

Holiness brings CHANGE

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[0 : 0 0] today we will explore more closely at the why, the what and the how of change. The deep spiritual change that brings our character more and more in line with God's character. Well, why are we concerned about change? We are made in the image of God. We were made to be God's image on earth.

We are God's representatives. We are to display his likeness. God created man in his own image. In the image of God, he created them. Male and female, he created them. But there's a problem, isn't there? Because the problem is that we now have a broken image because humanity has rejected God. So we try to live our lives our way and we mess things up. We struggle to be God's image on earth.

And God's verdict is all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. Then enter in Jesus. He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation.

Scripture tells us the word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. Jesus is the glory of the Father. He makes God known in this world. He is God in human form. And so he shows us what it means to be the image of God and to reflect God's glory, to reflect his love, his goodness, his beauty, his purity, his judgment, his splendor, his power, his wisdom and his majesty. Jesus reflected all of these things in his actions, in his attitudes and in his thoughts. Now I know that many of you here would love to reflect the image of Jesus in what you say and do and in your attitudes. But many of us also understand there is a problem and we cannot do so on our own. Now many of you would actually know that I have been learning ballroom dancing for some years. The world ballroom champions, Arunas and Katusha,

I say that specifically for Sam for a way that he pronounced it this morning. Arunas and Katusha, for me to watch Arunas and Katusha glide around a dance floor or to watch the power and the intricacy of their quick step, the speed of which they go, for me is absolutely fantastic. Now I appreciate that not everybody likes ballroom dancing. But let me share with you that the point here is I have watched Arunas and Katusha for hours, not all at once. But I have watched videos of them, I have watched their footwork, so I'd concentrate watching their routines and watch their footwork.

[3 : 4 6] I have then watched their footwork. I have watched their footwork. I have watched their footwork. I have watched the videos, how they use their body to sway. All of this I know is very foreign to all of you, but these are all very, very important if you're doing ballroom dancing. Now I have also listened to their lectures. I've learned a huge amount. I've actually watched their choreography. I've also watched their musicality, which is actually how they interpret the music in their dance. Just as a side issue, dancing is the visual of the music that you're listening to. That's what it's meant to be.

So now you can watch some dancing and have a different view of it. But that's what it's meant to be. And I've watched their musicality and I've learned heaps and heaps and heaps from Arunas and Katusha. The problem is I will never dance like Arunas and Katusha as much as I can watch them for hours and hours. I also would like to be like Jesus. I can observe him in my life.

In action in the gospels. I can study his life, the life he lived. I can look at the way he loved. I could try very hard to imitate Jesus. But at best, that would lead only to a small, short-lived improvement. And even then, I suspect that the short-lived improvement, self-improvement, I might add, will cause me to be very proud. I need help. Trying to imitate Jesus on my own will only leave me feeling like a failure. I can't be like him on my own. I can't match up.

I need rescuing and I need forgiveness. The great news is that Jesus is not only my example. Jesus is my redeemer. He is the one who actually can make me new.

If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has gone. The new has come. Well, what does this mean? It means that we are recreated in the image of God. It means in this new life that we all have, we have been given, we can grow like Jesus, reflecting God's glory, because God is in the business of change. It's not going to happen overnight, but that's the business that God's in.

[6 : 47] All the good effort that we can muster and all the obeying sets of rules will not bring lasting change, but change comes from when we're turning to Jesus and obeying him.

So we understand the why we need to change. It's because we are made in the image of God, that we are the image bearers of the creator God. But left to ourselves, we are unable to make any long-lasting changes that would reflect God's glory. So what then stops us? Well, for us to be growing in the image of God will mean that we need to understand ourselves and our own motives before long-lasting change can occur. Ask yourself, why do you want to be a better person? Why do you want to be a better parent, a better spouse? You want to hold your temper? You might want to have more compassion?

Of course, the righteous answer would be, because I want to reflect God's glory. I want to be like Jesus. And we all know that with our head. But let's just be truly honest between you and me and each other. Let's be truly honest with ourselves just for a moment and examine whether there might be another reason why we want change. Is it to prove yourself to God? For God to give you his approval and to say that you are a good person? That God would bless you in a special way because of the good that you do? There are many in this world that believe just being a good person is sufficient to God to welcome you into his kingdom.

