

## **“What Changes Do You Need to Make?”**

### **II Corinthians 5:16-21**

Preached by Dr. Robert F. Browning, Pastor  
Smoke Rise Baptist Church  
Stone Mountain, Georgia  
January 8, 2006

It is one of the most popular shows on television. Each week a couple of people are chosen to receive extreme makeovers that will improve their quality of life. Candidates may undergo cosmetic surgery, have their teeth straightened and whitened, receive a new hairstyle and wardrobe, lose weight or tone their muscles. Each procedure is filmed as the audience watches the transformation. At the end of the show, appropriately named Extreme Makeover, family members and friends stare in disbelief as they are introduced to the radically changed person. I must say the before and after pictures are rather startling.

**Do you think it is possible for people to make radical, permanent changes in their lives without the aid of a television production crew?** Many would say no and I understand. “You can’t teach an old dog new tricks,” is a slogan often quoted when this topic arises. “What’s true for dogs is not necessarily true for humans,” I remind people.

I believe it is possible to make changes, even radical ones. It appears Paul believed this and wanted his readers to know it. “If anyone is in Christ, he is a **new** creation; the **old** has gone, the **new** has come!” II Corinthians 5:17. The contrast between new and old is unmistakable. What has been doesn’t always have to be. New can replace old and does when Christ lives through us.

New ways of thinking, living, arranging priorities, relating to God, treating others, handling problems, challenges and temptations replace old ones. And when they do, the change is so sweeping and radical, it is as if someone has been recreated.

**Why do we need to know this?** No one is perfect or complete as Jesus implied, and the hope for change, for a better life, beats in every heart. According to Jurgen Motlmann, the essence of hope is the ability to start over.

I mentioned last week that I am reading Donald Miller’s book, Blue Like Jazz. It is his perspective on life, love and redemption. I particularly like it because he writes like Garrison Keillor of Prairie Home Companion speaks, in a folksy, down home way.

“Everybody wants to be fancy and new,” Miller writes. Nobody wants to be themselves. I mean, maybe people want to be themselves, but they want to be different, with different clothes or shorter hair or less fat. It’s a fact. If there is a guy who just liked being himself and didn’t want to be anybody else, that guy would be the most different guy in the world and everybody would want to be like him.”

“One night when I was watching television, I saw an infomercial about a knife that could cut through a boot and remain sharp enough to slice a tomato. They called it the Miracle Blade. Another night I saw a cleanser made with orange juice that could get blood out of a carpet. They said it worked like magic.”

The whole idea of everybody wanting to be somebody new was important insight in terms of liking God. God was selling something I wanted. Still, God was in the same boat as the guy selling the knives. Everybody exaggerates when they are selling something. Everybody says their product works like magic. At the time I understood God’s offer as a magical proposition, which it is. But most magical propositions are just tricks. The older you get, the harder it is to believe in magic. You understand there is no Wizard of Oz, just a schmuck behind a curtain. I pictured my pastor as a salesman or a magician, trying to trick the congregation into believing Jesus could make us new. And honestly, I felt as though he was trying to convince himself, as though he only half believed what he was saying. It was not that spirituality seemed like a complete con, it’s just that it had some of those elements.”

“The message, however, was appealing to me. God said He would make me new. I can’t pretend for a second I didn’t want to be made new, that I didn’t want to start again. I did.”

Deep down, we all do, don't we? As Zechariah revealed, we are all "prisoners of hope" Zechariah 9:12. And New Year's is a time to think about making changes and starting over.

**How is this possible?** How do we make radical and permanent changes? How can we be recreated? Our text gives us an important piece in that puzzle. Change is connected to Christ. "If anyone is **in Christ**, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!" II Corinthians 5:17.

I find Paul's phrasing intriguing. Wouldn't you expect him to write, "If Christ is in anyone, he is a new creation?" Why did he write, "If anyone is in Christ?"

Recreation occurs when we become absorbed in Christ's mission and work. When we adopt his lifestyle, values and priorities we become like him, leading the way for changes to be made. When we relate to God and others the way Christ did, we become his ambassadors rather than pursuing our own agendas. When we handle problems, challenges and temptations the way Jesus did, we become new persons, replacing old ways of living with new ones. In the process of following Jesus, extreme makeovers occur as we are recreated in his image.

I wish I could stand before you this morning and tell you that sweeping changes will occur in your life by merely asking God to grant them. This would not be genuine faith, though, but hollow magic.

Don't misunderstand me. I am not minimizing the role that God plays in our lives. Radical and permanent changes will occur only with God's help, but we must do our part, too. What is that?

Change is a process that begins when we become honest and sincere with God, confessing our sins and repenting. I have often said that sins that are not named will not be dealt with. I sincerely believe that.

Read Psalm 51, the text for the anthem this morning. What was the first thing David did that led to changes in his life? "Have mercy upon me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions. Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. For I know my transgressions and my sin is always before me" Psalm 51:1-3. For David, change began with humble repentance that led to forgiveness and healing. That's where we must also start.

"Forgiveness without conviction is not forgiveness; it is irresponsible toleration. It doesn't lead to reconciliation and peace; it leads to chaos," states Brian McLaren in [A Generous Orthodoxy](#). He's right.

Transformation continues when we follow Christ, accepting the challenge, as Paul stated in our text, to be his ambassador, adopting his lifestyle, making his mission ours. The radical changes we need to make will occur when we accept Jesus' invitation to follow him. Let me give you an example.

Jesus knew the twelve men he called as disciples would need to make sweeping changes in their lives. None of them had ever done what he would ask them to do. So how would they make those changes? The answer is found in his invitation to them. "Come, follow me and I will make you fishers of men" Mark 1:17. Radical changes occurred in their lives when they followed Jesus. By living with him, learning from him and following his example, they were transformed.

I firmly believe this is how radical and permanent changes occur in our lives. This was why Paul wrote, "If anyone is **in Christ**, he is a **new** creation; the **old** has gone, the **new** has come!" II Corinthians 5:17. The way to become a better citizen, neighbor, mate, parent, student, employer or employee is by following Christ, adopting his lifestyle and mission.

This is my New Year's challenge to you today. Follow Christ in the coming year. Live with him as the early disciples did. Learn from him and follow his example. Become his ambassador in a world that needs to hear his voice and see his presence. When you do, take note of the changes that occur in your attitude, relationships, priorities and lifestyle, because they will certainly come. As a matter of fact, you may not even recognize yourself by the end of the year!