

“I Will If You Will”
I Will Change You
October 30, 2016

PRELUDE – Promises

Worship – Promises

Baptism Intro

**Worship Songs (during baptism) – Greater
/ This Is Amazing Grace**

Announcements – Video

Feature – “In the Light” / Offering

In just 10 days, thankfully, mercifully, and at long last ... “Decision 2016” will finally come to an end as citizens all over our country make their way to the polls (at least, those who haven’t already voted in advance).

We’ve heard the incessant analysis of the

pros and cons concerning each candidate.

And we've heard their vision for change: how America can go from where it is today to a better place in the future. "Vote for me," they promise us, "and we will be stronger together. We will make America great again."

And now it's up to us to decide if we agree not only with their vision but whether or not we believe they have the leadership ability, the character and the policies to actually bring about the change they promise.

Of course, the promise of "change for the better" isn't limited to the domain of politics. In fact ...ⁱ

- It's why your inbox this morning is full of emails: "lose weight now" ... "become a better lover" ... "make money overnight" ... "learn a new language."
- It's why people like Oprah and Dr. Phil are household names.
- It's why you can go to any bookstore and see an entire wall of self-help books.
- It's why "My Pillow" has sold over 10 million pillows in the past few years. You, too, can have "the best night's sleep in whole wide world. Visit mypillow.com."

"Change for the better" is big business these days.

That's because, at some level, we're all suckers for change!

Who among us doesn't look in the mirror and wish we were skinnier or taller or shorter or, in some way, better looking? If it was possible to wave a magic wand and somehow bring change to our outward appearance – our eyes or our hair or our teeth or our legs or our weight – most of us would do it in an instant.

But as hard as it is to change on the outside, there's an even greater “change challenge”; and that's *changing on the inside*. If there is anything we know about human nature, it is that people change slowly, if they ever change at all.

Think about your own life. What would you change about yourself on the inside if you could? Would it be ...

- A critical spirit and a harsh tongue
- Envy and jealousy you feel towards those around you
- An attitude of discontentment and ungratefulness

Would you want to overcome ...

- Your bitterness and resentment
- An inability to resist sexual temptation
- The compulsion to spend more than you have or acquire more than you need
- A guilty conscience
- A quick temper
- A spirit of fear, anxiety and worry

Would you change your ...

- Pride and arrogance
- Prejudice toward others
- The impulse to control and manipulate people and situations
- Laziness
- Exaggerating or outright lying
- An inability to say “no” (when continuing to say “yes” is destructive)

The list could go on and on because pretty much every single person wants to change *something* about who they are on the inside. Almost all of us dream of being someone different and someone better than who we are today.

I’ve told you this story before but, several years ago, Jetta and I went to a four-day

retreat for pastors and wives.

And while we were there, one of the things I discovered about myself is that I had a lot of buried anger and grief over some of the things that had happened to me in the years I've been a pastor and that was actually coming out in some very unhealthy ways. It affected a whole bunch of things like how I related to people, what I believed about people, how I measured my success or failure as a pastor. I mean, it was just a huge ugly deposit of emotional sludge.

And when that truth about me became clear – when the light began to shine on what was really going on in my heart and my mind and my soul – I remember being, first, *embarrassed* that anyone would know

that about me. I'll never forget the counselor looking at the results of one of my tests (we had to take several personality tests in advance) and saying, "So, Rick, this says that you're a pretty angry person. Is that accurate?"

And I said, "I don't think so. I mean, things bug me from time to time but I don't think of myself as angry."

And he looked at Jetta and she was slowly nodding her head "yes." And then she went on to describe some of what she had observed in me in the preceding months. And it was all true. I really was an angry person. I just couldn't see it. I didn't want to see it.

But more than being embarrassed and a

little ashamed (pastors are supposed to be perfect, right?), I was *desperate to change*. I didn't (and don't) want to be like that. I didn't (and don't) want to continue in a pattern that is eventually going to destroy not just myself emotionally and spiritually but would also injure the people I love and care about. I wanted to change.

And I'm sure that most of you could tell a similar story because pretty much every single person wants to change *something* about who they are on the inside. Almost all of us dream of being someone different and someone better than who we are today.

What God Wants

Good news is ... God has that same dream and desire for us. *He* doesn't want us to be

the same person either!

Even better news is ... He has actually *promised* that if we come to Christ and we believe in Him as our savior, we will be changed – and quite literally. We will become new people at the core of our being, at the level of our spirit.

The Apostle Paul couldn't have stated it more clearly than when he wrote:

*If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! 2
Corinthians 5:17 (NIV)*

That's part of what we visualized in our baptisms earlier.

