

Be Changed...

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Sunday 15 May 2016

Psalm 51¹⁻³ / John 20¹⁹⁻²³ / Luke 18⁹⁻¹⁴

The Bible is interested in change. Specifically, it's very interested in personal change. One of the key indicators of this comes in the word μετάνοια or repent. In its various forms it occurs 56 times in the NT to say nothing of the times when another word is used to indicate precisely what it refers to so we find in Matt 18³, for instance, "Truly I tell you, unless you change [στραφῆτε] and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" or, if we wish to become Jesus' disciples, we must be willing to "let go" (ἀποτάσσω G698) of all our possessions (Luke 14:33).

And this is not just any change. Μετάνοια actually refers to change that is like changing from one species to another – **radical** change.

How are you with change? If you're anything like me change is not easy – even change you know you need to make – in fact, that change can be the hardest change of all.

The noun μετάνοια and its cognates are used 56 times in the NT. It is a really important concept but the question is – how does change work for us and, in particular, how can we change? One of the great frustrations of my life from an early age was that I shared a desire of most of the important people around me that I should change. Now it's fair to say that each of us has certain ideas about

how we should change but, in my case, there was general agreement that change was very necessary. A most helpful condition you might say.

If I were to summarise somewhat, I suspect my parents simply wanted me to change in such a manner that they had fewer complaints to field about my general behaviour. So any appeal to them about the fairness or otherwise of the charges brought against me really fell on deaf ears because they were usually only concerned that **'it'** had happened again – they were being blamed for some sort of action of mine and, try as they might, they couldn't deny that I was indeed their offspring so that somehow they were to blame.

And they weren't the only ones. My parents' friends got in on the action, my teachers certainly felt the same way and even my Youth Group Leaders struggled with the fact that I was one of the most consistent attenders at Bible Class. I was temporarily expelled from Scouts for similar reasons and from Sunday School and, indeed I should add, from Kindergarten – though, that was really quite unjust and truly only for a short period – let me assure you.

Of course the most frustrated person in all of this wasn't my parents or even my teachers. Rather, it was me. I didn't like being yelled at, sent to the principal, strapped or caned and generally not being liked. There were many things about me I didn't like that much, but mostly I just didn't like being in trouble even if, for the most part, **I wasn't to blame!** Let me make that very clear from the outset.

So I could see that some change was desirable but the question of how to make that change and what was fair and reasonable to change was difficult. Change, you see, relies on at least two fundamental things. It relies on us knowing we need to change and, it relies on there being real changes one can make. There's no use demanding a tiger become a lion and there's no use screaming at a deaf person. If we draw this in a grid we come up with something like this...

	Change	No Change
Knowledge of	<p>1. Change I know I need to make</p>	<p>2. Areas I know I don't need to change</p>
No Knowledge of	<p>3. Change I <u>don't</u> know I need to make</p>	<p>4. Areas I don't need to change but which I am unaware of</p>

Now this doesn't represent any particular theology of change and we may not even get there this morning but the studies from the 40 Days material certainly take you into that area. Rather what this does is do a little bit of analysis of the problem of change from an anthropological point of view and the interesting thing about this is where it takes us...

If we go through this 1 square at a time you'll begin to see one major theme coming to the fore I believe.

Starting with box 1 – change I know I need to make – one might assume this was the easiest box to deal with when in fact it is often the hardest box to deal with because what we know from theology is that a knowledge of needed change is not in itself a complete **change agent**. Just because we know we need to change in some area doesn't mean we can make the change. And the Psalms are perhaps the best place to discover this. Take this one for example...

**Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your steadfast love;
according to your abundant mercy
blot out my transgressions.**

² **Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,
and cleanse me from my sin.**

³ **For I know my transgressions,
and my sin is ever before me. (Ps 51)**

The writer knows his sin, every day his transgression is before him but he can do little about it **except... cry out to God**. I frankly believe that unless and until we get to this point of realizing our powerlessness against sin we haven't understood what true repentance is.

Another fascinating passage where this is highlighted is in the story of the repentant tax collector...

¹³**But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and**

saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' ¹⁴I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted." (Luke 18)

Notice what attitude was acceptable to God? Yes. It was the attitude of the tax collector who knew his sin but could do nothing about it. When he cried out to God in honest desperation it was, as Jesus says, his prayer that was answered.

