

Making Changesⁱ

Praise:

Begin to prepare your heart and mind for the study by listening to and/or singing the worship songs from the services. Choose two or three songs from the following list:

Freedom Is Here – Hillsong United
Salvation Is Here – Lincoln Brewster
Always – Kristian Stanfill
Oceans – Hillsong United
Whom Shall I Fear – Chris Tomlin

Rise and Sing – Fee
Everything Is Different – Shane and Shane
Turn Around – Matt Maher
Restore to Me – Mac Powell
Word of God Speak – MercyMe
Beauty for Ashes – Shane and Shane

Prayer:

Following the praise music, pray for understanding of the scripture, enlightenment that the Holy Spirit may guide your understanding, discernment that you may see how this lesson applies to you, and courage to surrender those things that hinder your spiritual growth.

Preparation:

(5-10 min)

1. Write on a piece of paper three sentences that describe or summarize the message, “Making Changes.”
2. Take turns reading aloud your respective summary. After all have presented, discuss the descriptions/summaries for the remaining few minutes (of the 10 total).

Reviewing the Scriptural Basis:

(5 min)

Read aloud the following scripture while allowing different participants to read each verse. As the verses are read, silently reflect on them and what they mean for you.

2 Corinthians 3:16-18 (NLT)

¹⁶ But whenever someone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away. ¹⁷ For the Lord is the Spirit, and wherever the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. ¹⁸ So all of us who have had that veil removed can see and reflect the glory of the Lord. And the Lord—who is the Spirit—makes us more and more like him as we are changed into his glorious image.

Breaking it Down

(30 min)

Break into smaller groups of three or four people. Read the key segments of today’s message, and answer together the questions related thereto.

The Healing Power of Christ

We are now beginning the fifth study from the sermon series, “The Healing Power of Christ.” This series is based on the reality that through His work on the Cross, Jesus has set us free from the power of sin and provided us a way to be whole and well. When we honestly evaluate our lives, we realize that we need healing...that we are all plagued by hurts that haunt us, hang-ups that cause us pain, and habits that mess up our lives.

Before we move into this lesson on “Making Changes,” let’s recap what we’ve learned in the first four lessons of this series. In order to receive the healing power of Christ, we must make several choices:

- #1: recognizing our need by admitting we have “issues” that we can’t fix ourselves;
- #2: reaching out to God, believing in His power, and staying “plugged in” to that power;
- #3: letting go of our hurts, hang-ups, and habits, and giving Him control over our lives; and
- #4: receiving forgiveness and confessing our faults to God and to someone we trust.

If you’ve maintained the course of this study, you’ve probably discovered that there are still some old patterns of behavior that you’re wrestling with, even though you’ve completed the first four lessons. That’s okay. It’s to be expected, and you’re not alone. Remember, your success and ultimate healing won’t come overnight. There is still more to learn about the healing process, and the next step is making changes....*lasting* changes that will enable us to become the people God wants us to be. Now, as we learn how to take this next step, we invite His Holy Spirit to dwell among us throughout this lesson, wherein we cannot help but be changed by an encounter with the living Lord.

The Problem

Despite our hurts, hang-ups, and habits, there is a reason we come to the Lord in faith and repentance—we recognize that there’s a problem, but we also know that things need to be different. Things need to change. WE need to change.

Leo Tolstoy wrote, “Everyone thinks of changing the world, but no one thinks of changing himself.” Some of us like predictability or consistency, so change can be a scary thing; others of us thrive on change and see it as exciting and challenging. However, the change in each of those examples relates to circumstances or situations, not to change of *self*. Sure, we understand that the Christian life is all about change—changing from unholy living to holy living, changing from living life our way to living life God’s way, changing from being like the world to being like Christ. But, the reality is that sin has created chaos in and of our lives, and it is a real and present danger that comes from within; therefore, we must be changed from within (where our sin nature, or inherent sin, originates) if we want to receive the healing power of Christ.

Let’s take a look at three components that make up the problem.

1) Heredity

We are born into this world “wired” in certain ways that we inherit from our parents’ genetic pool. Physically, we get the good, the bad, and the ugly: stature (or lack thereof), detached earlobes (who can make a taco tongue?), a predisposition to heart disease or cancer, etc. Relationally, we also inherit something of our parents’ talents and temperaments, their strengths and their weaknesses—reasons why some of us have a tendency toward various issues, such as an addictive personality, proneness to worry, becoming a workaholic versus being lazy. But just because we’ve inherited our dad’s explosive temper doesn’t give us license to go around berating anyone who disagrees with us. We are responsible for our own behavior, and we need to make some *changes*, not excuses.