Furthermore, we are promised that when Christ returns and renews and regenerates

this world – instantly changes it from what it is to what it was intended to be, we will get to participate in that renewal and regeneration. We’re literally going to become new people *in the flesh*.

That’s what one of Jesus’ best friends, the Apostle John was talking about when he wrote:

Dear friends, we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when He [Jesus] appears, we shall be like him ...

John 3:2 (NIV)

We’re going to be raised from death and given a body that, like His, is no longer subject to disease and death. “No more crying, no more pain” as John writes elsewhere.

And furthermore, these changes are unconditionally promised to those who believe *because of what God does*, not what we do.

As Paul once expressed it in a prayer for some of his friends in the city of Thessalonica:

May the God of peace make you holy in every way, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless until our Lord Jesus Christ comes again. God will make this happen, for he who calls you is faithful.

1 Thessalonians 5:23-24
(NLT)

By the way, we call that “grace” ... which simply means “God doing for us what we cannot do for ourselves with no strings attached.”

Specifically ...

- We can't recreate ourselves spiritually and become new creatures.
- We can't resurrect ourselves into immortal flesh after we die.
- And we can't make our spirit, soul and body blameless until Jesus comes again. (Heck, we can't even do that from now until the end of the Chiefs' game this afternoon!)

But, in Jesus' death on the cross, which atones (or makes up for) our sin and frees us from all condemnation ... and in His literal and physical resurrection from the dead, which is the Father's very first step in

renewing and regenerating all things ... God made a way for all those changes to happen.

And here's what's amazing (and why we call it amazing grace): *you and I didn't have to do one thing to convince Him to do all of that.* We didn't have to try and prove ourselves or our worthiness. God didn't say, "If you will promise to clean up your act, well then, OK, I will do what it takes to make all of this possible. I will send someone to save you."

That's why we say "grace has no strings attached." That's why we say "grace is unconditional." You don't deserve it and you can't earn it. But God does it anyway.

And what that means is, if you believe in Jesus as your savior ... change is most

definitely a-comin'. And it's going to be good – better than anything you can imagine. And you can't do anything to add to or take away from that destiny. It's all yours unconditionally.

That's change you (really) can believe in.

Now, as good as all of that sounds, God actually wants even more for us. He wants us to start experiencing change in who we are right now – *today*.

In fact, the idea of a Christ-follower who is *not* on a path of continuous positive change in at least some area of life is just unheard of in the New Testament.

**For instance, Paul wrote to the
Philippians ...**

*I press on to possess that
perfection for which Christ Jesus
first possessed me.*

Philippians 3:12 (NLT)

Talk about a lofty goal!

But Jesus himself said to his disciples: “Be perfect as your Father in Heaven is perfect.”

**To the Ephesian Christians, Paul
described that continuous
improvement in this way:**

*We will no longer be immature
like children. We won't be tossed
and blown about by every wind
of new teaching. We will not be
influenced when people try to
trick us with lies so clever they*

sound like the truth.

Instead, we will speak the truth in love, growing in every way more and more like Christ, who is the head of his body, the church. Ephesians 4:14-15 (NLT)

If you're a follower of Jesus, over time God intends for there to be some kind of measurable, demonstrable change in your character or your body or your generosity or your attitude or your relationships or your ability to withstand hardship or <fill-in-the-blank>. If you're a Christian, over time God intends for you to become more and more like Jesus and less and less like your natural self.

Over time, He intends for you to develop, for example ...

- A more gracious and tolerant spirit
- An attitude of contentment and gratefulness
- The ability to resist temptation
- The discipline to control your spending so you can be generous
- More humility and less arrogance
- An increasing trust in Him instead of needing to control everything and everyone
- The ability to say “no” when it’s the right thing to do

In fact, not only does God intend for this kind of transformation to happen, God promises to bring it about in us *if ...* you and I will cooperate in a certain way; if we will meet a certain condition.

And this is another one of those “I will if you will” kinds of promises we’ve been talking about in this series; where God says to us “I will do *this* if you will do *that*.”

- “I will rescue you from the dominion of darkness – I will save you from the eternal consequences of sin,” He says, “*if you call on Me.*”
- “I will relieve your stress and anxiety *if you come to me and take My yoke upon you.*”
- “I will direct your path *if you trust in Me with all your heart, do not lean on your own understanding and acknowledge Me in all your ways.*”

We’ve talked about each of those promises

in the past three weeks, so if you weren't here and you want to know more you can check it out on our website or app.

And, as we've said each week, God's grace is unconditional but many of His blessings that produce joy and happiness in this life are not. They're conditional: dependent on whether or not we do what He says.

