

“Change Happens for a Purpose” (2 Corinthians 3:7-4:6)

RIVERBEND BIBLE CHURCH, MAY 27, 2018

Revisiting “Change”

For nearly two months now on Sunday mornings, we have been considering the issue of how Christians change. Messages have spouted from the seed of a single verse at the end of 2 Corinthians 3.

And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit. (2 Corinthians 3:18)

Let’s recite this verse together.

The verse summarizes the facts about change.

- This change happens to all Christians. “We all, with unveiled face,” in the context contrasts with all others who are blinded to Jesus Christ and the truth of the gospel. And this change is not reserved for special Christians. We saw how, when God dealt with his Old Testament people, Moses alone viewed God’s glory. But now, all Christians enjoy that privilege forever.
- This change happens as we are “beholding the glory of the Lord.” We become what we behold. We imitate what we look at. Just as an athlete begins to play like the stars he or she watches, so the Christian takes on the character of Christ as he or she saturates the mind with the truth about Jesus from the Bible. We are being changed “into the same image” as the One we are all beholding.
- This change means we are “being transformed.” We are undergoing a metamorphosis like that which changes a caterpillar into a butterfly.
- This change happens “from one degree of glory to another.” It is a slow and challenging process.
- This change “comes from the Lord who is the Spirit” meaning the Holy Spirit.

This verse does imply that there are commands for us to obey. But the focus is on the facts of what God is doing to transform his people to be like his Son. The verse answers the “who” question, the “how” question, the “what” question, and the “when” question about what we call sanctification, becoming holy like Jesus. What’s missing is an answer to the “Why” question. Why should I change? Change is difficult (as we noted last week). Why bother? Besides, “God loves me just the way I am, right?” The truth is that, if you are God’s child through Jesus Christ, he loves you too much to leave you unchanged.

If you are **not** a Christian, you experience God’s love indirectly. You enjoy the Creator’s physical blessings. He sustains you through his providential care. He gave you a conscience so that you know right and wrong and can act accordingly. You may experience God’s love through a Christian. For example, children in a Christian home enjoy many benefits because their parents know God. But such

love does not save you. It does not compare with the personal, direct, and devoted love God has for his children in Christ.

His love includes the blessing of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is the agent of change in a believer's life. We will speak more of this next week. Christian, God loves you too much to leave you unchanged. In the words of Pastor Matt Chandler, "It's ok not to be ok, it's just not okay to stay that way." Christians must change. But why would we want to change? Our God loves us in the way he motivates us. He gives us reasons to change that maximize our joy in his glory.

One motivation for participating in this transformation process appears in the last word of the verse just before our theme verse. Let me ask you to turn again to 2 Corinthians 3 to see that word for yourself. 2 Corinthians 3 is on p. 965 of the Bible available to you there in the row. Our focus this morning is on one of the blessings that God gives his children as they press forward in the pursuit of holiness. To highlight the significance of this blessing, follow as I read at v. 12.

Since we have such a hope, we are very bold,¹³ not like Moses, who would put a veil over his face so that the Israelites might not gaze at the outcome of what was being brought to an end.¹⁴ But their minds were hardened. For to this day, when they read the old covenant [law, without Christ], that same veil remains unlifted, because only through Christ is it taken away.¹⁵ Yes, to this day whenever Moses is read a veil lies over their hearts [because they are seeking glory in the law and not in Christ].¹⁶ But when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed.¹⁷ Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. (2 Corinthians 3:12–17)

One of the Holy Spirit's blessings is freedom. The transformation of v. 18 brings us into an ever-increasing enjoyment of the freedom that only Jesus Christ can secure and sustain. We embrace and engage in the transformation process because it means greater freedom. Why would you want to change? In a word, freedom.

If that's the case, then understanding this kind of freedom is critical. Let's consider: what this freedom is not; what this freedom means for me personally; what it means in my relationship with other believers; and what it means for my relationship with those who do not know Christ.

What Freedom is Not

It is Not Freedom to Do Whatever I Want

In our culture, merely mentioning freedom conjures up thoughts of doing whatever I want. By this thinking, "Law restricts personal freedom. If I'm free, I don't have to bother with obedience." This is patently false. The Spirit's freedom thrives as we become like Christ who always obeyed. This freedom is not doing what I want but becoming what I was meant to be. It means waging war on my desires to cultivate better desires. My desires are unreliable. They change so easily. They focus on immediate gratification instead of lasting pleasures. A fish lying on the beach is not free, it's dead. A fish is only free when "confined" to the water. The caterpillar may desire to crawl on leaves and eat them. But he was

destined to fly. Satan would love for us believe that sin is freedom and holiness is bondage. But the opposite is true. Sin is bondage.

