorious life. Jesus made the cover of the March 28, 2005 Newsweek Magazine. Inside the article explains how Jesus changed the world and continues to change us today. In that same magazine is an article about Ashley Smith a person who completely changed against all odds, defying all wisdom and counter to all expectations.

Dirk Johnson explains how Ashley was arrested for petty crimes as a teenager and later for drunk driving and assault. Her husband was stabbed and died in her arms. She became a heavy drug user to numb the grief and pain. Ashley lived apart from her 5-year-old daughter who was in the custody of her aunt. She found herself at rock bottom at a drug abusers clinic. All the odds were certainly against Ashley but fortunately she was at a Christian clinic that offered more than medicine and therapy. She learned about God’s love for her, God’s grace to forgive her every mistake and God’s resurrection to renew every bleak circumstance and herself. She encountered people who lived and incarnated God’s love, grace and resurrection. God cleansed her heart with love, changed her and got her life back together. She came to believe that God loves everyone and God can change anyone. Ashley’s misfortune continued as Brian Nichols, the harden criminal, who just shot a judge, a court reporter, a sheriff’s deputy and a customs officer at an Atlanta courthouse broke into her apartment. Brian pointed his gun to kill Ashley. Amazingly Ashley was able to boldly love Brian. She truly believed that God’s love could change anyone, even Brian and any situation. Ashley told Brian about the changing, forgiving, resurrecting power of God’s love. She explained how God renewed her life. She read about God’s love from the Bible. Ashley told Brian that she was certain that God would forgive him, change him and renew his life. She suggested that God’s miracle for him was to peacefully go to prison and share the love of God with other inmates. Ashley believed in the changing power of God’s love. That God could change Brian, a murderer, into a loving witness for Christ. Brian was so moved by Ashley’s love that he called her an angel sent by God, allowed her to leave and then surrendered to police.

Today, Ashley weekly worships God who has changed, forgave and resurrected her. She participates and leads Bible study. Ashley lives with her daughter, her husband, and their baby boy. She is passionate about sharing the power of God’s love to renew everyone and points to herself as a living example. She often says, “Since God changed me, God will change you as well.” Ashley is a Radiology Tech at a local hospital. She enjoys running, biking and painting. She has renewed her relationship with her extend family. Ashley strives to pay forward the changing power of God’s love. Dirk Johnson of Newsweek wrote, “For a nation weary of crime and sometimes cynical about the possibility of redemption, this case was a triumph of spirituality over gunfire.”

Jesus changed death into life and hate into love which changed Peter which changed 3,000 people in a day which changed people for thousands of years. God's love changed Ashley who passed on that love to her family, friends and community. God's love is always active changing, forgiving, resurrecting. Are you letting God change you today? Are you inviting God to change you and your future? Amen