

Change?

Do people change? Can people change? *Are they even capable of change?* I suppose that really comes down to you. If you're a "glass half-full" kind of person, you'll see things one way, and if you're a "glass half-empty" kind of person, you'll see things very differently. Ultimately, though, you will see things both ways, depending on the subject. For instance, the optimist believes a person can change (and that change is good). In general, the optimist believes that good, honest, sincere people can change. They can learn from their mistakes. They can mature. They can break the cycle. Sometimes, however, that same optimist will say that a person doesn't change (but that's good too). This usually happens when someone comes into money or achieves some kind of success. *"It hasn't changed me at all. I'm still the same humble average Joe I was before."*

The jaded pessimist (or "realist," as they often prefer to be called) sees things very differently. Of course money and success changes a person! People **ALWAYS** change in those circumstances. They forget where they came from. They think they're better than others now. Money/power hasn't changed them? Yeah, right! But then in the same breath, that same jaded pessimist (aka "realist") will also lament how people never change. They don't change. They can't change.

There are a ton of sayings in this regard too; far more than the number of sayings that profess optimism in a person's ability to positively change. *"People never change. They just become more of who they really are."* *"People don't change, but their priorities do."* *"People don't change. Their mask just comes off."* *"Money/power doesn't change people. It just unmask them."* *"The person didn't change. You just never knew who they really were."* And then there's the old-timey wisdom that says, *"The zebra can't change it's stripes. The leopard can't change it's spots."* You get the drift.

With all this in mind, I understand why Ananias was so hesitant to meet with the man we now know as St. Paul. *"Rise and go."* *"Lord... I've heard many things about this man, how much evil he has done! We know all about his murderous ways."* Basically, Ananias is telling the Lord that this is who murderous Saul is and has been for quite some time, **and people don't change, especially over night.** It's almost as if Ananias thinks God is mistaken. Ananias tries to get the Lord to re-think His decision; **to change His mind.** *"You obviously have the wrong guy! Just ask any of us in the trenches. This guy Saul is a murderer! He hates all those who call on Your Name!"* **But the Lord changes his mind.** *"No... I know what I'm doing. Rise and go, for he is My chosen instrument."* God works in mysterious ways, right? And with that, Ananias goes. He obeys his God and Lord.

Let me ask you: Was murderous Saul, who would go on to become St. Paul, ***a changed man?*** Was the frail blind man that Ananias was being sent to visit the same fiery zealot who three days earlier was knocked off the back of his horse while on his way to hunt down Christians? Nope. In Ananias' defense, when you think about it, he was ***technically*** correct when he told the Lord about Saul and his wicked, unbelieving, and murderous ways. Wicked people don't just wake up and decide to change; ***not on their own!*** It just doesn't happen. In fact, it's **impossible**. However, things changed on that road to Damascus. Quite literally, in a blinding flash Saul changed. ***Maybe the better terminology: Saul was changed. The Lord changed him.***

Now, this opens up all kinds of questions and issues, many of which we simply can't answer because God doesn't give us the answers. For example, why do some people still not change, even after they encounter the Truth of Christ and His Word? I understand that we don't exactly get the whole "Damascus road experience," but the same Christ that Paul encountered on that road is the very same Word of God who took on flesh in the person of Jesus Christ. Why doesn't the Word of God—His Word of Truth—***change*** people? How can people hear this Word of God—come face to face with this Word of God—and simply dismiss it, ignore it, or mock it? I don't have answers for these questions. God doesn't tell us. The wind—the Holy Spirit—blows when and where it wills. This is the mysterious working of God, whom we do know desires that all men believe and have eternal life in Him. We know this because He tells us.

But if God truly desires the death of no man, then why not appear to everyone like He did with St. Paul? That blinding, terrifying encounter certainly served to work the miracle of change, didn't it? And it wasn't just a short-term, flash-in-the-pan type of change that is usually borne out of fear. Fear changes a person, there's no denying that, ***but change borne only out of fear rarely, if ever, lasts***. Once the fear subsides, we go right back to doing what we were doing. Just examine your own life. The evidence doesn't lie. The fruits you bear don't lie. Before we get to looking too far down our noses at those who have flat-out rejected Christ, look in the mirror. Examine your own life. The very same Lord Christ who confronted Paul on the road to Damascus is the very same Lord Christ who dwells with us today by means of His Word and Sacraments. Here is Christ... just as He Himself declares! ***Has the Truth of Christ changed you?***