Or you may well know that we have been saved by grace alone, but by doing some extra good things, somehow God is going to love you that little bit more.

I cannot tell you how many times throughout the years of doing ministry where I have sat one-to-one with people talking about the gospel. And I asked the question, why do you think God would let you into his kingdom? I cannot tell you how many times people have said to me, because I am a good person and I have kept the Ten Commandments. Now, when people say they have kept the Ten Commandments, what they're actually saying is, I have not murdered anybody. Because seemingly, the only commandment people actually remember is, thou shalt not murder. Sadly, what they don't ever, I have never in all the years I've done ministry, I've never had somebody say, I have kept commandment number one, to love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and all your mind. I've done that perfectly. I've never heard somebody say that. In actual fact, it never gets mentioned. Now, you might want to change and be a better person so that you can prove yourself to others. You might be a people pleaser, unable to say no. You hate people thinking ill of you, and so you work very hard for people to love you and affirm you, but then behind closed doors and with your family, you behave in a different manner. Consider a Christian who goes to a prayer meeting. They go to the prayer meeting because it's expected of them. They might go to the prayer meeting because they don't want to be rebuked by their friends who are also at the prayer meeting.

[11 : 22] And really, what they really, really want to be doing is they want to be at home watching TV and not being at the prayer meeting. Now, do you think God is actually going to know the heart of that person and whether they really should be at the prayer meeting or should be back home watching TV because their motive is not with pleasing God. Their motive is with pleasing the people around them. You might want to change so that you prove something to yourself.

You want to tell yourself that you're a good person, but your sin causes you to be ashamed because you expect something better of yourself. For example, if you have a problem with anger and when you get angry, the sin is an offence against you, against your own self-esteem. It is not an offence against God. To want to change for these reasons will not bring lasting change. Trying to impress God, trying to impress others or just trying to impress yourself puts you at the centre of the change.

It makes change all about me looking good. It's about my glory, not God's. And that is pretty much the essence of sin. Sin is living life my way for me instead of living God's way for God.

You see, behaviour can change, but the motives and the desires may be unchanged. That is not holiness.

Often it means rejecting God as Lord and wanting to be our own Lord or wanting to be our own saviour. Pharisees do good works. They reject bad works. And does that save them? Let's read out of Luke.

[13 : 44] To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else, Jesus told this parable. Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed, God, I thank you that I am not like other people, robbers, evildoers, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and I give a tenth of all I get. But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but he beat his breast and he said, God, have mercy on me, a sinner. I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled and those who humble themselves will be exalted. And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. Gospel repentance includes repenting of good works done for wrong reasons. Allow me to say it again. Gospel repentance includes repenting of good works that have been done for wrong reasons or with wrong motives. We need to repent repenting of trying to please ourselves and to become our own saviour. We all would love to follow a list, a tick-the-box type of Christian life, but that would be called legalism, not discipleship. Legalism is attractive for two reasons. First, it makes holiness manageable.

A heart wholly devoted to God is a tough demand. But a list of 10 rules that we just do and tick off, we can cope with that.

And second, legalism makes holiness an achievement on our part. You might say, yes, I was saved by grace. But I am the godly person that I am today because I have kept all these spiritual disciplines or a code of conduct.

No one likes to think that they are a legalist. But I can tell you all of us struggle in this way somehow.

So we know what stops us from change. It's our motives. It's our sin. So how then does change occur?

[16 : 50] Because that's what we really want. How do we encourage change? Well, we have to take seriously our sinful nature and seriously our need for the Saviour.

Look with me at Psalm 32. Blessed is he whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord does not count against him and in whose spirit there is no deceit.

David knew the freedom that comes from knowing his sins are forgiven. We have the added blessing of understanding more fully that it was the blood of Jesus who came into the world to deal with our sin because we could not and cannot save ourselves.

Our sinful nature, our wrong motives, our self-reliance is all dealt with at the cross. And whether we like it or not, our sin will cripple us and hinder how we live each day if it is left unrepentant.

Look at verse 3 and 5. We learn from these verses that confession of our sin is essential.

[18 : 36] Here was a man who was chosen by God to be the king of Israel. A man after God's own heart. A man who was loved by God and protected by him when he was pursued by King Saul who wanted to kill him.

