

What It Takes to Really Change

Second of six sermons in the “Daniel Plan” series¹

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- Romans 12:1-12 ¹ So then, my friends, because of God's great mercy to us I appeal to you: Offer yourselves as a living sacrifice to God, dedicated to his service and pleasing to him. This is the true worship that you should offer. ² Do not conform yourselves to the standards of this world, but let God transform you inwardly by a complete change of your mind. Then you will be able to know the will of God – what is good and is pleasing to him and is perfect.
³ And because of God's gracious gift to me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you should. Instead, be modest in your thinking, and judge yourself according to the amount of faith that God has given you. ⁴ We have many parts in the one body, and all these parts have different functions. ⁵ In the same way, though we are many, we are one body in union with Christ, and we are all joined to each other as different parts of one body. ⁶ So we are to use our different gifts in accordance with the grace that God has given us. If our gift is to speak God's message, we should do it according to the faith that we have; ⁷ if it is to serve, we should serve; if it is to teach, we should teach; ⁸ if it is to encourage others, we should do so. Whoever shares with others should do it generously; whoever has authority should work hard; whoever shows kindness to others should do it cheerfully.
⁹ Love must be completely sincere. Hate what is evil, hold on to what is good. ¹⁰ Love one another warmly as Christians, and be eager to show respect for one another. ¹¹ Work hard and do not be lazy. Serve the Lord with a heart full of devotion. ¹² Let your hope keep you joyful, be patient in your troubles, and pray at all times.
- Sermon-in-a-sentence: Lasting change occurs when we give ourselves to God's purposes.

To prepare for this sermon, please sit up straight. Now clasp your hands together and put them in your lap. Now, look at your hands. Notice which thumb is on top. If your left thumb is on top, raise your hand.... If your right thumb is on top, raise your hand.... Were there any of you whose thumbs were side-by-side, with neither thumb on top? Do you know what it means if your left thumb or right thumb is on top? Nothing. All it means is that when you were a baby swimming around in the womb, one day your little hands came together a certain way, and maybe a few hours later they did it again, and before you knew it, you had developed a pattern of behavior. You had unconsciously created a habit.

Now, remembering which thumb was on top, re-clasp your hands but this time do it in such a way that the other thumb is on top...! Was that strange? Hard to do? Does it feel weird? Uncomfortable?

That little exercise demonstrates that the force of habit is powerful because it convinces us that something is normal. And if we think something is normal, any variation to that is... abnormal. Strange. Weird. Maybe even “wrong.”

Why do we find “change” so difficult? Because it's about “putting the other thumb on top.” It's about doing something that goes against what we're used to.

Ten years ago I was having some sciatic nerve pain. The doctor asked, “You carry your wallet in your back pocket?” You bet I did. That's what my dad did. That's what my older brother and my grandfathers did. “Don't do that anymore,” the doctor said. Right then I took my wallet out of my back pocket and slipped it into the front pocket of my pants. And it felt weird. For days when I'd reach for my wallet it looked like I was giving myself a pat on the fanny until I'd remember to check the front pocket.

¹ This sermon is indebted to the Rev. Rick Warren's “Daniel Plan” sermon series for a number of the illustrations and points presented here.

I'd heard that it takes about three weeks to make something a habit. And for about those three weeks, it didn't feel right. I thought it didn't look right. It was awkward to do. But what do you know: after about three weeks I didn't even think about it anymore... and with the pressure on the sciatic nerve gone, so was the pain.

The point is that change is hard... change of any kind – whether you're trying to improve your eating habits or treat someone better, whether you're trying to stop biting your fingernails or trying to be more aware of God's activity in your life. Oh, sheer willpower might get you to change for a moment or maybe a day or two or maybe even a week or so. But willpower wilts:

- You take that pack of cigarettes, pull out the remaining smokes and tear them apart, crumble up the pack and throw it away... until the next morning when you're being driven crazy by your nicotine craving.
- You're succeeding at being civil with that co-worker who just seems to rub you the wrong way... until his error requires you to do extra work to fix the situation.
- Your resolve to reduce your intake of sugar seems to be working... until someone brings in a box of Becker's doughnuts and they just sit there calling your name.

Change is hard, and sheer willpower isn't enough to make changes that last. The apostle Paul wrote a prescription for people facing such situations – and all of us face situations where we want to change but it isn't easy. You'll find it in Paul's Letter to the Romans, Chapter 12. It's on page 215 in the New Testament toward the end of the Bible. Paul offers six principles for lasting change, whether it's to change your health, deepen your faith, improve your outlook, repair a damaged relationship, whatever.

