

Improvement or Change

Is improvement enough or is a change of heart needed?

I can take something old, put on a coat of paint, and make it almost appear new; at least it may look like it from a distance. When you get a close look at it, most likely you will be able to tell it is a makeover; it's still an old item.

There is a current trend or fashion, which is to make-over old furniture. People repaint it, then take a bit of sandpaper here and there to make worn marks, following up with a clear sealer. It mixes the old worn antique look, with a fresh sealed finish. If you like that kind of thing, it makes for some interesting projects. Even so, it is still the same old object, but with a reinvented purpose. There has been an improvement, but at best the old still shines through.

Sometimes we as Christians may do similarly by looking at spiritual improvement and trying to believe there is a true change of heart. A person's words may sound right, and they speak of a relationship with God, yet they bear fruits and attitudes that have a flavor of the world. Could this be because the life transforming change has not taken place? Are they living an intellectual life, and trying to effect a change from the outward, rather than a heart-changing event which begins on the inside? This is very deceptive. One cannot reach heaven without repentance of sin, no matter how much improvement is made. *John 3:3-7 KJV 3 Jesus answered and said unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God. 4 Nicodemus saith unto him, How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter the second time into his mother's womb, and be born? 5 Jesus answered, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. 6 That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. 7 Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be born again.*

There is a subtle movement that says the deeds of the body do not defile the soul when scripture speaks clearly the opposite. *2 Timothy 2:19-22 KJV 19 Nevertheless the foundation of God standeth sure, having this seal, The Lord knoweth them that are his. And, Let every one that nameth the name of Christ depart from iniquity. 20 But in a great house there are not only vessels of gold and of silver, but also of wood and of earth; and some to honour, and some to dishonour. 21 If a man therefore purge himself from these, he shall be a vessel unto honour, sanctified, and meet for the master's use, and prepared unto every good work. 22 Flee also youthful lusts: but follow righteousness, faith, charity, peace, with them that call on the Lord out of a pure heart.*

There are spirits of resistance that come into our hearts. They want to put on a show of spirituality, but still retain control. This spirit has a blinding effect in which the individual may not be able to see it. They may feel judged and unloved when it is pointed out and may justify their actions by others or by good intentions. Their focus is on an outward performance instead of a heart changing experience with the Lord. When the witness of a heart change is there, it speaks for itself, even if the outward has not been perfect. *1 Peter 2:11-12 KJV Dearly beloved, I beseech you as strangers and pilgrims, abstain from fleshly lusts, which war against the soul; 12 Having your conversation honest among the Gentiles: that, whereas they speak against you as evildoers, they may by your good works, which they shall behold, glorify God in the day of visitation.*

It is true, that even if we have made a commitment to God, we still have these treasures in earthen vessels. Our flesh does not get converted; we cannot repent or sanctify it away. We will still have the same temptations, but our spiritual life will be made clean and new. *2 Corinthians 5:17 KJV Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.* When the Spirit of the Lord is dwelling in our heart, He gives us power to overcome those fleshly desires. *Act 1:8 KJV But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth.*

Maybe we are frustrated, because we are accepting improvement instead of change; the change that happens through repentance and seeking the Lord's will. This will affect lasting change without the frustration that goes with only seeking improvement. Improvement is limited because it relies on our own personal strength for power to overcome trials and temptations.

A minister may see an area of weakness in one of the members in his congregation and make multiple visits to encourage them. He may see signs of improvement; reading the Bible and prayer but fail to see the freedom of heart that comes with spiritual renewal. They may have changed the outward, but there is little witness of the revelation from God which promotes a change in the heart. It is easy to commend them on their improvement, and hope they gain more conviction in the future. This of course may be possible; sometimes improvement is all that is needed. However, the individual may become frustrated when they are not pointed to the source of change. The change that happens when we realize that what we were doing was sinful, and we are unworthy of God's saving Grace. This type of change brings spiritual vision, and the evidence of the Holy Spirit working becomes clear.

It is human weakness to simply try to change the outside, but that is not the true gospel. The gospel is a life transforming experience which changes people from the inside out. Jesus had strong words for those who cleaned up the outside, yet on the inside were filled with evil. Perhaps some of His strongest words were directed at those individuals. *Matthew 23:25-26 KJV 25 Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For ye make clean the outside of the cup and of the platter, but within they are full of extortion and excess. 26 Thou blind Pharisee, cleanse first that which is within the cup and platter, that the outside of them may be clean also.* Those who Jesus addressed also oppressed the people, which may have played a part in His strong words. However, it is a serious warning to consider. A meeting with Jesus, always affects a change of heart, especially in those who knowingly admit to God their need.

In physical life, one may have a failing heart. The doctors will try all they can to strengthen the old heart. They may try drugs, exercise, and a change of lifestyle, to try to prolong life, but in the end, there is little to no improvement. Finally, the doctor may say that they need a heart transplant. This is a totally different procedure than what they have been doing up to that point. It means that because one dies, the other can live. To get a new heart means surgery and pain, but the patient knows that this is the only way they can live.

This illustration depicts what it is like spiritually to try to just make improvements instead of getting a spiritual heart transplant. Without that life-giving operation of God on our spiritual heart, we will not be able to have spiritual health. From time to time all of us need that to happen. We cannot walk so carefully that we do not need God's continual flow of Grace. *Ezekiel 36:26 KJV A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you: and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you an heart of flesh.*

John 10:10 KJV The thief cometh not, but for to steal, and to kill, and to destroy: I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly.

Our children bring home their report cards every quarter. On the opposite page from the one that lists their academic achievements, is a place where their behavior in school is graded. There are usually three different options which the teacher fills in the blank for each quarter in succession. They are listed as number one - Good, number two - satisfactory improvement, while the third is something like - needs improvement. I seem to fall short of understanding number two, especially when the teacher marks that blank for multiple quarters in succession. In reality the teacher says, they have been improving but have never moved beyond improvement. I wonder if that is what it is like when we accept intellectual improvement, instead of a spiritual heart change. If so, we never will find true satisfaction of making the grade. *Joel 2:12-14 KJV Therefore also now, saith the LORD, turn ye even to me with all your heart, and with fasting, and with weeping, and with mourning: 13 And rend your heart, and not your garments, and turn unto the LORD your God: for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and repenteth him of the evil. 14 Who knoweth if he will return and repent, and leave a blessing behind him; even a meat offering and a drink offering unto the LORD your God?* Without a spiritual heart, day after day and year after year we will find ourselves with a lack of grace and power. Eventually, we will grow discouraged from always trying but never finding true freedom in the heart. This finally turns into being cynical and eventually giving up on Christian life. Satan may then bring the temptation to accuse others of holding the bar too high, and not being understanding of their *weakness*. *2 Timothy 3:7 KJV Ever learning, and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth.*

Jeremiah 17:7-10 KJV Blessed is the man that trusteth in the LORD, and whose hope the LORD is. 8 For he shall be as a tree planted by the waters, and that spreadeth out her roots by the river, and shall not see when heat cometh, but her leaf shall be green; and shall not be careful in the year of drought, neither shall cease from yielding fruit. 9 The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it? 10 I the LORD search the heart, I try the reins, even to give every man according to his ways, and according to the fruit of his doings.

No one said the way to heaven was going to be an easy street. Those who go there are going to make it because they chose to and persevered to the very end. Only volunteers will be there.

The Unlikely Writer –

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