

IF SCROOGE COULD CHANGE, THERE'S HOPE FOR YOU. 2 CORINTHIANS 5:14-17

The classic Christmas movie I want to highlight today is entitled "A Christmas Carol." There have actually been about 200 different film adaptations of the original story written by Charles Dickens back in 1843. It's a regular theatre attraction in major cities during the Christmas season. Now, Charles Dickens belonged to the Church of England, but he didn't have what we would consider a genuine, personal faith in Jesus. The story, "A Christmas Carol", doesn't really point people to Jesus in a clear or direct way. Nevertheless, there are many spiritual themes in this story that point to the biblical story of Christmas. As you probably know, Dickens introduces us to one of the great characters of English literature. Ebenezer Scrooge is a very wealthy and equally miserable tightwad who experiences an amazing transformation on Christmas Eve. He's visited by the ghost of his former financial partner, Jacob Marley, and then by three more ghosts – the Ghost of Christmas Past, the Ghost of Christmas Present and the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come.

One of the themes in "A Christmas Carol" is change – deep, personal, life-transforming change. It focuses on the remarkable transformation of Ebenezer Scrooge who became a very different man. Christmas is about change – spiritual and life-altering change - at the very deepest level of your humanity and mine. God didn't send His Son, Jesus, into this world so that you could stay the way you are. He sent Jesus to change you from the inside out. Your complete transformation is God's desire and God's goal. The Bible has a great deal to say about change even though it never uses that word. For example, let's look at our text for today.

Paul, the great Christian leader and apostle, wrote those words to his Christian brothers and sisters at the church in Corinth – a city in Greece – trying to explain to them the monumental change that's the direct result of Jesus coming into this world. Paul says that it's like a whole new creation occurred. I'm intrigued by what Paul mentions there in v. 17 as the "old" and the "new." When Jesus came into this world as a new born baby – what we now celebrate as Christmas – and then when, some 33 years later, Jesus died on the cross and rose again from the dead – what we now celebrate as Easter – something immensely significant happened. Something entirely new was offered to human beings that had never been available before. As a result, now there is both the old and the new. So, what is the "old" and what will you do with it? By the same token, what is the "new" and what will you do with it? Let's consider the question about the old first.

WHAT WILL YOU DO WITH THE "OLD"?

What do I mean by the "old"? Let me describe it three ways. First, the "old" is when sin controls your life. The Bible says each of us is born with a sinful nature. From birth, that nature controls your attitudes, your choices, your ambitions, what

you think about God and how you relate to other people. It dominates you in ways that you don't fully comprehend. The Bible says, "So letting your sinful nature control your mind leads to death. But letting the Spirit control your mind leads to life and peace. For the sinful nature is always hostile to God. It never did obey God's laws, and it never will." (Rom 8:6-7 NLT) Often, when you and I hear that word "sin" we usually think it refers to the "biggies" – murder, adultery, stealing, lying. But the Bible has a far more comprehensive definition of sin. All acts of sin actually begin with attitudes found deeply embedded in your heart and mine – pride, hatred, resentment, selfishness, lust, greed, jealousy, envy, rage. Scripturally speaking, the "old" refers to all those attitudes inside of us controlling and dominating our decisions, our choices, our relationships - everything.

Second, the "old" is when self is the center of your life. Paul is very explicit here in what he means by that. "Christ died for everyone so that they would live for Him. They should not live to please themselves but for Christ Who died on a cross and was raised from the dead for them." (2 Cor 5:15 NLV) A self-dominated life is one where your primary goal every day is to please yourself. We get a very vivid picture of what that does to a person ultimately when you see it depicted in the life and character of Ebenezer Scrooge. In this scene, Scrooge's young nephew, Fred, invites his uncle over for Christmas dinner.

Ebenezer Scrooge wasn't an evil man in the way we often think of evil. He didn't kill or torture people. He'd simply made self the center of his life. As a result, he'd become over time uncaring, greedy and miserably alone. You can even be a very nice person on the surface – liked, admired, respected by other people – but self can still be very much the center of your life. But over time, when you allow self to be the center of your life, you will end up becoming as miserable and repulsive as old Scrooge ever was. Your issue may not be money and greed as it was for Scrooge. It might be pride, or lust, or needing to control other people. Sin takes many forms, but basically it comes down to living to please yourself. Ultimately, Scrooge is you and me without Jesus Christ. He's a good picture of what being dominated by sin and self will do to you over time.

