

HOW PEOPLE CHANGE – NEW YEAR’S 2014

INTRODUCTION

This time of year everyone is talking about change. We look back over the last year and evaluate our progress. We make decisions about what to improve and then make declarations about what we will do differently in the coming year.

Sometimes we actually do one of our New Year’s resolutions. Most of the time we do not.

For many people, this all just devolves into a lot of positive thinking, temporary good vibes, and white knuckled legalism.

God isn’t interested in temporary change. He never will be. God always calls us to change with a view towards who He has called us to be in eternity, across the horizon of time.

He isn’t interested in just doing temporary modifications that will pass away when we do. Everything God does in us now is intended to be more than modification, it’s meant to be eternal transformation.

I’d like to lose weight this year. I’ve been getting in shape, going to the gym. Now I need to tackle my diet. But God isn’t interested only in me being skinny. He’s interested in my gluttony. He’s interested in my gluttony because my gluttony is a hindrance to my worship, my joy, and my effectiveness in my calling.

I TIMOTHY 4:7-8

⁷ *Have nothing to do with irreverent, silly myths. Rather train yourself for godliness;* ⁸ *for while bodily training is of some value, godliness is of value in every way, as it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come.*¹

Paul is instructing Timothy that godliness is of greater value because it profits us both now and eternally.

He is NOT putting down the value of physical fitness!

THE ROLE OF GRACE IN OUR TRANSFORMATION

We learned recently in Paul’s letter to the Galatians that eternal transformation comes through the grace of God. We are sanctified the same way we were justified.

¹ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*. 2001 (1 Ti 4:7–8). Wheaton: Standard Bible Society.

It is God's LOVE for us, expressed through his scandalous GRACE.

[[DRAW – Love → Grace → Us]]

He puts it another way by telling us to walk in the Spirit and we will produce the fruit of the Spirit. Walk in the flesh and we will produce the works of the flesh.

But the question we are asking this morning is how does this work exactly? Here we are, the start of a new year and we want to make some changes. We want to get healthy, improve our finances, have a stronger devotional life, be better parents, whatever the case may be.

How do we get there from here?

HOW TRANSFORMATION HAPPENS:

I'm giving you 5 ways. Maybe there are more that you can think of, but these are my 5 as comprehensive as I can be.

[WRITE THESE ON THE WHITE BOARD]

1. Discipline
2. Blessing
3. Suffering
4. Conviction
5. Community

1- DISCIPLINE

Discipline is kind of a dirty word with most people. No one in this room this morning got excited when I said the word "Discipline". **You would rather me talk about suffering than discipline!**

Discipline is often very closely connected to suffering, but by discipline here I simply mean "God's correction through negative consequences."

The most obvious illustration of this is the parent to child relationship. Your child is doing something that will bring him harm (spiritually or physically) and so you introduce pain to his backside to provide him with the sudden, passionate motivation to change.

God often puts us on a short leash to teach us to obey and listen to Him.

READ Hebrews 12:5-12

In Romans 1 we see that God judges those that have rejected Him by worshipping other gods by CEASING TO DISCIPLINE them. He lets them have what they want and it destroys them.

2 – BLESSING

READ Romans 2:1-4

God not only draws us to repentance and transformation through His discipline, but He also draws us with His undeserved goodness.

This is wonderfully illustrated in the parable of the Prodigal Sons that Jesus told during His ministry.

In this story, the son takes his inheritance from his father early and leaves home, shaming his father. He then spends all of his inheritance on wine and women. And he ends up eating with the pigs in a pig sty.

He comes to his senses and returns home hoping to be a servant in his fathers house. This is discipline. He came to his senses because he was experiencing a spanking from God.

But then when he gets near his home, his father runs out to meet him. He blesses him with an over the top party and celebration. It's unwarranted and undeserved. Both the pig sty and the party are ways that the Father draws us to repentance.

Paul's warning in Romans 2 is to us to be careful not to miss the point of God's blessing. We can make the mistake of taking blessing as a sign of our own goodness instead of a sign of God's goodness.

