

“Discover the Christ Who Changes Lives”

Luke 3:7-18

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INTRODUCTION

Some people will remember almost sixteen years ago, when the world faced the prospect of entering the new millennium. It was a fearful and stressful time for many. We didn't know what would happen. People were making dire predictions, like the computers around the world would crash turning off power and water, and denying access to bank accounts and other important records. In response to these forecasts people purchased generators, stocked up on water, and liquidated their assets. Thankfully, none of those predictions proved true.

In the troubled and turbulent times two thousand years ago, John's message of the coming judgment resonated with the people. They flocked to him to hear his message, to repent, and to be baptized by him in the Jordan River. When they came, John cautioned them, though. Repentance and baptism is serious business. They change lives. John's caution is one that we need to heed today, also.

THE GOSPEL BRINGS CHANGE

The crowds who came to John to be baptized wanted to go through the motions involved in repentance and baptism without having it affect their lives in any way. They were like children who were forced to say, "I'm sorry" by their parents but never really meant it, and people who are baptized because everyone else is doing it or the family expects it. Viewed in this manner repentance and baptism become mere shells of what they really are.

We struggle with the same issues that John's audience did. We are tempted to simply go through the motions of religion—attend worship somewhat regularly, pray occasionally, and try to be nice to people (unless they really bug us). We shoot for the lowest common denominator of what we need to be saved, and be on speaking terms with God. Such a faith doesn't cost us much, but it doesn't do much, either. A religion like this never feels quite right. It is like a shirt that is too small, or a pair of shoes that just isn't our style.

God came to earth in the person of Jesus to offer real and eternal change. Our sinful hearts want convenience and ease. Our sinful hearts want what is best for us at all costs. Jesus came to change our hearts. Even though sinful man challenged Jesus every step of the way, ignored his teaching and purpose, and finally condemned Him to die and crucified Him, Jesus came because He loved us. Even though we weren't there when Jesus walked this earth, we carry the guilt and shame of challenging, ignoring and condemning Jesus. Yet, Jesus was

willing to offer us change, forgiveness and salvation, at all costs. He died and rose again that we might live.

God continuously invites us to allow real change to take place in our lives. Repentance, which literally means a change of heart or a change of direction, demands change. Baptism is the first step in a new life with Christ that is full of changes. Though change is scary, it can work a powerful work in our lives and mold us into the people God wants us to be.

PRACTICAL CHANGE

The people ask John for specific changes, in response to his caution. John's reply may surprise us at its practicality and what does not contain. At first thought, we might think that the changes brought about by baptism and repentance might include more worship, Bible study, prayer, and service at work. John doesn't mention these at all, and by the way, neither does Jesus.

What shall we do, the people asked: A genuine change of mind resulted in a change of action for the **people**, the **tax collectors**, and the **soldiers**. The repentant were instructed to give to those in need, to work at their jobs with integrity, to refrain from abusing their power, and to be content with earning a basic wage.

Two carpenters work their whole career for a developer. Each of them builds hundreds of homes, all to the highest of quality providing shelter for families all over their county. On their last month of work, their developer gives them each one last job. Each one is to build a house for a "special client" on a larger two larger than average lots in the best developments owned by the developer. The first carpenter, hands aching from arthritis, back barely holding together from years of labor decides to build his best home ever. He chooses all the best materials and takes extra time to make sure every nail is in it proper place. The second carpenter, also aching and sore, decides to finish the job as quickly as possible. He uses the lower grade materials that take less time to procure and prepare. He takes significant short cuts that, while legal, will shorten time between major maintenance issues. On their last day of work, the developer throws them a wonderful retirement party. All of their friends and families are there to celebrate their years of hard work. To each, he gives a box with a set of keys. "For your years of hard and faithful work, I would like to thank you with the keys to the home I asked you to build for my "special clients. May you know enjoy the fruit of your labor in your retirement years."

Finally, John tells the people to be content. In repentance and baptism, we respond to God's love. We realize that God's love is steadfast and overwhelming. Resting in that love, we can be content and satisfied with the blessings that God pours out upon us.

CHRIST LIVING IN US

God wants the changes in our lives to be more than surface changes. God wants to change us from the inside out, so that what we do and say is a true reflection of who we are. To do this, God gives us the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is God's presence in our lives. When we talk about being in Christ and Christ being in us, this is a work of the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit is also God's power in our lives. The Spirit guides us into change and gives us the ability to change. The Spirit molds us and shapes us so that we begin to take on the image of God.

CONCLUSION

Change is always scary. In some ways it is similar to learning how to swim. When we first approached the water we were scared, but our parents or swim instructor assured us that they would be there for us. When we jumped in, we discovered that they caught us. When we tried our first strokes, they were there to support us. Change isn't as scary, when we know that God is with us and that the change is pleasing to God.

The Christ Child who was born in Bethlehem does more than gurgle, coo, and look cute. The Christ Child has come to give us abundant and eternal life, but the path to abundant life requires change.

Amen.