Third, the "old" is when spiritual stagnation or death characterizes your life. The Bible puts it like this, "It wasn't so long ago that you were mired in that old stagnant life of sin. You let the world, which doesn't know the first thing about living, tell you how to live. You filled your lungs with polluted unbelief, and then exhaled disobedience. We all did it, all of us doing what we felt like doing, when we felt like doing it, all of us in the same boat." (Eph 2:1-3 MSG) When you let sin control your life and when you allow self to be the center of your life, the inevitable result is spiritual stagnation or death. Scrooge was dead to God and the things of God. As a result, he was dead to people – their value, their worth, their needs, their concerns. He was dead to what really mattered – God's love, God's will, God's grace, God's plans and purposes.

So, then, what are your options and mine? Well, yes, I can choose to excuse or rationalize the presence of the “old” within me. That’s what most people do. Most people resist change – especially spiritual change. The last thing Scrooge wanted to do was to change. In fact, the only reason he decided to change was because the pain of not changing was greater than the pain of change! God is all about changing your heart and giving you a wholly new perspective on life. It’s we who want to cling to the “old” stuff – the pride, the resentment, the rage, the lust, the selfishness, the love of money and what it buys, or the illusion that we’re more important than other human beings. We deny it. We say, “I don’t have a problem in that area.” We ignore it. We say, “I’m not that bad. There are many people worse than me.” We justify it. We say, “That’s just the way I am. If you knew the tough breaks I had in life, you’d understand.” Let’s face it. Most of us like to excuse and tolerate the presence of all that “old”, sinful stuff inside us.

You and I do have another option, however. You can reject the domination of the “old” stuff inside you. That’s what Paul was telling the Corinthians. The old can be stripped of its power. It can and must be thrown out. It can and must be surrendered to Jesus. The Bible word for that is repentance. In this next scene from the movie “A Christmas Carol”, we get a marvelous depiction of repentance – both the remorse you should feel as well as the joy you should experience.

That’s what it ought to be like when a person starts to follow Jesus as his or her Savior and Lord! But right here I have to disagree with Charles Dickens. Scrooge repents of self-centeredness and becomes a changed man all by himself. That doesn’t happen in real life without the transforming power of Jesus Christ. Self-empowered repentance isn’t enough. It doesn’t last. Something supernatural and outside of you and me is needed. The Bible says this, “If a person does or does not go through the religious act of becoming a Jew, it is worth nothing. The important thing is to become a new person.” (Gal 6:15 NLV) That’s what it means to be born again spiritually. When you admit the undeniable fact that you are a spiritual failure before an awesome, absolutely holy God, Jesus enters into your life spiritually as Savior and Lord. He’s the One who enables you to get rid of the “old” and grasp on to the “new.” That initial, first time rejection of the “old” ushers in the “new” –the new creation, the new person.

Here’s something else I’ve learned along life’s journey. Repentance – this rejection of the power of the “old” within me – is a lifelong process. The longer I live, the more the Holy Spirit reveals to me other aspects of the “old” that are still within me of which I was unaware but must also be rejected. It might be an ungodly attitude, a selfish way of relating to other people or a sinful indulgence that has to be rejected. Over and over again, I have to make a choice. Am I going to excuse this remnant of the “old” within me? Or will I reject it? The story of Christmas is lovely and pleasant, to be sure. But when you fully understand its implications, it’s an uncomfortable story. Why? Well, it’s all about the incredible transformation that’s needed in your life and mine – a transformation so deep and so sweeping that it’s beyond your ability or mine to pull off. God had to do it!

By the same token, there are very real choices you and I have to make. Will you reject the “old” and embrace the “new”? That’s the great question of life and, in some sense, we answer it every day. That’s where we need to go next.

WHAT WILL YOU DO WITH THE “NEW”?

What do I mean by the “new”? First, the “new” is when the Holy Spirit controls your life. Again, the Bible says, “So letting your sinful nature control your mind leads to death. But letting the Spirit control your mind leads to life and peace.” (Rom 8:6 NLT) How can you know if the Holy Spirit is controlling your life? One obvious sign is the difference you and other people will see in your everyday, walking around life. “But the fruit that comes from having the Holy Spirit in our lives is: love, joy, peace, not giving up, being kind, being good, having faith, being gentle, and being the boss over our own desires.” (Gal 5:22-23 NLV) That kind of “new” will start to show up more and dominant more as the Holy Spirit gets more and more control of your life. The “new” can only happen when the Holy Spirit invades your inner spirit. From day one, He makes it His mission to take over more and more control until every last smudge of sin, self and hell is expelled from your life.