And when it comes to experiencing fundamental change in who we are as people, the same principle applies. Yes, it's true that when we come to Jesus and believe in Him and call on Him to save us, God gives us a new heart and a new nature and He guarantees that, in the end, by His grace, that's what's going to survive into eternity. Our *ultimate transformation*, so to speak, is going to happen.

However, to experience transformation *right now* in this life (which, again, all of us long for at some level) ... *that* is dependent on us meeting the condition.

It's Morphing Time

Of course, saying *that* makes it sound like there is only one thing we have to do in order to cooperate with God. In reality, there are many things we can do that help us to grow and change as Christians – such as worship and prayer and hanging out with other followers of Jesus, serving and giving and even fasting.

But the reason all of those things “work” (so to speak), is that they actually help us meet the condition ...

... which Paul spells out for us in his letter to the church at Rome:

Do not be conformed to this present world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may test and approve what is the will of God—what is good and well-pleasing and perfect.

Romans 12:2 (NET)

Now, as we've done in each of the messages in this series, I want us all to read this together out loud so we can maybe get it more firmly embedded in our brains (which, I think you can see, is one of the things that helps to renew our minds).

So, let's give it a shot, shall we? Here we go:

Do not be conformed to this present world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may test and approve what is the will of God—what is good and well-pleasing and perfect.

Romans 12:2 (NET)

Now, I'm going to take a few minutes to break this down but first let's go ahead state the promise and the condition since that's what we're trying to get at in this message and this series.

The promise God makes to us is “I will change you for the better – I will transform you – if you will begin to think in a new way.”

Ok, hold that thought for a bit and let's break down what we just read from Romans 12. And I'm going to begin at the

end of what Paul writes because that part is probably a little confusing.

He says “be transformed by the renewing of your mind so that you may test and approve what is the will of God – what is good and well-pleasing and perfect.”

Now, whenever Christians read “the will of God” in the scripture, we tend to think of it in terms of specific direction for our lives (which is what we talked about last week). Should I date this person? Should I quit my job? Should I buy this car? Should I let my kid go to this school?

But that’s not what Paul is talking about here. Instead, what he is talking about is “proving” that the way God says we should live (God’s will for our everyday lives) is always good, pleasing and perfect (or

complete).

“Renew your mind – begin to think in a new way,” Paul is saying, “and you’ll not only experience transformation, you’ll also discover that God’s really is the best way. It really is the way to contentment and fullness and happiness.”

Now, let’s go back to the beginning where Paul says, “don’t be conformed; instead be transformed.”

And those are the only two choices. We’re either going to be squeezed into the mold of what our culture tells us matters most; what it says is acceptable; what it says about how to live ... or ... we’re going to change into people who are proving to themselves (and to everyone who is watching) that God’s way really is the best

way. We're moving in one direction or the other.

Now, one more thing that's really important to note about this phrase. The word that gets translated "transformed" is the Greek word "metamorphoo" from which we get our word "metamorphosis." And we use that word to describe a transformation but not just any transformation. It's a change that reveals what was already there in the first place.

- For example, a tadpole changes into a frog because that's what was already in its genetics. It doesn't become a bird.
- And a caterpillar changes into a butterfly because, genetically, that was what was already present.

Metamorphosis reveals the essence of a thing; it does not change it into something else altogether.ⁱⁱ

By the way, this is the same Greek word used to describe something that once happened to Jesus during his time on this earth.

Mark writes that ...

Jesus took Peter, James, and John, and led them up a high mountain to be alone. As the men watched, Jesus' appearance was transformed, and his clothes became dazzling white, far whiter than any earthly bleach could ever make them.

Mark 9:2-3 (NLT)

To put it in more culturally appropriate terms, they got to see Jesus *morph* (at least, temporarily). For a moment, his true identity – which had always been present but hidden – broke thru the trappings of his flesh and blood for all to see.

So, when Paul says that you and I can be transformed, he means to say that our true identity – the *new* identity that God puts in us when we believe; the new creation that we already are ... Paul is saying that *that* – the real us, the new us – can begin to come out in everyday life. We can morph into our true and better selves that are designed to reflect the glory of God and prove that His way is good, pleasing and complete. We can become more like Christ and less like ourselves.

God will bring that about in us *if* we renew our minds; if we learn to think in a new way. So, let's talk about what that means and what it looks like.

The Process of Renewal

Now, the word “renew” is very important because it implies that something has gone wrong with our minds; they're broken in some way; they don't work like they were originally intended to work ... which is exactly the point Paul makes at the very beginning of this letter to the church at Rome.

Describing what has happened to the human race, he writes:

For though they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God or

show gratitude. Instead, their thinking became nonsense, and their senseless minds were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools...They exchanged the truth of God for a lie.

Romans 1:21-22, 25 (NIV)

And when that happened (and happens), Paul writes that people as a whole developed a propensity to worship the creation instead of the Creator.