Here's the 1st Principle: Commit your body to God.

Paul says, "...Because of God's great mercy to us I appeal to you: Offer yourself as a living sacrifice to God, dedicated to his service and pleasing to him."² By "living sacrifice" Paul means to commit, to dedicate your body, your being – who you are – commit who you are to God's service.

Why start with the physical, committing our bodies? Because your body affects your behavior. Try this: again, sit up straight. Gently roll your shoulders a couple of times, either forward or backward. Now, take an easy but deep breath and hold it 'for a count of five, then release it slowly. Do you feel different? I can guarantee that you are more alert now than you were thirty seconds ago. Why? Your body sent messages to your brain saying, "Sit up and pay attention." Your body affects your behavior; lasting change begins by sacrificing, by dedicating your body, your self – who you are – to God.

But change is your choice. If you don't want to change, guess what? You won't! You have to submit yourself to God's authority, to God's caretaking. And by giving yourself, your body, to God's purpose, Paul says that that self-sacrifice is an act of worship – you're honoring the creator with your whole being!³ So, "commit your body to God."

Here's the 2nd Principle for lasting change: Refocus your mind.

See what Paul writes in verse 2: "Do not conform yourselves to the standards of this world, but let God transform you inwardly by a complete change of your mind. Then you will be able to know the will of God – what is good and is pleasing to him and is perfect."

A lot of the struggles in our daily lives are the result of our conscious or more likely unconscious act of conforming to the standards of this world.

Pastor Rick Warren has said that whatever gets your attention gets you. It's easy to focus on and think about negative stuff, stuff that wears you down, what we don't possess or what we don't want to have happen. The advertising industry certainly encourages that: *How come you're not driving a nicer car? Wouldn't you look better in this garment? If you're not drinking this beverage or eating at that establishment, no wonder you're not having enough fun in your life!* Why focus on what's negative, on what's bad for you? Focus on what's good for you! Ask God to help you move in that direction: Paul says, "...let God transform you inwardly by a complete change of your mind." When you allow God to occupy your mind, you don't obsess over the priorities that society or advertising claims are important; you become more

² Romans 12:1 GNT

³ from Romans 12:1 "This is the true worship that you should offer."

mindful of what is good and pleasing and in line with God's will. So lasting change begins with committing your body to God and refocusing your mind.

The 3rd Principle for Lasting Change is this: Humbly assess your current state.

In Romans 12:3 here's what Paul says: "And because of God's gracious gift to me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you should. Instead, be modest in your thinking, and judge yourself according to the amount of faith that God has given you."

Here's a big announcement: None of us lead perfect lives. None of us "have it all together." Not me. Not you. Not anyone. But we're pretty good at pretending that everything's okay... sometimes even in the privacy of our own homes, in the solitude of our own thoughts.

What are you pretending isn't a problem in your workplace? What are you pretending isn't a problem with your finances? What are you pretending isn't a problem in your marriage or in your family? What are you pretending isn't a problem with your health?

Here are some questions that might help you assess your current state: *What preoccupies your thoughts? What's going on in your life that is crying for change? What's sapping your physical and emotional energy instead of feeding and building your energy?*

Do you know when I decided that my health was an issue I needed to address? When I saw a photo of me taken at a golf outing, and even sucking in my gut didn't do enough to hide the extra weight around my middle. A photo was the first step for me to honestly assess my current state of health. And it was humbling. For one thing, I had to acknowledge that I allowed myself to eat in ways that weren't constructive – no one was forcing me. For another thing, I realized that the only reason I didn't have time for more physical exercise was because I wasn't giving myself that time; I was using it or wasting it in other ways.

It takes courage to assess your current state. But our faith in God gives us assurance that God loves us even in our brokenness, our weakness, our imperfection. So let's see: for lasting change we have to 1) commit our bodies to God, 2) refocus our minds on what's positive, and 3) humbly assess our current state. That leads us to...

Principle #4 for Lasting Change: You must get group support.

Fifty-eight times in the New Testament the phrase "one another" is used. Fifty-eight times. The Bible knows that we're wired to be with others, to enjoy others, to support others. You want proof? Remember what Jesus did after he launched his public phase of his ministry in the last three years of his life? After he was baptized by John, and after he went on a private retreat in the wilderness to figure out the best way to spread the news of God's generous and unconditional love... after all that, the first thing he did was... form a group. He called men to be his apostles. And as they went about the countryside preaching and teaching and healing, they drew more and more people together.

