

Biblical Change 4 – Why We Don't Change

Of whom we have much to say, and hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing. 12 For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the first principles of the oracles of God; and you have come to need milk and not solid food. 13 For everyone who partakes only of milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, for he is a babe. 14 But solid food belongs to those who are of full age, that is, those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil. (Heb 5:11-14)

Most people think babies are cute. You see them looking into prams, cooing and 'aw-ing' as they see these tiny humans. What would be your response, if one day you looked into a pram, lifted up the covering blanket, and there staring at you, was a man's head, with a thick beard, with a dummy in his mouth? And he spat out his dummy, and said in a deep baritone, "ga-ga!" I think you'd be shocked, and not just a little disturbed. Babies are loved for being what they are: babies. To find a fully-grown man in a crib or a cot wouldn't be cute, it would be tragic.

Delayed development is no longer cute, it becomes sad. There are physical conditions that people often have which stunts growth, or delays development, so that the person ends up looking different to his or her chronological age.

The same kind of delayed development can take place in the Christian life. When Christians do not experience change, even though there has been much passing of time, we have the same kind of tragic condition. You often find newer believers who overtake other Christians who have been Christians for far longer, in a matter of months. We all know people who have spent years in the Christian faith, years in church, but little to no discernible change has occurred for all that time. Which should tell us that spiritual change and growth is not like physical change and growth. Physically speaking, the passage of time produces an inevitable change. But in the spiritual realm, you can meet people who are spiritually exactly where they were when you met them 15 years ago.

Two passages in the New Testament really deal with the question of why people do not change: this passage in Hebrews, and a passage in James. We'll look at both of them to understand why change can be stunted or halted in a Christian's life.

The writer of Hebrews would like to take his readers further in a teaching on Melchisedek, but something in them prevents him from doing so. They have a problem. The problem could be called by several names: chronic immaturity, prolonged infancy, stunted growth. Put simply, his readers are not changing; they are not growing up spiritually, they are remaining in the same place.

In verse 12, the writer says that given the passage of time, there is a fair expectation that his readers would have long ago passed the place they are now, and become teachers of others. It is not that time by itself causes change and growth in Christians, but time combined with the right actions will inevitably bring change. Instead, these Hebrew Christians are doing something that is preventing change from happening, so that more time produces more expectations, but it doesn't produce more Christlikeness.

The writer expects that had these Hebrew believers been doing the right things, they would have advanced to where they would now be teaching others, and where their understanding of the faith would have progressed beyond the absolute basics. Instead, these people need repetition of first principles, they are still totally dependent on their teachers, and they cannot digest any doctrine beyond Grade One basics.

What is the problem here? Why would someone remain in this place of unchanging immaturity? Verse 11 gives us the answer. The person in immaturity has done something to his receptivity. Dull of hearing. The word for dull is only used by the writer of Hebrews in the New Testament and it means to be slack, slothful, sluggish. The approach to hearing the Word has become lazy.

With that approach in place, it does not matter how many sermons you hear, it does not matter how many hours you spend in church, it does not matter how much time passes from the day of your conversion, because when you become dull of hearing, the life-changing power of the Word of God no longer affects you. Your spiritual ears develop serious problems, so just like taking a deaf man to more lectures won't help him, so more exposure to the Word of God won't help you if this kind of dullness is present.

What causes this dullness? The writer tells us very clearly in verses 13 and 14. *13 For everyone who partakes only of milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, for he is a babe. 14 But solid food belongs to those who are of full age, that is, those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil. (Heb 5:11-14)*

The spiritual infant who can only handle milk is *unskilled* in the Word. This literally means he is inexperienced, untried, untested in the Word. By contrast, verse 14 tells you what the mature Christian does: by *reason of use*, he has his senses *exercised* to discern between good and evil. The mark of the mature is sound judgement, the ability to weigh things properly, recognise truth from error, good from evil, beautiful from ugly, useful from useless, best from better. How did he get there? By reason of use, he has trained his senses. We could paraphrase the Greek this way: those who through repetitive practice have been trained to perceive good and evil. The growth, and the consequent discernment comes from practice, from use, from active exercising. The man who takes the Word of God he already has, who shuns the evil he already knows, and pursues the good he already knows, is exercising and training, and using the Word. He prevents dullness and immaturity, by putting into practice the truth he has.