1. List some character traits you have inherited from your parents? Share the ones you like versus the ones you dislike.
2. What is one thing you’d like to change about yourself that seems to come naturally for you or that you have a tendency to do without thought?

2) History

Throughout the course of our lives, we learn patterns of behavior from those around us. Accents and dialects are good examples of learned linguistics. You're fixin' to learn more about this environmental influence, if y'all keep readin'.... Yet, while people have different accents to varying degrees, we do not have a single fixed accent. Our accents are primarily determined by our experiences, and we *change* our accents, often without noticing, as we have new life experiences.

From our environment we also discover how to behave and relate to others. Oftentimes it gets ingrained into our character, as well...so much so that it feels as though it's in our DNA. Case in point?—Florida fans bleed orange and blue.

As we watch our parents and other influential people around us, we learn how to give and receive love, how to respond to hurt or fear, how to cope with the ups and downs of life. Moreover, since one person is just as flawed as the next, we learn some incorrect behaviors, too. And while it may be hard to change these faulty ways of living and our learned character defects, we can unlearn them and thus become capable of making changes.

1. How has your upbringing affected or influenced your perspectives and conduct as an adult?
2. What have been the benefits of the upbringing you had?
3. In what ways has your "history" adversely affected you?

3) Habits

Habits are the most significant source of our problem because they're something we can change with God's help. Think about heredity: we can't change who our parents are. Think about history: we can't change the environment where we were raised. BUT, think about habits: we can change—with God's help—the way we act. We may have been influenced by our heredity or history, but ultimately we alone are responsible for our habits...and habits are just plain hard to break.

English author and poet, Dr. Samuel Johnson, wrote, "The chains of habit are generally too small to be felt until they are too strong to be broken." It's hard to change patterns of behavior because they become so ingrained in us. Repeating something over and over...and over and over⁽ⁿ⁾ will create a "rut" wherein we'll get "stuck." If we do something long enough, it becomes a permanent part of our lives. Likewise, it behooves us to remember that habits are not developed overnight; so, why should we think that we can change them quickly or easily? Martin Luther King, Jr. put it this way, "Change does not roll in on the wheels of inevitability, but comes through continuous struggle." Looking at the Christian walk—especially for those who are new to it—we can't allow ourselves to be discouraged by setbacks. We might think, "I accepted Christ two weeks ago, so why am I not just like Him now? After all, doesn't Scripture say that I'm made in His glorious image, and that God will change me to be like Him?" The truth is: Change is hard, and change takes time.

Stuck with our hurts, hang-ups, and habits, we start to believe a lie about them. We begin to see our problems as a part of us. Instead of saying, "I worry," it becomes, "I'm a worrier." "I lose my temper" becomes "I'm hot-headed," or "I mess up" becomes "I'm worthless." Our problems begin to define us, and we confuse our identity with our character defects and convince

ourselves that “it’s just the way I am.” Inevitably, this mantra turns into a self-fulfilling prophecy, and we become resigned always to have our problems. Recall Paul’s contention that, as Christians, God’s Spirit changes us to become more and more like Christ? Well, not even God can change us if we don’t believe He can (and will)! Understand that a lie...believed as truth...affects us as if it were true. When we believe that we’re stuck with our hurts, hang-ups, and habits and that *that’s* just the way we are, then we keep ourselves from God’s life-changing power. And He won’t (and really *can’t*) change us unless we choose to cooperate with His grace.

1. Discuss some good habits (and bad ones) you’ve developed over time.
2. What habit have you tried to ditch but, so far, have not succeeded in so doing. What do you think is the reason or cause for this failure?
3. Fill in the blank: “It’s just like me to _____.” Explain your rationale.
4. What lie have you believed as truth? How has that affected your life?

The Process

The all-important step we have to take in order to change is to change the way we think. In Paul’s letter to the Romans (12:2a), he writes, “Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but *be transformed by the renewing of your mind.*” (NIV, emphasis added) Other translations include, “be changed within by a new way of thinking” (NCV); “be changed from the inside out” (MSG); and “let God change you inside with a new way of thinking” (ERV). Notice that all of these translations use the passive voice. Grammatically, passive voice allows subjects to have something done to them (by someone or something). In other words, Paul is saying that we must allow ourselves, our minds (subjects) to be changed (something done to us) by God (someone). As a result, a change in our minds will lead to a change in behavior. It starts with a change in our thinking. Unfortunately, that change usually doesn’t come quickly or easily. *Really?!*

Transforming our minds or changing our thinking is a process, and, as such, a process takes time. The Greek word for “change” is metamorphoō (think of the metamorphosis of an insect). Leo Tolstoy wrote, “True life is lived when tiny changes occur.” Let’s now look at what John Baker describes in his book, *Life’s Healing Choices*, as the “seven focus points”ⁱⁱ that we need to practice in order for God to change us.

