

TEXARKANA REFORMED BAPTIST CHURCH

SERIES TITLE: YOU WILL CHANGE | SERMON TITLE: YOU MUST CHANGE

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I wanted to start a series on personal change in the Christian life; I thought to title it "You Can Change." The trouble is that as I reflected on the pertinent biblical material I realized my title was not exactly accurate. So instead I've named the series "You Will Change." Before we're done I think we'll all see the important difference between those two titles.

So I propose to show you from Scripture for the next month or so that, as a Christian, You Will Change. And that's good news, because, according to Scripture, You Must Change.

Let's begin by clarifying what I mean. When I say You Will Change, I am telling you the Scripture teaches that every person who is chosen of God, regenerated, and granted faith and repentance, necessarily improves in their character, behavior, thinking, and feeling. Whatever moral and religious quality a man begins with is enhanced by his conversion to Christ. And this has to be the case; it cannot be otherwise. This is a certainty, it is inevitable, it is infallible. A converted man can no more avoid growing in virtue and piety than a baby can avoid growing into an adult.

Now of course this assumes the newly converted Christian lives for a while after his conversion; if, like the thief on the cross, he dies shortly after conversion, while even here there will be immediate improvement, yet we may not see much because there wasn't much time for the man's conversion to work on his character. But for our purpose we are assuming a man who is converted and goes on to live for a significant amount of time.

So in this series I am primarily telling you that, as a converted person, You Certainly Will Change. Some of the sermons in this series will explain elements of salvation which make change a certainty. And though we'll see that to a limited extent a Christian man can fight against the change God is working in him, yet, with few exceptions, on the whole a Christian man cannot successfully prevent this change, so certain has God made it. Now this fact that converted people Will Certainly Change, through the infallible determination of God, is very good news in light of another Biblical Fact. This other Biblical Fact is the subject of today's sermon. The reason it is such good news that our personal change is a certainty in the Christian life is this: According to the Bible, if we wish to be saved from God's wrath, then We Must Change.

When I say we must change I mean we must experience improvement in our character, behavior, thoughts and feelings in order to be saved. We must move from a condition of commitment to sin and self-rule to a commitment to righteousness and Christ-rule. And that commitment must issue in a real, significant, consistent, and regular obedience to the Word of God. Without this change we cannot reasonably hope to be counted among God's people who will be saved from God's wrath on the last day.

Now I say this obedience must be real, significant, consistent and regular; I do not say it must be sinless or perfect. Nor do I say it must be without lapse, or failure, or backsliding, or ignorance. The testimony of Scripture from beginning to end is that God's people, though truly justified and accepted by God, and though walking in a significant and consistent obedience to God's word, yet still possess inward corruption which issues in real and sometimes heinous sin. I will refer to this particular sort of obedience which I have in mind as "limited obedience."

I define Limited Obedience as obedience to the Bible which is significant, consistent, and real, flowing from regeneration, faith, and the power of the Spirit, but which falls short of sinlessness and perfection. With this definition I seek to describe a middle category between, on the one hand, the glorified/perfected saint in heaven, and on the other hand, the committed, enslaved, unregenerate, practicing sinner.

Now this limited obedience is not the ground of our justification; that ground is only Christ and we lay hold of Christ by faith alone, faith which is worked in our hearts by God's own power. This limited obedience is not the root beneath the tree of salvation, which causes it to be, but the fruit which hangs on the tree of salvation, fruit which cannot help but grow, the tree being what it is. This fruit can no more refuse to grow than a baby can refuse to grow into a man; twenty years hence that baby will be 6 feet tall and 175 pounds; this is not a process the baby can stop, and the limited obedience which Christians must possess is not a process Christians can stop. And that's very good news since God requires this limited obedience of Christians for full and final entrance into his kingdom. God first requires that we must change, then he sets about ensuring that we do change.

Take again the image of the tree. Suppose God required of a seed that it bear fruit in order to enter his kingdom. Of course the seed knows that in order to bear fruit it must send its roots down into a good source of nutrients and water. Now suppose God himself plants that seed in a rich soil near a river. The seed puts down its roots and pulls up the water and nutrients which make it grow into a healthy tree; being a tree, and continually absorbing water and nutrients, the

tree bears fruit; in fact, it could not do otherwise, since bearing fruit is what well-watered trees do! Then God comes and examines the tree, finds the fruit he required, and grants the tree to enter his kingdom. So the seed is required to bear fruit, and God himself connects the seed to the rich resources it needs to grow into a tree and bear fruit. And the seed/tree cannot keep from bearing fruit. What God requires God supplies. But God does require.