The path to change is through active implementation of the Word, the path to dullness and chronic immaturity is through conscious neglect.

If you don't use it, you lose it. Just like muscles weaken and even atrophy if we don't use them, our spiritual perception, and our spiritual growth slows down and even halts if we do not take the truth we have and apply it, use it, obey it.

If a man is not physically active, increasing his food intake won't make him healthier, it will make him unhealthier. And when a Christian does not practice the truth he already has, more exposure to the Word can even harm him. He becomes more and more culpable, but his dullness is making him less and less capable. His obligation is growing, while his obedience is shrinking.

This is exactly what Jesus meant when He said these words: *"Therefore take heed how you hear. For whoever has, to him more will be given; and whoever does not have, even what he seems to have will be taken from him."* (Luk 8:18)

If this kind of dullness is in your life, more and more sermons become like more and more layers of scar tissue over a wound. More to remember, but less desire to do so, and each time, the sensitivity to the Word is growing less.

Spiritual dullness is chosen. It is not a passive disability, or a disease that comes upon you. It is a chosen resistance to the Word of God. In the book following Hebrews, James gives us a look inside

dullness. James is dealing with the powerful Word which God used to beget us, to regenerate us. So you would think this powerful Word has an automatic effect on us. But no, James shows us that there are very clearly things we can do that prevents the Word's effectiveness. James X-rays the process of being dull and shows us three ways that a hearer of the Word can become and remain dull.

I. Grow Angry Over The Need For Change

19 So then, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath; 20 for the wrath of man does not produce the righteousness of God.

Here James tells us that the first way that we hinder the Word's effectiveness is if we get angry with the Word. Instead of being quick to hear, that is, teachable, we are quick to speak, to react, to get angry. This kind of response does not produce God's righteousness; it does not enable change into Christlikeness.

Why would we get angry, and react instead of listening? Because the Word of God tells us to change! If we feel that what the Word is saying is not what we need and not what we want.

Sometimes the anger comes from conviction. The Word of God comes, and it penetrates, and cuts, and reveals. That's uncomfortable. We feel exposed, revealed, even cornered. It's as if all our carefully arranged excuses and coverings have been suddenly ripped off, and there's the temptation to get angry.

Now here is where James is exactly right about being quick to speak. Have you ever found yourself in an argument with someone where you were being blamed? Did you ever find yourself getting angry, and thinking of what to say even before the other person finished? Perhaps even interrupting the person? It's as if we don't give their words even a moment to penetrate, we want to shield them off and deflect them with our words.

We can do that with the Word. We feel the Word of God pointing at us, blaming us, and we get upset, and quickly bat it away with anger. This is not what I need to hear! I don't need to be made to feel like I am some horrible sinner! The real problem is my spouse! The real problem is my boss, my child, my health, my finances, my parents, my past, my church. That's where the change really needs to take place.

So we play spiritual rugby – the truth is passed to us, and we quickly pass it to someone else.

There's another way we get angry with the Word. We get annoyed at the choice of message. We feel it is not relevant to me and my life. We feel a kind of impatience with the message and the messenger for bringing this message that doesn't touch me where I am.

Now let me say that preachers can certainly be at fault here. Preachers can preach messages that have very little connection to the lives of God's people. But let's assume you're in a church where the Word of God is being systematically taught, both topically, and expositively, and that the overall diet is a healthy one. If that's the case, and I get angry, and say, 'this is not relevant', what am I saying about God's Word? You see, am I always the best person to know what I need to hear? Is the patient always able to properly self-diagnose? The fact is, we are very bad judges of what we need.