1) Focus on changing one thing at a time.

If you took your personal moral inventory (the assignment from the preceding lesson, “Receiving Forgiveness”), you probably identified a few problem areas in your life. Trying to change all of them at once can be overwhelming. The writer of Proverbs says, “An intelligent person aims at wise action, but a fool starts off in many directions.” (Proverbs 17:24 GNT) Instead of tackling the items on your list all at once, ask God to reveal one hurt, one hang-up, or one habit that is causing the most damage in your life right now. Then, focus your attention on *that* item, and address each subsequent item accordingly.

1. On which primary hurt, habit, or hang-up are you having trouble focusing?
2. What do you find most encouraging about this practice?

2) Focus on living one day at a time.

The Bible makes it very clear that God provides for us one day at a time. We see this demonstrated in the Book of Exodus (Chapter 16) where God daily provided the Israelites with enough food, or “manna,” to sustain them; however, it was enough for only one day at a time. “[W]hen they measured it out, everyone had just enough. Those who gathered a lot had nothing left over, and those who gathered only a little had enough. Each family had just what it needed.”

(v. 18) For many of us, living one day at a time is all we can do. We can make ourselves sick with worry or anxiety when we start the “what if” game. Recall the words of Jesus, “Do not worry about tomorrow. Tomorrow will have its own worries. The troubles we have in a day are enough for one day.” (Matthew 6:34 NLV) Take it little by little, and—with God’s help—believe that you can...and will...change. Abraham Lincoln wrote, “The best thing about the future is that it comes only one day at a time.” Keep your focus on living one day at a time, and invite God’s presence into each of those days. [“Lord, just for today, help me not to worry...just for today keep me sober... just for today let me be positive rather than negative....”]

1. What’s one thing you can do, just for today, to change for the better?
2. Share a time or experience in your life when all you could do was take life one day at a time.

3) Focus on God’s power, not your willpower.

Because change is hard, it’s understandable that—after many failed attempts to change something about ourselves—we convince ourselves that we can’t change. Sadly, what we’re really saying is, “God isn’t big enough to help me change!” Yet, we know, as Jesus said, “All things are possible with God.” (Mark 10:27 NIV) That means no matter how big our problems are, God is bigger than our problems. Moreover, we need to rely on His power, not our own willpower. Henry Drummond, a 19th century Scottish evangelical writer and lecturer, wrote, “Willpower does not change men. Time does not change men. Christ does.”

As we’ve been learning throughout this series, if our own willpower were enough, we’d have changed already; but we haven’t because we can’t. Paul was right when he said, “I can do everything by the power of Christ. He gives me strength.” (Philippians 4:13 NIV) We need to be willing to give Him a chance to do for us what we cannot do ourselves. That means focusing on His power to change us.

1. Describe a situation or “victory” where you exercised willpower and/or one where you continue to do so without exception. How are you able (or not able) to maintain such control?
2. Why do we seem to rely on God’s power only when we face a crisis or emergency?

4) Focus on the good, not the bad.

Let’s be honest: we spend an excessive amount of time and energy focusing on what’s wrong or what could be better, whether those things pertain to our lives in general or to specific people or circumstances in our lives. Earlier in this study, we learned that a change in our minds will lead to a change in behavior. The Apostle Paul understood this as truth, and it’s why he told the Philippians, “Fix your thoughts on what is true and good and right. Think about things that are pure and lovely...Think about all you can praise God for and be glad about.” (Philippians 4:8 TLB)

We have to be intentional about focusing on the good. “Whatever has your attention has you.” (p. 141) So, when we remind ourselves of God’s promises or recite a scripture, we are reinforcing a structure of positive thinking. It’s simply another baby step in the process of making changes.

1. How would your life be different if you spent more time focusing on good things?
2. What can you do to build your own positive-thinking structure in your home?—at work?—in school?

5) Focus on doing good, not feeling good.

If we wait until we feel like doing certain things, we'll probably never do them. Obvious examples are dieting, exercising, studying, cleaning the house, washing the car, returning a call, etc. While we may not feel like doing those things, we know that most of them are simply the right things to do. The enemy would have us believe otherwise. We face a real enemy in this world, and we know him as the Devil; when it comes to doing things right, he'll make sure we never feel like it. He delights in our procrastination and our lethargy.