So in the figure the unconverted man is the seed, the roots put down by the seed is our union with Christ, the water and nutrients are Christ, the full grown tree is the converted person, the fruit we bear is the limited obedience which God both requires and makes certain.

Now, after what I've said so far, undoubtedly someone will accuse me of preaching legalism. And if there's anything Christians are not clear on, it's the true definition of legalism. The moment a preacher tells us to obey the law, we cry "Legalist!" And if he dares suggest that law keeping is in some sense, however limited and qualified a sense, required for final entrance into the kingdom, now we're ready to report him to the Legalism Police. When that preacher then proceeds to show a number of plain Bible passages which certainly look like they're saying that obedience is somehow required for salvation, we're ready with an assortment of exegetical gymnastics to get ourselves out of the problem.

So biblically, what is Legalism? To give an abbreviated answer from Paul's writings, I think we can say true legalism is the attempt to become legally right before God on the basis of our law keeping. It is the attempt to achieve our own righteousness before God, a righteousness which is based on law and not on faith in Christ. Legalism is depending on law rather than Christ for our ultimate justification before God. The best places to see such a definition are Romans, Galatians, and Philippians 3.

But once a person has been justified by faith in Christ, for them to attempt to keep God's commands, even with great rigor, is absolutely not legalism! Nor is it legalism for that person to believe that such obedience is required for entering God's kingdom, so long as it is understood that such obedience is not the ground of justification, but the fruit of justification. Obedience is not the root which makes the tree grow, but the fruit which hangs on the branches and which is produced by the root partaking of moisture and nutrients. To say this fruit is required is not legalism. Or, if it is, practically every prophet and apostle who writes in the Bible is a legalist; far more, Jesus himself may be the biggest legalist of them all, judging by his plain and repeated statements which make obedience necessary for entering the kingdom.

I want to get to the Biblical proofs for this doctrine but one last word about the false accusation of legalism: Some think that when the Bible gives commands which in some sense require obedience for salvation, such passages don't really mean what they say; all they actually intend to do is break you down so you see you can't keep God's law and then you run to Christ in faith and everything is better. Now I agree part of the Law's purpose is to shut the mouths of sinners and make them guilty before God, in preparation for receiving the Savior. But to use this idea as a defense to explain away every plain demand for obedience in Scripture is irresponsible and mistaken. The Bible itself does not tell us to interpret every demand for obedience in such a way; it tells us Moses' Law does have that function in part. But Jesus, for example, requires obedience in order to be saved without mentioning a word about the idea that the law is designed to condemn us only. Jesus says what he says because he means it; we must obey and in a limited sense that obedience is required for salvation, though it is not the ground of our justification. The way some people use this Law/Gospel paradigm effectively silences the word of God at many points. But we had better be careful with that, since Jesus warned about those who nullify God's commands and teach others the same. Enough on the legalism charge.

Let's consider, then, some of the many texts which show what I'm saying, that in order to be saved we must change, that is, we must improve morally and religiously.

Matthew 3:10 ¹⁰ "The ^aaxe is already laid at the root of the trees; therefore ^bevery tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

Matthew 7:19 ¹⁹ ^aEvery tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

The Baptist and Jesus preach that every tree not bearing the good fruit of repentance will be thrown into the fire. Since repentance is at issue in the Matthew 3 text we know that we are talking about change; these trees bear bad fruit, but are called upon to change and begin bearing good fruit. We Must Change.

Matthew 5:3-10 ³ ^{"1a}Blessed are the ²poor in spirit, for ^btheirs is the kingdom of heaven. ⁴ "Blessed are ^athose who mourn, for they shall be comforted. ⁵ "Blessed are ^athe ¹gentle, for they shall inherit the earth. ⁶ "Blessed are ^athose who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied. ⁷ "Blessed are ^athe merciful, for they shall receive mercy. ⁸ "Blessed are ^athe pure in heart, for ^bthey shall see God. ⁹ "Blessed are the peacemakers, for ^athey shall be called sons of God. ¹⁰ "Blessed are those who have been ^apersecuted for the sake of righteousness, for ^btheirs is the kingdom of heaven.