Jesus answered them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin. (John 8:34)

People choose an addiction because it promises freedom. Yet, it ends up enslaving them. We all come to Christ as addicts. All Christians continue to struggle with addiction of some kind. It may be a substance like alcohol. It may be an activity like work or sex. It may be a concept like the approval of others. These enslave us. A spirit other than the Holy Spirit controls us. God saved us for a freedom to be who we were meant to be not to be what we want to be.

It is Not Freedom from Suffering

A popular theology tries to convince you that, if you have the Holy Spirit and trust in him, you will not suffer. It suggests that change for the Christian progresses from one triumph to another in an uninterrupted victory. Anything less reveals faulty faith. Again, Paul could not disagree more. Look down into chapter 4 as he continues to describe the experience of Christians being transformed.

*⁸ We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair;
⁹ persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; ¹⁰ always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies.
(2 Corinthians 4:8–10)*

Christian freedom thrives while enduring suffering, not escaping it. In v. 16 of Ch. 4 Paul states that our inner self is being renewed daily even as our outer self or body is wasting away. The Holy Spirit frees believers not to panic when trouble comes. No amount of suffering can neutralize our freedom. But what exactly is this freedom? This passage points to some important conclusions.

What Freedom Means for Me Personally

Ch. 3:12-17 contrasts the law-person whose heart is veiled and the Spirit-person whose heart is unveiled. The law-person does not have Christ. The Spirit-person does. The law-person is in darkness and cannot find God's glory. The Spirit-person sees Christ as the perfection of God's glory and sees God's law through Christ. The law-person is hardened (v. 14). The Spirit-person is free. The law-person without Christ has no power to keep God's law. The Spirit-person has the power of the Spirit to keep God's law as a delight. The law-person cannot please God. The Spirit-person is free to please God as he grows to be more like Christ.

Freedom for the individual Christian is freedom to please God. God's law produces four responses in our conscience: Apathy, Arrogance, Anguish, or Affirmation. Every person has a conscience. Look at 4:2. At the end of that verse, Paul refers to "everyone's conscience." A conscience is like a gauge or warning light on a car's dashboard. It comes on to tell us that something is wrong. Our consciences signal that we have broken God's law.

Every human being knows right from wrong. A person this week challenged me on that statement. He mentioned that he knew someone who could steal as if it were not wrong. In response, I asked what this thief would do if someone stole from him. The answer came quickly. “He would rise up in anger.” There’s the evidence of a conscience. He knows that stealing is wrong. He has developed ways to ignore his conscience selectively, especially when he will benefit from stealing. We can see a warning light on our dashboard and ignore it. This is the response of **apathy**. God’s law does not help me. It gets in my way. I ignore it.

Or, we might respond to the warning. The dashboard tells us that at least one tire is low on air. We stop, check the pressure, fill all the tires to proper inflation, and start to drive again, self-satisfied that the light has gone out. This is the response of **arrogance**. We recognize that we can keep some of God’s law some of the time though never for the right motive. We self-righteously compare ourselves to others. We look good in our own eyes. This is self-glory.

But such glory fades quickly because we fail quickly. There is a slow leak in the tire. All our efforts fail to solve the problem. The light keeps coming on. We could ignore it – apathy. Or, we could redouble our efforts to put more air in the tire. That’s like trying harder to please God by keeping his law in our own strength. At some point, **anguish** will set in. Failure will overwhelm us. Our conscience remains, according to Titus 1:15, defiled.

Anyone who owns up to this moral failure and turns from sin to trust Christ, finds new life. Jesus died as a sacrifice for sin in the place of sinners. He rose again to guarantee forgiveness for anyone who seeks it from him. He gives his Holy Spirit to all who come to him. The Spirit lives in Christians and frees us to respond rightly to our conscience. When a Christian sins, conviction sets in. He or she can admit it, confess it, seek forgiveness, reconcile, and live in the freedom of Christ’s forgiveness. Conscience then acts as an **affirmation** that we are pleasing God.

Christians still must deal with damage to the conscience. A damaged conscience is hindrance to the enjoyment of true freedom. Sound biblical teaching and study will gradually heal the conscience to hate evil and love good, not only in theory but in practice. Some Christians suffer from a hyper-active conscience. They worry that they have sinned when they have not. This too stifles freedom. Similarly, a weak conscience may hinder a believer from enjoying full freedom in Christ. But any true freedom is better than the bondage that keeps us from it. Consider a similar contrast between Christ’s work and the law in Hebrews 9

For if the blood of goats and bulls, and the sprinkling of defiled persons with the ashes of a heifer, sanctify for the purification of the flesh [the law provided for external cleansing as sign pointing to Christ],¹⁴ how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God. (Hebrews 9:13–14)

Christians love growing in holiness because it frees us to please God. Live in that freedom. Ask the Holy Spirit to heal your conscience according to God’s word. Ask the Holy Spirit to tame your conscience where it is out of control. Live in the joy of pleasing God, no longer cowering under the law’s

condemnation. Rest in who Christ is and what he has done, not what you can do for him. Apply the gospel to your troubled conscience.