What we think we need, and therefore what we think is relevant, and what the Holy Spirit knows we

need can be very different things. In any given congregation, you have all kinds of interests. You have the people who wish every message was about end-time prophecy, and everything else seems a bit boring. You have the people who wish every message was deep theology, explaining the mysteries of doctrine. You have the people who wish every message was a practical how-to sermon with five easy steps. You have the people who wish every message was some kind of typology or allegory. How could a sermon please all these tastes? Well, of course, it can't, unless God's people arrive with an attitude that says, what God serves up today is exactly what I need.

When God speaks, it is always relevant. If God's truth has been properly expounded and delivered, it is timeless and life-changing. When God opens His mouth, you don't interrupt Him and say, "Listen, I can't see how what you're saying has any relevance for my life right now." No, you stop, and with a heart that is slow to speak and quick to listen, you find the relevance. You humble yourself under the Word, removing yourself from being the centre that the Word should orbit around, and put God's glory at the centre, around which you should orbit, and you will quickly come to see the relevance.

Whether it is anger from conviction, or anger from annoyance over relevance, you can see why it does not enable you to grow in righteousness. If we are like this, we remain dull, saying, I want change through another message – one where I am not convicted, or one which I feel is relevant.

No. If you want change, be slow to speak, slow to get angry, quick to listen, and receive the Word with meekness. "Let the righteous strike me, it will be a kindness." "Search me, O God." "Speak Lord, your servant is listening." Let the conviction come. This is relevant to Me. I need change, and I am ready to change.

II. Deny That We Need To Change

21 Therefore lay aside all filthiness and overflow of wickedness, and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls.

James takes it a step further. Not only must you not reject the Word through anger, you must not reject the Word out of self-righteousness. He says, lay aside all filthiness and overflow of wickedness. If you are going to receive the Word, you need to be willing to repent and be cleansed. You can't come to the table with dirty hands: the Word will not have its effect on you, if you have an unrepentant, dirty heart.

Biblical change has a very simple motive: God is glorious and holy, but we are sinners. If we confess and repent of our sins, and turn to Him in faith, we give Him glory, and we receive joy. So the change we need to make is always primarily a change of heart, going from sin to righteousness, from idolatry to worship, from what displeases God to what pleases Him. That's where the change always takes place.

When we hear the Word of God, we are never supposed to walk away from it saying, "Well, I hope so-and-so was listening!" The Word of God never calls for you to hope that a change will come to your circumstances, to the way others treat you, to your financial fortunes, to your health. Those are, for the most part, unchangeables. They are out of your hands. Biblical change deals with sin, your sin, which you can lay aside, which you can repent of.

Sometimes we want change, but not for the reason God wants it. We want our marriage to change, because the fights are annoying us. God wants change because the fights are dishonouring Him, and marriage is to reflect Christ and the church. We want change in our work habits because it is starting

to get us into trouble with our boss. God wants change in our work habits so that we would reflect Him and His image in our work. We want change in our devotions because we feel guilty when we don't. God wants change because He desires communion with us. So we don't change, because we hang on to what God wants to get rid of. We want change to come in another area, by another person, through some other circumstance.

But the bad news, and the good news is that the change God wants from us is repentance. The bad news is repentance is never fun. It is painful to own our sin. But the good news is it is uncomplicated. This is what God wants me to repent of, this is what He wants me to replace it with, I will do that by His grace.

It is difficult, but it is not torturously long. It is a matter of saying as David did, "Against You, and You only, have I sinned. The problem that You are addressing is not someone else, not somewhere else, it is in my heart. I will repent of my side of the problem."

Anger is the dullness that says, I don't want to be told I need to change. Unconfessed sin is the dullness that says, I don't have to change my heart – that's not where the problem lies!

To grow is to say – I need to change. To grow is to say, I need to change in my heart. Somewhere here is what I need to lay aside.

But James shows us one more way that we can be dull of hearing.