To avoid the enemy's snare, we need to focus on God's Word. 1 Peter 2:21 (NLT) reminds us that, "...God called [us] to *do good*, even if it means suffering, just as Christ suffered for you. **He** is your example, and you must follow in *his* steps." (emphasis added). We can also find encouragement from the psalmist who wrote, "Trust in the Lord and do good. Then you will live safely in the land and prosper." (Psalm 37:3 NLT) Paul teaches the Romans that "there will be glory and honor and peace from God for all who do good—for the Jew first and also for the Gentile." (Romans 2:10 NLT) Keeping little scriptural reminders like these around our homes, in our cars/lockers, or at work/school, will serve to keep us focused on doing good. And, as we focus on doing what's right and good, we'll find that our feelings will eventually catch up to our actions. (paraphrased, p. 142)

1. Describe a change you've tried to make that just didn't feel right at first.
2. What is something God is guiding you to do today, even though you might not feel like doing it?

6) Focus on people who help, not hinder.

The Bible makes it clear in 1 Corinthians 15:33 (NCV), "Bad friends will ruin good habits." Recall from an earlier section in this study that our environment and the people around us influence our behavior and habits. For those of us on the road to recovery, it's important to take a hard look at our relationships and how those relationships are helping or hindering our healing. Consider the obvious... If you're struggling with an eating disorder, don't join your skinny friends for bottomless fries at Red Robin. If you're struggling with alcoholism, don't schedule date night during happy hour. If you're struggling with pornography, don't go to your buddy's bachelor party. The key is to stay away from people who hinder your healing process and to surround yourself with people who can help your healing process.

Read Ecclesiastes 4:9-10 (NIV): "Two are better than one...If one falls down, his friend can help him up." There's something to be said about strength in numbers. Seek out people that you can lean on, those who will help you make positive changes in your life, and turn your focus on those relationships.

1. Share how other people you chose to associate with have adversely affected your behavior. How did you break away from these relationships?
2. How can your friends or fellow small group members help each other in their spiritual journeys?

7) Focus on progress, not perfection.

Direction determines destination. If you're heading in the right direction, it's okay if you haven't met your destination. Making changes in our lives is a process. We didn't develop our hurts, hang-ups, and habits overnight—some have been years in the making. To think that we can change everything in one day or one week or one month is self-defeating thinking. It is by walking step by step with the Lord, by staying focused on our progress, we'll get there.

The Chinese philosopher, Lao Tzu, wrote, “A journey of a thousand miles begins with one step.” The Christian life is a journey; it begins with a decision and is followed by a process. We make the decision to turn our lives over to God; then, He begins the process of changing us into the likeness of Christ. Don’t get discouraged if you haven’t met some arbitrary goal you set for yourself. God delights in even our smallest victories; He celebrates them as milestones in our spiritual growth and progress. Hold fast to His character, and keep your focus on your progress.

1. Where are you seeing progress in your life right now as you seek to grow in Christlikeness?
2. When God looks at your “Progress Report,” He sees all As. Celebrate His delight in you by sharing a victory you have experienced recently.

In Closing:

As Christians, we have a very lofty goal of being like Christ. Since most of us aren’t there yet, we need to make some changes. These aren’t necessarily easy or quick, but they are achievable because “with God all things are possible.” Let’s rely on Him until we get to where we need to be, remembering Paul’s words he spoke to the people of Philippi, “...God who began the good work within you will keep right on helping you grow in his grace until his task within you is finally finished.” (Philippians 1:6 TLB)

Close in Prayer:

The Serenity Prayer

God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change;
courage to change the things I can; and wisdom to know the difference.

Living one day at a time; enjoying one moment at a time;
Accepting hardships as the pathway to peace;
Taking, as He did, this sinful world as it is, not as I would have it;
Trusting that He will make all things right if I surrender to His Will;
That I may be reasonably happy in this life and supremely happy with Him
Forever in the next. Amen.

The Blessing (say this as a group):

“Only God who made us can touch us and change us and save us from ourselves.” (Billy Graham)

Action Items for the Week Ahead:

Review the key points of today’s message and the scriptures related thereto. In the week ahead, reflect upon those scriptures, and consider the following:

1. PRAY about it: Ask God to reveal the main character defect you need to work on first.
2. WRITE about it: List five good things you are thankful for. Journal about the progress you are making as you cooperate with God’s Spirit in changing you and your behavior.
3. SHARE about it: Share your “thanksgiving” list with someone else. Tell someone about your efforts to act yourself into a better way of feeling.

ⁱThis sermon series, “The Healing Power of Christ,” is based on the book, *Life’s Healing Choices*, by John Baker. ©2007 by Richard D. Warren and John E. Baker. All quotes used in this discussion guide are taken from this book and annotated accordingly.

ⁱⁱ Ibid, pp. 137-143.