And when that happened (and happens), Paul writes that people as a whole began to accept and even glorify sinful behavior. Wrong became right and right became wrong and that way of thinking began to permeate all of life.

You don't have to look very hard at our

current culture to see the reality of what Paul is talking about.

Now, what that means, bottom line, for you and me – even if we're new creations, reborn of God's Spirit into beings that are most definitely going to complete the morphing process when Jesus returns; what that means is that *right now* we are still enslaved in our minds to the stinkin' thinkin' that characterizes the human race. We're still in a fog from our minds being darkened.

And that's why we so often find ourselves squeezed into the mold of this world. That's why it's so easy for believers in Jesus to end up looking like everyone else and to conform to the same exact patterns:

- To live no differently from the person on our left or on our right
- To spend like they spend
- To date like they date
- Talk like they talk
- Watch what they watch
- Treat people like they treat people
- Interact with our kids like they interact with their kids.

Same fears, same worries, same debt, same struggling marriage, same conflicts at work.ⁱⁱⁱ

And that's why our minds need to be renewed. Our minds need to be renewed so that we can morph; so that the new us, *the real us* in Christ, can come out and we can experience change. It really is all in your head (and mine).

So, what does that look like?

Well, I could give you a bunch of Bible verses and we could talk about them, but I have to confess that by far the best illustration that I have ever seen comes from about as unlikely a source as you could ever imagine – *Seinfeld* Season 5 Episode 22 – which begins with the unhappy, unsuccessful, and unlikeable George Costanza sitting on a pier, looking out at the ocean and mournfully contemplating his life.

Suddenly, the light comes on in his head and it occurs to George that ...

... well, let's watch.

Video Clip – “The Opposite”

B – George: “Every decision I’ve ever made in my entire life has been wrong.”

E – George looks back at Elaine and Jerry as scene fades.

Probably the best and most complete show they ever did IMHO.

Now, if you’ve seen that show and remember it, you know that George’s life (at least for this episode) changes dramatically for the better. Among other things ...

- He starts dating the girl at the counter.
- He lands his dream job with the Yankees.
- He finally moves out of his parents’ house.

And it all happens because he decides to think differently. Specifically, he does three things in that regard.

He does an assessment, an analysis and then makes an application.

- George's assessment: "my life is not what I want it to be."
- Analysis: this is when the light comes on and he realizes "all my thoughts and all my decisions are 100% completely wrong."
- Application: "I will think opposite thoughts and allow those thoughts – regardless of what people think or what I've always done – to guide my choices."

... which is obviously wise because if you think the things you've always thought, you'll do the things you've always done.

Conclusion

So, what does this mean for you and me as we attempt to renew our minds?

I think it means we do the same three things (and we do them over and over because this is a process).

But we do them with the added factor and the added confidence that, on the inside, we really are new creatures in Christ who have the ability to live the kind of life that God wants for us. We *will* morph – our spiritual DNA (so to speak) *will* come out in a way that doesn't happen for the George

Costanzas of the world. George eventually went back to being who he was at the core – unhappy, unsuccessful and unlikeable.

But that's not who we are in Christ.

So ...

- We assess and keep on assessing: we ask God turn the light on and to reveal to us “where am I, really? Is my life really the full and abundant life Jesus has promised? Am I being used by God to accomplish something for His Kingdom?”
- We analyze: “where am I being conformed and squeezed into the mold of the world? Where am I falling short in loving God and loving people (which

is the yoke Jesus offers us)? Where I am thinking and living opposite of what God wants?”

- And then we apply it: “what new thoughts – God-centered thoughts – do I need to think? What new ways do I need to walk in? What people and patterns of life – habits – will help me?”

And as we do this we remember, again, that this is a process. Morphing does not happen all at once. It will take a lifetime learning how to live by the Spirit, to live a new life. We must submit, and keep on submitting, to God. Over and over and over we must "take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ" (2 Cor 10:5).

See, the change in our spirit comes about

immediately. But it usually takes quite a while for that change to be reflected in our life.

Then finally, we remember that there is grace for our failures. There is no condemnation so we don't need to fear that. We're forgiven completely and totally of all our failures. But we want more than that for our lives. God wants more than that for our lives.

God says "I will if you will. I will change you for the better – I will transform you – if you will begin to think in a new way."

Would you stand with me for closing prayer?

Endnotes

ⁱ This part of the introduction is from Ray Pritchard's excellent message on Romans 12:2 at this link: <http://www.keepbelieving.com/sermon/changing-your-mind/>

ⁱⁱ Pritchard, <http://www.keepbelieving.com/sermon/changing-your-mind/>

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://cedarbrookchurch.net/tag/starting-over/>