

548 Can People Change?

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God's Answers to Life's Questions

Have you ever heard that judgment some people make, "Oh, he'll never change," or "That's the way she's always been, and you can't ever expect her to be any different." Sometimes in our heart of hearts, we make the decision that people are unable to change. Some theologies even teach that the lost are incapable of any change, that they are doomed to remain in sin and suffer eternal destruction. But is that really what the Bible says, and has God made people so incapable of change that they cannot rise above a sinful lifestyle and live a life pleasing to God and go to heaven?

Throughout the history of man, people have sought ways to excuse themselves from responsibility. Adam, you'll remember, when he called to account for eating the forbidden fruit, said, "The woman whom You gave to be with me, she gave me from the tree, and I ate" (Gen. 3:12). You might remember King Saul who failed to do what God had told him. When the Lord told him to utterly destroy all the Amalekites and their animals, you'll remember Saul brought back King Agag alive and the best of the animals in order to make a sacrifice. When Samuel asked Saul why he had disobeyed the Lord, Saul said, "I did obey the voice of the LORD, and went on the mission on which the LORD sent me, and have brought back Agag the king of Amalek, and have utterly destroyed the Amalekites. But the people took *some* of the spoil, sheep and oxen, the choicest of the things devoted to destruction, to sacrifice to the LORD your God at Gilgal." (1 Sam. 15:20-21). Saul did not want to accept his responsibility; he blamed the people. In the same way people want to blame their parents, blame society, blame their past, and even blame God for their behavior. Some people will say, "God made me this way, and I can't change."

God did not make anyone to be a sinner. God doesn't want anyone to sin, and our heavenly Father does not lay stumbling blocks in our path so that we will sin. James said in James 1:13-16, "Let no one say when he is tempted, 'I am being tempted by God'; for God cannot be tempted by evil, and He Himself does not tempt anyone. But each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust. Then when lust has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and when sin is accomplished, it brings forth death. Do not be deceived, my beloved brethren." God wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth (1 Tim. 2:3-4).

Some people think of our weakness to sin as a nature that we have inherited from our forefathers. They think that sin is an inborn trait, and we cannot change unless God works a miracle in our lives and changes us. We have to wonder why God, if He loves us and wants to save us, doesn't miraculously change everyone? If it takes a miracle for us to change, why hasn't everyone changed? One group answers that God arbitrarily some people to be saved and others to be lost. We must wonder again what kind of monster that makes God who would make people sinful and condemn them eternally for being what He made them to be?

In Ezekiel 18, God makes it clear that every individual will be judged by his own choices in life. God does not hold children responsible for the sins of their fathers. Here is what the Bible says, "Then the word of the LORD came to me, saying, What do you mean by using this proverb concerning the land of Israel, saying, 'The fathers eat the sour grapes, But the children's teeth are set on edge'? "As I live," declares the Lord GOD, "you are surely not going to use this proverb in Israel anymore. Behold, all souls are Mine; the soul of the father as well as the soul of the son is Mine. The soul who sins will die" (Ezekiel 18:1-4)

Sin is not a natural trait to be inherited; sin is an act of disobedience to God. I have blue eyes; that is a trait that I inherited and had nothing to do with. But to sin is an act I choose. 1 John 3:4 says, "Everyone who practices sin also practices lawlessness; and sin is lawlessness." The King James Version says, "sin is a transgression of the law." Sin is an act arising out of a choice. Little infants do not sin, because they are not old enough to know what they are doing. When a person is old to know and chooses to do something wrong, then they become accountable to God for their "sinful" behavior. Sin is an act not a natural trait.

Someone says, "Phil aren't people weak to temptation?" Of course, they are! Jesus said to his disciples while praying at Gethsemane, "Keep watching and praying that you may not enter into temptation; the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak" (Mt. 26:41). That man is weak to temptation and inclined to sin is certainly true. When Noah came off the ark, God said, "I will never again curse the ground on account of man, for the intent of man's heart is evil from his youth" (Gen. 8:21). This inclination toward evil, however, is not the same thing as an inbred trait that one cannot change. I can't change my blue eyes, but I can say no to sin.

When Potiphar's wife tempted Joseph to sleep with her day after day, Joseph refused and said, "How then could I do this great evil and sin against God?" (Gen. 39:9). Joseph had the power to say no! James 4:7-8 says, "Submit therefore to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you. Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded." One can resist the devil. We don't have to say yes to every temptation. We are free moral agents and can choose right or wrong. We can say no to the devil; God will be with us. We can choose the Lord over Satan!

Someone asks, "Can't people become addicted or enslaved to sin?" Yes, they can. Jesus answered them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is the slave of sin" (John 8:34). Paul said in Romans 6:16, "Do you not know that when you present yourselves to someone as slaves for obedience, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin resulting in death, or of obedience resulting in righteousness?" Sin can enslave us if we give in to it. We all become a slave of something; and sin is happy to be our master. But being a slave to sin results in death. We can also choose to give ourselves to obedience! How much better!