When Satan tempts me to despair
And tells me of the guilt within
Upward I look and see him there
Who made an end to all my sin
Because the sinless Savior died
My sinful soul is counted free
For God the Just is satisfied
To look on him and pardon me

Holy Spirit transformation means freedom for you and me individually. But it also means freedom to relate lovingly to other Christians in the church.

What Freedom Means in My Relationships with Other Believers

Consider the first two verses of 2 Corinthians 4

Therefore, having this ministry by the mercy of God, we do not lose heart. ² But we have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways. We refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God's word, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God. (2 Corinthians 4:1–2)

Paul here is specifically describing his own ministry as a gospel-proclaimer. But the truth he declares applies generally to all Christians. We don't encourage change by enforcing laws on each other. We don't create laws to sanctify each other.

Christians have attempted this often. Churches pursue holiness by pressuring everyone to wear only certain clothes, or cut their hair in a certain way, or enjoy only one style of music, or refrain from certain social activities like going to movies or dancing. They redefine holiness to make it external and enforceable. This strategy fails primarily because it contradicts God's word. We pursue holiness with each other by openly declaring truth (v. 2). We share the Scriptures plainly and honestly. This happens in a variety of contexts from private conversation to public preaching and everything in between. V. 2 says that we commend ourselves to everyone's conscience. We live before each other consistent with the truth we proclaim. We do not coerce a response. We trust the Holy Spirit to work on the conscience of fellow believers.

Our church has a covenant which summarizes the promises and commands that unite us as community under Christ's Lordship. But we do not force people into that covenant. Membership is voluntary. We do not restrict services to members-only. We open the Lord's Table to all who know Christ. Even when we practice church discipline it is for sin that is serious, obvious, and unrepented. We are all forgiven sinners who continue to sin. We testified to that in our time of confession earlier. When one of our members practices sin that we determine is serious and obvious, we urge our brother or sister to repent

using the process which Jesus describes in Matthew 18:15-20. If repentance does not follow these frequent urgings, we act to remove that person from membership. We withdraw our affirmation of his or her profession of faith. We do not declare that he or she is **not** saved, only that we cannot affirm it. Even in this situation, our goal is to reconcile so that we can bring holiness to completion together in the fear of God (see 2 Corinthians 7:1).

Are you tempted to look down at other believers because you deem yourself more holy than they? You do things that they neglect to do. Or you refuse to do things that they practice. You think they should be more like you. Do not enslave your brother or sister. Practice freedom. Is the issue a matter of biblical command or teaching? Go and present the truth in a setting that will commend yourself to your brother or sister. Pray for the Lord to work on their conscience. Commit to patience with them because you know that God's timing for their sanctification is different than for yours. Seek repentance and restoration.

If the matter does not concern a violation of biblical standards, continue to love, learn, and live before your fellow believer, trusting God to sanctify them as he has promised. Remember that we are being sanctified together and not as isolated individuals. Live in the Spirit's freedom for Christ's people.

What Freedom Means for My Relationships with Non-Christians

We need only to say that this same principle applies to the way we relate to those who do not know Christ. 4:2 calls us to present the truth openly without trying to manipulate a response to the gospel. We commend the gospel to their conscience, knowing that only the Holy Spirit can free their conscience to see their sin and seek Christ. 4:3-4 reminds us that they do not believe the gospel because they are perishing. They cannot see Christ's glory because of a Satan-inflicted blindness. V. 5 commends Paul's example, calling us to proclaim Christ, not ourselves (our preferences, or politics, or personal pursuits). It urges us to serve non-Christians for Jesus sake rather than trying to conform them externally to Christian morality. We are free to serve because we need nothing from them, not even their right response to our message. God is pleased when Christ is faithfully proclaimed even if he is rejected.

Let me conclude. It's right to preach to Christians, "Change, because the Bible commands you to change." We need that. But we cannot start there. We must begin by saying, "Change, because God is already changing you." But we cannot stop here. We must press on to say, "Change, because you will experience freedom in Christ that is infinitely better than the deceptive bondage of sin." And, "if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed" (John 8:36).