In each beatitude Jesus says persons possessing certain qualities are blessed because they will be given the gifts of the kingdom. These are qualities we must possess or else we will not receive the kingdom with its gifts.

Matthew 5:13 ¹³ "You are the salt of the earth; but ^aif the salt has become tasteless, how ¹can it be made salty *again*? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled under foot by men.

The saltiness of disciples, based on context, is likely their kingdom character or kingdom righteousness. Those disciples who lose this saltiness get thrown out and trampled, being useless.

Matthew 5:20 ²⁰ "For I say to you that unless your ^arighteousness surpasses *that* of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven.

In context, this righteousness is the kingdom character Jesus is teaching about, with its sincerity and inward dimension, aspects culpably lacking from the Pharisees' religious practice. Entering the kingdom requires going beyond the Pharisees in terms of quality and scope of righteous character.

Luke 14:33 ³³ "So then, none of you can be My disciple who ^adoes not give up all his own possessions.

Following Jesus requires a new relationship between us and our possessions. As many disciples retained property and possessions, apparently this "giving up" can be done while still in possession of some amount of wealth. But we must reorient nonetheless, or else we cannot follow him.

John 8:31-32 ³¹ So Jesus was saying to those Jews who had believed Him, "^aIf you continue in My word, *then* you are truly ^bdisciples of Mine; ³² and ^ayou will know the truth, and ^bthe truth will make you free."

We must keep on obeying Jesus' teaching to be true disciples. This obedience results in both knowledge of the truth and even freedom, in some sense. But we must change from disobedience to obedience for this to be true of us. We Must Change.

Romans 2:5-10 ⁵ But ¹because of your stubbornness and unrepentant heart ^ayou are storing up wrath for yourself ^bin the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God, ⁶ ^awho WILL RENDER TO EACH PERSON ACCORDING TO HIS DEEDS: ⁷ to those who by

^aperseverance in doing good seek for ^bglory and honor and ^cimmortality, ^deternal life; ⁸ but to those who are ^aselfishly ambitious and ^bdo not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, wrath and indignation. ⁹ *There will be* ^atribulation and distress ¹for every soul of man who does evil, of the Jew ^bfirst and also of the Greek, ¹⁰ but ^aglory and honor and peace to everyone who does good, to the Jew ^bfirst and also to the Greek.

Now here we have Romans, the document which contains perhaps the greatest exaltation of God's free grace in justification and salvation the world has ever seen. And even here we find Paul affirming that men must obey God to arrive at eternal life. God will pay back every one according to his deeds, whether good or bad; so since we all enter life doing bad, we must repent, be forgiven, and change. If we persevere in doing good, God will give us glory, honor, immortality, eternal life. If we obey unrighteousness we'll receive wrath and indignation, etc, etc. This is a very plain text which shows We Must Change.

Romans 8:12-13 ¹² So then, brethren, we are under obligation, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh-- ¹³ for ^aif you are living according to the flesh, you ¹must die; but if by the Spirit you are ^bputting to death the deeds of the body, you will live.

Again we have Romans telling us that if we live according to the flesh (which means a lifestyle of unbelief and all the sins which follow) we must die, and that eternally. The alternative is to be putting to death the deeds of the body by the Spirit (deeds of the body refer to sins characteristic of unbelievers) which will result in eternal life. But of course such "mortification" of sin is nothing other than the change I have in mind when I say We Must Change.

1 Corinthians 6:9-11 ⁹ Or ^ado you not know that the unrighteous will not ^binherit the kingdom of God? ^cDo not be deceived; ^dneither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor ¹effeminate, nor homosexuals, ¹⁰ nor thieves, nor *the* covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers, will ^ainherit the kingdom of God. ¹¹ ^aSuch were some of you; but you were ^bwashed, but you were ^csanctified, but you were ^djustified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God.

What does Paul mean by "unrighteous"? Of course he means the kinds of people whom he then lists, so we are talking about various unrighteous lifestyles. So, for example, if you practice sexual immorality, say in committing adultery or viewing porn, you are going to hell. If you cheat people in business as a normal way of life, you're going to hell. If you regularly use abusive language toward others, you are going to hell. If you constantly envy other people, you are going to hell. And it's not enough to just feel bad when you read this list and ask God to forgive you

while continuing in these sinful behaviors. Continue in such behaviors and go to hell, period. What this means is that in order to be saved you must change your lifestyle.