Second, the “new” is when Jesus is the center of your life. It’s very clearly stated in the Scripture we read earlier, “Christ died for everyone so that they would live for Him. They should not live to please themselves but for Christ Who died on a cross and was raised from the dead for them.” (2 Cor 5:15 NLV) Right there is the real, underlying reason for Christmas! It was never about giving us a heart warming story about shepherds, wise men, cattle, and a cuddly baby. The Son of God was sent from Heaven to rescue you. That requires what someone has called getting “de-centralized” or “re-centralized.” Before you started following Jesus, your life was organized around self. You were, by definition, self-centered. You lived to please yourself. But now your life is organized around another Person – not yourself, but Jesus. John Calvin, a great theologian a few hundred years back, put it simply and well, “He died for us so that we might die to ourselves.” That’s where spiritual life begins and continues. That’s what Jesus was referring to when He said, “ ‘... I came so they can have real and eternal life, more and better life than they ever dreamed of.’ ” (John 10:10 MSG)

Third, the “new” is where spiritual transformation and having God’s life in you characterizes your life. When you start following Jesus, you become a new being. You’re literally a new person – a new creation of God. “When someone becomes a Christian, he becomes a brand new person inside. He is not the same anymore. A new life has begun!” (2 Cor 5:17 TLB) Once you were essentially dead to God; now you’re alive to Him. Once you could have cared less about how He wanted you to live out your life; now knowing and doing His will is your greatest desire. Once you were separated from Him; now you are connected to Him every day. Once you dreaded Him, frankly; now you run to Him for peace and joy. Once you were hostile to Him; now you love Him. Once

you saw other human beings as there to meet your needs; now you see them as infinitely valuable beings made in God's image. This transformation is ongoing and continual never stopping this side of Heaven. The Bible says, "Do not act like the sinful people of the world. Let God change your life. First of all, let Him give you a new mind. Then you will know what God wants you to do. And the things you do will be good and pleasing and perfect." (Rom 12:2 NLV)

So, then, what are your options and mine? First, you can avoid the demands of the "new" upon you. You can be going through life minding your own business when all of a sudden – out of the blue – the Holy Spirit puts His finger on a character flaw, an improper relationship, an ungodly attitude, hardheartedness towards someone else, or a gossiping tongue. He will speak into your heart, "Time to change!" Sometimes we say, "But can I put off that change until tomorrow, or next year or maybe when I'm old?" When you resist spiritual transformation, you are essentially refusing to repent. When you refuse to let God change you, watch out! "Happy is the man who always fears the Lord, but he who makes his heart hard will fall into trouble." (Prov 28:14 NLV) God is fully willing and capable of making your life miserable until you change in the ways He knows are best for you.

Fortunately, you and I have another option when it comes to the demands of the "new" in our lives. We can embrace them! Let God change you. That's why He sent His Son. That's the ultimate significance of Christmas. No, it's not always easy. God's never content to just let sleeping dogs lie or leave things well enough alone. The Holy Spirit always wants to tinker here and there when it comes to your life and mine. Yes, He alone can transform, but you have to give Him the permission to be transformed. The Bible says, "...Be energetic in your life of salvation, reverent and sensitive before God. That energy is *God's* energy, an energy deep within you, God himself willing and working at what will give him the most pleasure." (Phil 2:12-13 MSG)

Let me close today with a couple of questions. How has God transformed your life? How has God transformed your life... lately? Perhaps you used to use foul, filthy language, but now God's cleaned up your tongue. Maybe you'd fly off in a rage, but now God's got your temper under His control. Perhaps you loved to control other people, but now you're able just to enjoy them for who they are. Maybe you were either promiscuous or perverted when it came to sex, but now God has helped you put sex in its proper place in your life. Perhaps your heart was like a closet stuffed full with old resentments, but you invited the Holy Spirit to clean house and He did. Maybe you were a racist, but now you love people who look different than you do. Perhaps you were like old Scrooge himself in that you loved money and made it your god, but now you make money serve King Jesus instead. Maybe you felt tremendous guilt and shame over a terrible sin or failure in your past, but now you've fully embraced God's forgiveness and the guilt is finally gone. Perhaps there was a time when you could have cared less about God or what He wanted for your life, but now you long to hear Him say

one day, "Well done, good and faithful servant." If God has changed you, if God has transformed your life, raise your hand. Change – your spiritual transformation and mine - is what Christmas is all about. Instead of a closing story from me, let's watch the closing scene from the movie "A Christmas Carol."

"It was said of Ebenezer Scrooge that he knew how to keep Christmas very well." Will you know how to keep Christmas well this week? If Christmas means anything to you, my friend, it means allowing God to transform you. That's why He sent His Son. That's why Jesus willingly came, was born, died and rose again. "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!" (2 Cor 5:17 NIV)