

CHANGE

I know few people who really like change. It seems that change always brings a certain fear of the future and usually more work to actually bring the change about. Truthfully, however, there is no escaping change. We are all growing older, our bodies our changing as our the bodies of our spouses, our children, or friends and our neighbors. The weather changes daily and now, we are told, changing into a decades long hurricane cycle that promises to plague us for years to come. Most of us have experienced change in our careers. Experts tells us that an individual will likely have 14 or 15 different jobs in a lifetime including at least two major career changes.

Of course, not all change is bad. When we change jobs or position to increase our career prospects or to earn more money the change may be good. When we struggle to change personal habits like eating habits, workout routines or eliminating smoking or alcohol, these are good changes.

Growth in Christ and Christian maturity are two more examples of change that most people consider good. The Bible even insists that we make certain changes. John the baptizer called upon men to repent because the kingdom was coming (Matthew 3:2). Jesus called for repentance as he began to preach (Matthew 4:17). Peter demanded repentance as a prerequisite to salvation (Acts 2:38; 3:19). Paul declared that true sorrow over ones own sin will produce repentance (2 Corinthians 7:9). These passage and more are commended to the reader as evidence that change, that is, repentance, is expected in the one who would be a child of God.

Probably the greatest example of change is recorded in the case of Paul. This great apostle describes his former life as a persecutor of the church (Acts 22:3-5). In the very next chapter he declares that *"I have lived before God in all good conscience up to this day"* (Acts 23:1). Yet in between these two sections we find a description of the event that changed Paul's life – his conversion on the road to Damascus and his baptism after being thoroughly taught by Ananias. This moment in his life was a turning point, a change from persecutor to preacher.

Such change is not miraculous. It comes from an unwavering desire to be pleasing to God. Paul suffered greatly after his conversion. He was a man with enemies all around. His former Jewish comrades thought him a trader and sought his life (Acts 9:23 ff). At the same time, the Christians were suspicious of their new brother (Acts 9:26). It was only because of Barnabas that Paul was allowed to associate with the church (Acts 9:27)

It is absolutely true that change can be hard. Researchers at MIT have found that we never really break old habits, they just hibernate and can return easily.¹ It is also the case that the more basic the and fundamental the habit, the harder the change can be. It is no easy task changing habits, especially when trying to develop new habits as we grow into a mature Christian.

Paul called us reject the changes the world offers and instead to be changed by God. He writes: *"do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind"* (Romans 12:2). But what, you ask, is meant by the renewing of ones mind? The idea is that we eliminate the *"pollutions of the world"* (2 Peter 2:20) by thinking on pure and Godly thoughts (Philippians 4:8). Before becoming a man of God, we must bring our thoughts into line with his. Only then, equipped with a Godly mind, can we expect to grow into the person God would have us to be.

Five suggestions for successfully making the changes come to mind.

1. **A FIRM DESIRE COUPLED WITH A PERSONAL DECISION IS ESSENTIAL.** One cannot change *for* someone else. The desire for change and the determination to do must come from within.
2. **PURSUE YOUR DESIRE THROUGH ARDENT PRAYER.** Although the desire comes from you, God has promised to help those who seek him (Psalm 145:18; Zechariah 1:3; James 4:8). Don't give up on prayer but continually and permanently seek the Father.
3. **WORK IN STAGES, NOT ALL AT ONCE.** Experts tells us that incremental change is more likely to last. God does not seek perfection from the new Christian, he desires growth and progress toward the heavenly. For example, it may be impossible to immediately reach a goal of 10% giving, but done over time pursuing a goal of 10% (or more) is surprisingly easy.
4. **FAILURE WILL COME BUT DISCOURAGEMNT MUST BE IGNORED.** There is no such thing as a straight path to Christian maturity. We will stumble and fall. Sometimes our failures will be embarrassingly public. But we remember that we all sin but must continue walking in the light in order to reach the goal (1 John 1:5-10).
5. **KEEP YOUR EYES ON THE GOAL AND NEVER LOOK BACK.** No matter what goal we seek, we must have a vision of where we will end up. For the Christian there are two goals or visions. The first goal, the intermediate one, is to keep one's eyes on Jesus and strive to like him each day. The second goal, the long range one, is to dream of what heaven will be like (Hebrews 11:16; Revelation 21:1-8).

Can we make the needed changes? Absolutely. God has never demanded of man that which cannot be done. The task is often difficult and pitfalls abound. But we must never give up. The prize if too great. As Paul said, let us *"press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus"* (Philippians 3:14)

Bryant Evans

¹ Michael Kanellos , "MIT explains why bad habits are hard to break," *CNET News.com* at http://news.com.com/MIT+explains+why+bad+habits+are+hard+to+break/2100-11395_3-5902850.html as of November 4, 2005.