We need one another. If you could change on your own without the support of anyone else, why haven't you already done it? If you've purchased every fitness gadget advertised on TV but haven't attained the fitness you seek, why not? If you've purchased self-help books that didn't help, you know why, don't you? Lasting change rarely, rarely, rarely happens on your own. You need others to encourage you as you make progress, to support you when the going gets tough, to counsel you when you lose your way, to hold you accountable to your goals, and to comfort you when you slip up (which is a normal part of making progress). In verses 4 and 5 of Romans Chapter 12 Paul uses his familiar image of "one body with many parts" to highlight how we need each other in order to be whole. (By the way, that's why the church has endured for all these hundreds of years – because we realize that we can't grow in faith living in silos. We need one another.)

Okay... "Commit your body to God," "Refocus your mind," "Humbly assess your current state," "Get the support of a group," and the **5th Principle for Lasting Change is "Fill your life with love."** There is nothing to compare to the power of love. Love changes hardened hearts and opens closed minds. Love invigorates and revitalizes and renews. Love is the most powerful force in all creation. Why? Because God is love. That's what the Bible says. It doesn't say that God *has* love. It says God is love.

Let me tell you another benefit of being part of a support group – whether a small group in the Daniel Plan or a women's circle in our Presbyterian Women organization or a Sunday school class or a mission team or a choir or an ushering team or men's group or this worshiping congregation or whatever. Groups don't simply perform a task or offer encouragement and accountability. Groups give you the

opportunity to love... to share God's love with others. Groups are the avenue for expressing and expanding God's love in the world... one person at a time. You give yourself away in sharing God's love.

In Romans 12:10 Paul urges us to "Love one another warmly as Christian brothers [and sisters,] and be eager to show respect for one another."

Finally, the 6th Principle for Lasting Change: Be motivated by enthusiasm.

Paul closes out this section of Romans 12 with straight talk about what it takes to make change that lasts. He writes: "Work hard and do not be lazy. Serve the Lord with a heart full of devotion. ¹² Let your hope keep you joyful, be patient in your troubles, and pray at all times."

Friends, we're called to be motivated by enthusiasm because of God's love in our life. Let me take apart the word "enthusiasm" for you. The word has origins in the ancient Greek language. "*En*" means "in." "*Thūs...*" comes from "*Theos*," the Greek word for God. So "enthusiasm" means to be "in God." Enthusiasm is more than simply positive thinking. There's nothing wrong with positive thinking. But positive thinking isn't enough when you're faced with the grind of trying to overcome longtime habits. Positive thinking alone isn't going to get you past overwhelming obstacles in your life. Positive thinking isn't enough when tragedy knocks you down. But when life deals you debilitating blows, enthusiasm will sustain you, because you are "*en Theos*" – you are "in God."

When you are "in God" you are motivated by God's love alive in you. That enables you to do what Paul says in the final verse of this section:

- Your hope keeps you joyful because you know you're pursuing God's plan for you;
 - You can be patient when troubles arise, because you know that while God didn't cause the troubles, God's going to find a way – somehow, at some point of time – to fashion something positive out of trouble you encounter.
 - And when you're enthusiastic, when you live your life "in God," your life is, in fact, an act of prayer, keeping your thinking and your attitude attuned to God's plan for your life.
- "Let your hope keep you joyful, be patient in your troubles, and pray at all times."

What does it take to really change? Willpower is a helpful part of motivation, but willpower alone won't do it. Nor will some miracle supplement that supposedly knows how to melt fat off of only certain parts of your body. Whether you're pursuing a healthier life through The Daniel Plan or healthier relationships or healthier spending and saving habits or a healthier state of mind, real, lasting change comes from

- 1) Committing your body – your whole self – to God;
- 2) Refocusing your mind on what's positive
- 3) Humbly assessing your current state to see where change is needed;
- 4) Getting the support of a group because God created us to be with others;
- 5) Filling your life with love by receiving the loving support of others and by offering it to others who are in great need of the love you can offer;
- 6) Being motivated by enthusiasm – being in God – by putting your whole life in the hands of the God, for as Jesus said, "With God all things are possible."⁴

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⁴ Matthew 19:26