Galatians 5:19-21 ¹⁹ Now the deeds of the flesh are evident, which are: ^{1a}immorality, impurity, sensuality, ²⁰ idolatry, ^asorcery, enmities, ^bstrife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, ^cdisputes, dissensions, ^{1d}factions, ²¹ envying, ^adrunkenness, carousing, and things like these, of which I forewarn you, just as I have forewarned you, that those who practice such things will not ^binherit the kingdom of God.

Like Corinthians, we have a list of practices which lead people to hell if not repented of. Notice "outbursts of anger." Do you regularly explode in anger? Then you won't inherit the kingdom. Notice "striving" and "disputes"; do you regularly fight and argue with others? Then you won't inherit the kingdom. No one who lives in these things will go to heaven. Either Change Or Die.

Hebrews 13:4 ⁴ ^aMarriage is to be held in honor among all, and the marriage bed is to be undefiled; ^bfor fornicators and adulterers God will judge

Continual sexual immorality and adultery lead to hell, and it doesn't matter at all if you have faith in Jesus. Believe in Jesus all you want. Believe in him right into the pit of hell. Send me a postcard and let me know if it helps any down there. Because either you leave your adultery and immorality forever or you can look forward to a fiery future. We Must Change.

1 John 3:7-8 ⁷ ^aLittle children, make sure no one ^bdeceives you; ^cthe one who practices righteousness is righteous, just as He is righteous; ⁸ the one who practices sin is ^aof the devil; for the devil ¹has sinned from the beginning. ^bThe Son of God ^cappeared for this purpose, ^dto destroy the works of the devil.

Only those who do righteousness, Biblically defined, belong to God. Everyone else belongs to the devil. Since we all start out belonging to the devil and doing sin, We Must Change.

So here's the summary: I plan to show you in this series that Christians Will Certainly Change. It is inevitable, infallible; it cannot be stopped, even by Christians themselves. And that will turn out to be very good news because, as we've seen today, We Must Change if we would inherit the Kingdom of God. Only those who change go to heaven. Everyone else will perish. So how should we respond to this Doctrine? A few ways:

Those who have no intention of changing to conform to the Word of God should despair. Despair, and stop coming to church. Stop reading your Bible, stop believing in Jesus, or believe in

Jesus if you like; whatever makes you feel better. It doesn't really matter. Enjoy each day as much as you can all your vain life under the sun because there is no enjoyment where you're going. Eat, drink, and be merry because tomorrow you die, and there is no merriment in Outer Darkness.

Those who would like to change, but who just can't be bothered to put effort into that change, go ahead and follow the instructions I just gave to the first group.

Those who sincerely want change, but are struggling to overcome sins which have you captive: First, examine whether you are in the faith; Is Christ in you? Do you know yourself? Confess your sins to God, plead for forgiveness and power to change. Leave your sin with whatever violent resolve it requires. Leave father, mother, vocation, and whatever else it takes to flee from sin. Then carefully obey the word of God each day and have peace.

Those who don't like this sermon because you think its legalistic: Go over again the Scriptures we read. Ask yourself honestly about their plainest and most obvious meaning. Beware of alien theological ideas which silence the challenging and unpleasant parts of Scripture. Take the Bible at face value.

Those who are being diligent to study God's word each day and practice it: Well done, and keep going. Search even further for ways you are not conformed to the Word and change those also. Dwell on God's law night and day that you may be like a fruitful tree planted by the rivers of water. Examine your life again and again, think over the Scripture, and keep on changing. Keep going.

Those who suffer anxiety that you are never obeying well enough: First, look for ways you are truly not obeying, and repent. Obey the word of God and not your own will. But also, be reasonable. Don't surrender to that vague sense of guilt without questioning it. If there is sin making you feel guilty, you should feel guilty. Confess and repent. But if you are guilty for irrational reasons, or practically no reason at all, reject that guilty feeling and remember you are clothed with Christ's righteousness. You are justified before God, forgiven, and adopted into the Father's family. God's love is upon you forever. Accept legitimate guilt and deal with it. Reject false guilt by recalling that you are clothed with Christ's righteousness.