3 – SUFFERING

ROMANS 5:3-5

³ *Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance,* ⁴ *and endurance produces character, and character produces hope,* ⁵ *and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.* ²

Suffering transforms us into the image of Christ faster than anything I know. It causes us to depend of God because we have no other choice. It brings us to the end of our own strength and forces us to submit to His strength in our weakness. It's the fast track to maturity.

The reason I want to distinguish between suffering and discipline is that I don't want you to think that all suffering is because of something you are doing. Quite often God allows us to suffer simply because He is more interested in our eternal transformation than He is with our temporary comfort.

However, just like discipline, suffering is a sign of God's love not His neglect.

4 – CONVICTION OF SIN

JOHN 16:7-11

² *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version.* 2001 (Ro 5:3–5). Wheaton: Standard Bible Society.

⁷ Nevertheless, I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you. ⁸ And when he comes, he will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment: ⁹ concerning sin, because they do not believe in me; ¹⁰ concerning righteousness, because I go to the Father, and you will see me no longer; ¹¹ concerning judgment, because the ruler of this world is judged.³

It is one of the Holy Spirit's jobs to convict the world of sin. **But what is conviction?**

The ancient Greek word that we translate as "convict" means: "to convince someone of the truth; to reprove; to accuse, refute, or cross-examine a witness."

The Holy Spirit is like an attorney examining a witness. He points to the evidence and convinces us that we need a Savior. It is not a general feeling of shame or dirtiness. It is a specific conviction over sin as an offense against God Himself.

Conviction drives us to the feet of Jesus to repent. It motivates us into the grace of God, not away from it. And when intimacy with God is restored through repentance, the conviction of the Holy Spirit is replaced by joy in His mercy.

5 – CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY

You really don't have to look any further than Galatians 5 to see this dynamic in action. Look at all the fruit of the Spirit he mentions.

GALATIANS 5:22-23

²² But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. ⁴

Most of these only make sense within the context of relationships. It is in relationships that these things are manifested and challenged.

If these are the fruit of the Spirit, then we actually need each other to even know if we are producing fruit or not. That's how important Christian community is. I'd go so far as to say that you cannot produce the fruit of the spirit without being in relationship with other Believers.

What's the Law of Christ? Love God with everything, and love your neighbor as yourself. You have to have a neighbor to do that.

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

³ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*. 2001 (Jn 16:7–11). Wheaton: Standard Bible Society.

⁴ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*. 2001 (Ga 5:22–23). Wheaton: Standard Bible Society.

Notice that with all 5 of these things, you are not the initiating force. God is. If you invite God over for coffee, you don't dominate the conversation. You let Him decide what He wants to talk about. If you go on a road trip with Jesus, He gets to choose the destination. You are not the supreme and sovereign ruler of your own soul. He decides what He wants to change and how. This is why He is God, and you are not. If you knew what you were doing, you wouldn't need a Savior.

The very idea that you would say, "I resolve to change" is laughable. It's spoken from a position of pride. You're no match for your own iniquitous will that is pushing against you. You aren't strong enough. Only Christ is.

Instead, we should be saying "God has resolved to transform me." This is spoken from a position of worship. You are responding to God who has initiated with you.

Let me give you an example from my own life.

I've been physically unhealthy for about 15 years or more. I've wanted to change that for just as long.

Over the years God has disciplined me over it, he has blessed me with physical healing that I did not deserve, He has allowed pain into my life that has built my faith and character, the Holy Spirit has deeply convicted me over the sin that produces it, and my friends and family have supported and rebuked me. All of these things have culminated in some real change in my life over recent months.

The external changes are reflections of eternal transformations that have been slowly taking place over many years.

I'd like to take all of this a step further and really get my diet under control this year. I think this is something God is initiating with me that I want to respond to. But there's no way it's going to happen without the grace of God in these 5 ways.

CLOSING

So, I want to encourage you all to step out of the will power game. Don't sow seeds into the flesh. Sow seeds into the Spirit by asking God what He is initiating with you this year.

Don't just ask in the privacy of your prayer closet. Look at where God is Disciplining you, Blessing you, allowing you to suffer, Convicting you, and look at where the chaffing is with the people around you.

Then let the Holy Spirit lead you into transformation.