III. Pretend That We Have Changed

22 But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. 23 For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man observing his natural face in a mirror; 24 for he observes himself, goes away, and immediately forgets what kind of man he was. 25 But he who looks into the perfect law of liberty and continues in it, and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work, this one will be blessed in what he does. (Jam 1:19-25)

A mirror's primary purpose is for self-grooming. You see yourself so you can adjust yourself. The point of the encounter in the mirror is self-correction. To look, see what needs to be fixed, and walk away and immediately forget what you saw would be odd. If we saw a man with a big chocolate smear on his mouth, who looks in the mirror, and then walks away and does nothing about it, we would conclude some things about him. We'd have to conclude the man is half-serious. If he thinks that just seeing himself in the mirror has fixed the chocolate smear, he's deceived. Seeing the smear is half the problem solved. He then has to do something about it.

So is the person who comes to hear the Word but makes no changes. He wants himself or others to feel that he wants to look into the mirror of the Word and be changed, but because he immediately forgets what he hears, we have to conclude his trip to the mirror of the Word was not really to see himself and change. He hears the Word, and sees the changes that need to be made, but leaves the chocolate smear.

Remember in Hebrews? The mature are that way by reason of use. Through practice, they develop perception to discern good and evil. But the immature do not develop because they do not practice the Word. They do not do what they hear.

How does this happen? It happens when we think that the hearing is enough. It is when we think the exposure to the Word is a substitute for going home and doing the hard work of change.

Ancient church father Basil:

"He who seeks to understand commandments without fulfilling commandments, and to acquire such understanding through learning and reading, is like a man who takes shadows for truth. For the understanding of truth is given to those who have become participants in truth"

One time A.W. Tozer was preaching to a church in California. The church was used to altar calls, and after a very powerful message, everyone was expecting a mass movement forward. But Tozer said to the crowd, "Don't come down here to the altar and cry about it – go home and live it!" With that comment, he dismissed the meeting.

Sometimes we make substitutes for actually doing the Word. We think that just being present will cause the change. Or we feel if the message deeply moved us, then change has already taken place. Or we think if there was some point of theology, or controversy or some delicious point of difficult doctrine, that we have changed. Or we think that simply having been in the social experience of being around God's people, that we have changed. But all of these are just substitutes for doing the Word.

Oswald Chambers said: "There is a danger with the children of God of getting too familiar with sublime things. We talk so much about these wonderful realities, and forget that we have to exhibit them in our lives. It is perilously possible to mistake the exposition of the truth for the truth; to run away with the idea that because we are able to expound these things, we are living them too."

God's method is very simple. You hear it, then you do it. You see the problem, by hearing, and then you fix the problem by doing. You diagnose by hearing the Word, and then you heal by doing. Now some of that doing might happen while you listen to the Word. You might repent on the spot. You might believe and trust something while reading. But most of the time, there is still something I need to go and do if I am to change.

Usually, it's something pretty incremental, an adjustment. You don't go home with a list of seventeen things you need to do. It is something to believe, something to turn from, something to act upon. But if no change takes place while you hear, and no change takes place later on, then you have become what James calls a forgetful hearer.

A church had a new pastor who preached the same sermon every Sunday. When people started complaining, he told the congregation, "I'll preach a new sermon when you act on this one."

The difference between the forgetful hearer and the one who remembers is found in verse 25

25 But he who looks into the perfect law of liberty and continues in it, and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work, this one will be blessed in what he does.

The secret behind this is the kind of looking. The man interested in change looks with a kind of intent that means he will not forget. The word for 'looks' is actually "peers". The man is staring with focus and intent, because he aims to change. The Christian who wants to change is peering into the Word, with the kind of focus that means he will not forget.

That doesn't mean he remembers every word or point. But he does remember the change the Holy Spirit wants to make in him, because he cares about pleasing God. Remember, his motive is in the heart, so when the Spirit puts His finger on something, he is not going to easily forget.

How do you stunt your growth? Get angry at the Word, say, "I don't need this or want this!" Be

stubborn around the Word, say, "It's not me or my heart that needs to change!" Be half-honest around the Word, say, "Hearing is as good as doing."

Those newborn Christians who overtake Christians twice their age have a simple secret. They come to the Word expecting to change. They look for change. They know the change must take place in the heart. And they go and do it.