What does he do? He commits adultery and then he lies about it and then he tries to cover up his sin.

He then has a man killed. David knew what it was like to be lost. But he also knew what it was like to be forgiven.

Friends, we need to be careful not to minimise any of our sin. We can fall into the trap of thinking, it's not too bad.

There are other sins that are far worse than mine. And so we would never take the responsibility for our own sin. You might not have the same sins as King David, but any sin will inhibit the change that we are longing for in this new year.

[19 : 53] True repentance grieves over sin. It will never minimise the sin and it will never blame others. It is ownership 100%.

We also need to be careful of not wanting to hide our sin. As we see in the psalm, David physically was ill because of keeping silent.

Unfortunately, hiding our sin is due to our pride. Another sin. Sin begets sin begets sin. We hide, we pretend, and we don't seek help.

It's self-reliance. The real problem is we love our reputation more than we hate our sin. True repentance lets nothing get in the way.

Allow me to give you one last reason why we might not wish to repent and change. And basically, it's because we don't want to.

[21 : 05] Truth is, sometimes we want the consequences of our sin to disappear, but we want to hold on to the sin itself. Now, I know a family close to our family that are in a really difficult financial situation.

There is much debt. There is mismanagement with money. There is compulsive purchasing. There is addictions attached to it. There is a desire for the change to be out of debt, but when there are solutions put before them, and where hard decisions have to be made to cut back, change does not come.

They're not made. Because the change of the situation is wanted, but without any change in behaviour. They want all the bills to disappear with no change in the way that they are living life, or no change in the way that they shop, or no change in the hobbies that they have.

But they want the bills to go. The key to change is continually returning to the cross. A changing life is a cross-centred life.

In Colossians we read, But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death, to present you wholly in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation.

[22 : 44] At the cross we find hope, for we see the power of sin has been broken, and the old nature has been put to death. At the cross we find grace, power and delight in God, who we need to overcome our sin.

And here at St Paul's, we have been encouraged time and time again to preach the gospel to ourselves daily. When we go to the cross, we see that God died for us.

And if you live for people's approval, or for your career, or for your possessions, or control of anything else, and you don't make it, or you mess up, then you will be left feeling afraid, downcast, or bitter.

But when you let Christ down, as we do, he loves us still. He doesn't beat us up, because he has died for us.

He died for you, and he's died for me. The secret of change is to renew your love for Christ, as you see him crucified in your place.

[24 : 09] How are you going to encourage this change? Well, fortunately for us here at St Paul's, all we need to do is to look at our core values.

That's where change occurs. We need to spend time in God's word, and to allow God to speak to us, and to transform us into his image.

Prayer needs to be our priority, over and above other activities we choose. When we realise that God is the great change agent in our lives, then prayer will move up the priority list.

Prayer needs to be our reflexive voice when temptation comes. Just when a child is playing by themselves, they're very happy in their own little world.

But when danger comes, the first thing that child will do is to look for mum or dad to make sure that they're safe. The same has to happen with us.

[25 : 22] When temptation comes our way, what we reflexively need to do is to look to the Father to see that we're safe. Treasuring Jesus together will also inevitably help us change by reminding us, reminding one another of the truth, by modelling Christian change and holiness for one another.

We've got a responsibility to live holy lives because my life is going to help you live your life and vice versa. God is at work in each of us.

And so we can encourage each other. We can provide accountability for one another. And when we worship God together, we are reminding ourselves that God is bigger and better than anything that sin offers.

Worship isn't just affirmation that God is good. It's an affirmation that God is best. We remind our hearts of God's goodness, his majesty, his love, his grace, his holiness, and his power.

That's what happens when we meet together here on a Sunday. All of that is happening all at once. How wonderful. And we also have the opportunity to serve.

[27 : 02] Now, we often make the mistake of thinking that fulfilling an act of service shows change in our hearts. But in fact, it's a means of grace that God uses to change us.

Serving God and others help redirect us outwards. And it takes the attention away from ourself as we focus on another.

Friends, change is possible. And it's possible because of Jesus. May this 2016 be a year where all of us here at St. Paul's grow and change into the likeness of Jesus.

Amen.