We choose everyday which way we'll go. I am reminded of Joshua who said, "Now, therefore, fear the LORD and serve Him in sincerity and truth; and put away the gods which your fathers served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD. If it is disagreeable in your sight to serve the LORD, choose for yourselves today whom you will serve: whether the gods which your fathers served which were beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD." (Joshua 24:14-15). If we could not change, we could not leave an old life of sin and start one in righteousness.

Throughout his earthly ministry Jesus preached a repentance to Israel. Like John the Baptist, he preached, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!" (Matt. 4:17). When Jesus sent out the apostles into all the towns and villages of Israel, they preached "that men should repent" (Mark 6:12). When Paul preached in Athens on Mars Hill, he spoke to pagans who knew nothing about the God of the Bible or Jesus. While they had some knowledge about morality, they had never read a Bible. Paul said, "Therefore having overlooked the

times of ignorance, God is now declaring to men that all *people* everywhere should repent.” (Acts 17:30)

If men cannot change, why then did Jesus, the apostles, and Paul require repentance, which is a change of heart leading to a change of behavior. In fact Jesus threatened, “unless you repent, you will all likewise perish” (Luke 13:3). Peter said, “The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance” (2 Pet. 3:9). God expects each of us to repent, that is, change our hearts and lives to conform to His will, if we wish to be saved. Repentance is not an option; it is necessary. God would never ask us to change if we were incapable of it.

The fact is, people can change and do change. Saul of Tarsus, persecutor of the church and the chief of sinners, became a Christian and the apostle Paul. The people of Ephesus came to Christ, confessing their sins and burning their books of magic (Acts 19:19). People can change! Jesus said, “If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross daily and follow Me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake, he is the one who will save it” (Luke 9:23-24). The fact is people can deny themselves, they can take up their crosses and follow Jesus.

The Bible often uses the phrase “whosoever will.” That implies that either you or I can “will” to do the will of God. Jesus promised in John 7:17, “If anyone is willing to do His will, he will know of the teaching, whether it is of God or *whether* I speak from Myself.” Why would the Lord talk about “willingness” if people were incapable of change? If men cannot change, such language becomes nonsense. Of course, you can change! Jesus told the woman caught in the act of adultery, after He had rescued her, “Go. From now on sin no more.” (John 8:11) Jesus truly believed this sinful woman could change, and we too should believe we can change.

Jesus said in John 3:14-17, “As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up; so that whoever believes will in Him have eternal life. For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life. For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him.” Jesus was lifted up on the cross to give us all hope that “whosoever” believes could be saved. God did not want to decide for us. What He did was provide a way that we could decide for ourselves—that way is faith and obedience.

No only did the Lord give us the opportunity to change, He also gave us the inner strength and determination to change. Anyone who examines what the Bible says about the cross upon which Jesus died, who sees His suffering and His love will find the inner strength to make those changes. God helps them to change by giving them hope and a reason to change. People will do out of love things they might never do for any other reason. When a person realizes just how much God loves us and how He sent His Son Jesus to die for us, to redeem us and to transform us into new and better people, he won’t ask, “can I change?” but “why haven’t I?”

It’s the devil who discourages people. He tells them they can’t change. He tells them if they try, they’ll fail. You see, the devil *knows* you can change; but he doesn’t want you to. He wants you to stay in your sins and stay away from God. But the Lord Jesus knows you don’t have to listen to the devil or discouraging people around you. You can make a difference in your life, if you will. You can leave an old life of sin and be born again as a child of God, saved and pure. You can go to heaven, if you want. But you can’t go on living a life of sin. You must change if you want to be close to God. The first step in change is a change of heart. Trust God, believe in Him.

Salvation is for whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ, the son of the Living God. Trust God to help you every step of the way as you turn from your old life of sin to a new life of faith and love for God. With your faith, love, and penitence, confess the name of Jesus before others and be baptized in water for the forgiveness of your sins. Baptism with faith, repentance, and confession is the new birth, a birth of water and the Spirit (John 3:5; Titus 3:5). There is not a good reason for you to delay this change—not even for one day. Why not give yourself to the Lord in obedience to the gospel today. Visit a nearby congregation and obey.

The word “someday” is not on the calendar. Don’t wait until “someday.” It may never come. Moses wrote one psalm, Psalm 90. In verse 12, he said, “So teach us to number our days, That we may present to You a heart of wisdom.” My friend, you may not have long to make the changes you have been meaning to make “someday.” Life, at best, is uncertain; and the day may come when you must cross over to the other side. Don’t go to face God unprepared. When you stand before him, do it with hope and confidence rather than fear and dread.

Some young people came to a wise man asking him when they should repent. He replied, “Repent the day before you die.” They said, “But we do not know when we will die.” He replied, “Then repent today.” My friend, should you not repent today? Should you not change your heart and your life and give yourself to God today? There will never be a better to make that change. Through the years I’ve frequently heard people who have made those changes say how they regret not having done it sooner. You will never regret doing the right thing. Give up those bad habits, put the Lord first in your life, and live every day with a song in your heart and the love of God in your life, because you are no longer living like you used to. Find peace that passes understanding.

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