Quadrant 2 represents areas I know I don't need to change.

Areas I can be reasonably confident I am progressing well. You may think this is a 'no problem' area but in fact what I find often is that people refuse to believe their own perception about these areas. This is especially the case with teenagers and young people. So all the negative stuff they know isn't good tends to **overshadow** all the things that are great about them. And, I suspect this is something we take into adulthood and about the only thing that helps is **perspective**. In other words, it is the opinion and encouragement of others which enable us to really see and believe that we indeed have some redeeming features built in to us. Things which are not only not bad but which are really good! Frankly we need to be aware that we all need some reminding of what is good about us and this is a part of what it means to grow a healthy relationship with one another. How good we are at pointing out the problems and how poor we are at reminding one another of what we are good at and what we do well!

An elderly woman and her little grandson, whose face was sprinkled with bright freckles, spent the day at the zoo. Lots of children were waiting in line to get their cheeks painted by a local artist who was decorating them with tiger paws. “You’ve got so many freckles, there’s no place to paint!” a girl in the line said to the wee guy. Embarrassed, the little boy dropped his head.

His grandmother knelt down next to him. “I love your freckles. When I was a little girl I always wanted freckles,” she said, while tracing her finger across the child’s cheek. “Freckles are beautiful!” The boy looked up, “Really?” “Of course,” said the grandmother. “Why, just name me one thing that’s prettier than freckles.” The little boy thought for a moment, peered intensely into his grandma’s face, and softly whispered, “Wrinkles.”

Quadrant 3 – change I don’t know I need to make. I think we all have a fear around this quadrant because it raises the possibility that we’re walking around embarrassing ourselves when everybody else can see what the problem is but us. It also makes us very vulnerable to those who use this possibility as a social weapon – “Did you see what she was wearing last night?” “Well actually no, I can’t remember but if you’re talking like that it must have been something horrible and inappropriate so I’m just going to agree with you and act horrified.”

Of course on the other hand, like the King who had no clothes on, everybody may be too scared to tell us that we need to make a change and so we go on being stupid because we refuse to hear a word, a good word, about change.

How many church members does it take to change a lightbulb?
Change? Change??? My grandmother paid for that light bulb!

Finally quadrant 4 – Areas I don't need to change but which I am unaware of. Again the issue here is that others often see what we do well and don't let us know. I find, contrary to many commentators and people who call themselves Christians, that the Bible is incredibly positive about humankind. I think this is God's basic view of us. He created us beautiful and He thinks we are beautiful.

¹³ For it was you who formed my inward parts;
you knit me together in my mother's womb.

¹⁴ I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.
Wonderful are your works;
that I know very well.

¹⁵ My frame was not hidden from you,
when I was being made in secret,
intricately woven in the depths of the earth.

¹⁶ Your eyes beheld my unformed substance.
In your book were written
all the days that were formed for me,
when none of them as yet existed. (Psalm 139)

We have a God who understands our need for change but He will never do it in a harsh way. Instead, in the way of the Son, He will demonstrate lovingly our need to change and He will take upon Himself, the true cost of that change...

Loving actions can do much more than change your feelings; they can also communicate in unmistakable terms the reality of your forgiveness and your commitment to reconciliation.

Thomas Edison apparently understood this principle. When he and his staff were developing the incandescent light bulb, it took hundreds of hours to manufacture a single bulb. One day, after finishing a bulb, he handed it to a young errand boy and asked him to take it upstairs to the testing room. As the boy turned and started up the stairs, he stumbled and fell, and the bulb shattered on the steps. Instead of rebuking the boy, Edison reassured him and then turned to his staff and told them to start working on another bulb. When it was completed several days later, Edison demonstrated the reality of his forgiveness in the most powerful way possible. He walked over to the same boy, handed him the bulb, and said, "Please take this up to the testing room." Imagine how that boy must have felt. He knew that he didn't deserve to be trusted with this responsibility again. Yet, here it was, being offered to him again as though nothing had ever happened. Nothing could have restored this boy to the team more clearly, more quickly, or more fully.

Will you commit to change today?