Well... that really depends on the subject. ***Are we talking about justification or sanctification?*** In terms of justification; in terms of sin and condemnation and faith and salvation, man doesn't change; not on his own; not by himself. Man can't change a thing about himself, about others, or about the fallen and sinful world he lives in. We are conceived into sin, born into a fallen and sinful world that is full of sinners. In fact, God tells us very plainly that we are dead in our sin, from conception to cradle to grave. Dead! A corpse isn't very effective at doing anything, especially when it involves changing our sins to

righteousness. Dead in our sin, we can't bring about the change that moves us from the bondage of death to eternal life any more than a leopard can change its spots or a zebra can change its stripes. It's utterly impossible. But... God not only can, but *does* make that change.

Look to this cross. Here is God Himself bringing about this change, not just for you, but for all those dead in their sin. Christ died for *all* people, right? "*God so loved....*" The death and resurrection of Christ has changed things *for all of us borne of Adam*. "*It is finished*" was spoken for ALL people, once and for all time. This Divine verdict will never change! So—yes—this Truth of Christ has changed you, *objectively*. In terms of *objective justification*, you are no longer an enemy of God. You have been declared "innocent." You are no longer a slave of sin, death, and the devil. You are a beloved child of God. By virtue of your baptism into His all-atoning death and resurrection, He has adopted you into His heavenly household. God has changed you.

Now... has this Truth of Christ—this cruciform Truth of His free and undeserved gifts of mercy, grace, and everlasting life—*changed you?* That's a whole different issue, isn't it? I know it's impossible for our fallen mortal minds to comprehend, but give it a shot. Try to comprehend all the mercy and grace that God has so unconditionally shown to you and continues to rain down upon you. *Don't worry about the other schmuck and how they need to change!* Think of all the undeserved/unfair mercy and grace that the Lord has so unconditionally shown to you and continues to rain down upon you. Consider your baptism; your adoption into His eternal household; your deliverance from death to life. Consider the fact that in just a couple of minutes you will come face-to-face with Christ right here at His table. Consider how He's not coming to you in fear and terror, but in mercy and grace... in love. He is coming to you in order to feed you, nourish you, and comfort you. He is coming to you in order to change your sorrow and fear to joy and peace. The same Almighty Lord who declares, "*I, the Lord, do not change,*" also declares, "*I am with you always. Take and eat. Take and drink. This IS My body/blood, given and shed for you for your forgiveness.*" Folks: This SHOULD change you!

Understood in/through repentant faith, such Good News does change a person. You can't change the Truth, but the Truth can change you. This cruciform Truth changes a person; *not just a Sunday morning change*... you know... where we put on the mask and masquerade as "good Christians" for an hour or two. (It should come as no surprise that the Greek word for the wearing of a mask is "*hypocratos*"—hypocrite. It's a theatrical term. Actors who only pretend/play a part are called "hypocrites.") May this NEVER be the case with you! This cruciform Truth, understood in repentant faith, through the working of the Holy Spirit, *truly changes a person*. Resurrected to new life in Christ, the changed person wants nothing more than to keep the Word/Will of God—always—not because they have to or out of some irrational fear that if they don't God will smote them. Nope. The changed child of God desires and works hard at doing

these God-pleasing things because this is how they show their thanksgiving to Him. This is called piety. This is called sanctification. This is good. Changed in Christ, the new man endeavors to do all these things, not in order to be saved, but out of the joy that they are saved. That's just how it is. You're known by your fruits, and good fruit trees bear good fruit. That's the Truth, and that Truth, just like the Truth that is Christ—the Way, the Truth, and the Life—*never* changes.

As you now prepare to enter back into this ever-changing world full of lies and half-truths, may you—by God's pure grace—remain ***grounded and unchanging*** in His unchanging Truth of Law and Gospel. Times change. Circumstances change. People change. But as much as things change, they still remain the same. There is nothing new under the sun. For better or worse, in sickness and in health, in good times, bad times, richer, poorer... whatever the case may be, may you, as one who has been graciously changed by God in Christ, ***remain unchanged by the world***. Go forth in the name of Christ, and make known His marvelous, life-changing Word! ***Changed people change people***. That's our mission! That's the whole reason this Church exists. The better terminology: Christ in us; Christ through us (or words and our deeds) changes people. ***He changes people***. May He change people through you, and never in spite of you. *“Let your Light (the Light that is Christ, the Light of the world) shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.”*

To Him who never changes be all the glory, all the praise, and all the honor.
AMEN