

"People Can Change"

When you look in the mirror spiritually, do you like what we see? Hello, I'm Phil Sanders, and this is a Bible study "In Search of the Lord's Way." And today we're wondering if we can change our hearts and lives or are we stuck with what we have?

Welcome to In Search of the Lord's Way! We're truly grateful that you've joined us today. We're here to search the Scriptures for God's will. And we want you to know the Lord and to live with Him forever. Your friends, members of some churches of Christ in the area served by this station, sponsor this program; and they would love to have you attend Bible study and worship with them. When you walk through the door, you'll feel welcome and wanted. Thanks for taking time with us today. We want to be a part of your life each week.

The best lessons of life come from God's Word, the Bible. I don't know about you, but I need a lesson now and then. Lessons teach us, so we might not make the same mistakes that we've made in the past. Lessons open an opportunity for us to change our lives and to do better. Because they point to something better, we have hope for the future. I thank God for the lessons of the Bible; they protect me and help me to go in the right direction and avoid the hazards of life. Now some people think that people cannot change. Have you ever heard someone say, "Well, that's just the way I am; or I can't change"; or "you can't teach an old dog new tricks." Or maybe, "Well it's genetic; and I was born that way"?

When I hear people say such things, I have to ask, "Is that really true?" Are we born with no ability to make changes in our spiritual or moral lives? Are we unable to repent? I have to admit that that concept really doesn't square with what I've seen in people or with what I read in the Bible. Through the years I've seen all kinds of people make serious changes in their thinking and in their lives. And I believe you can too!

Now if you want to study more, we offer this study free. If you'd like a printed copy or a CD of our study and you live in the United States, mail your request to In Search of the Lord's Way, P.O. Box 371, Edmond, OK 73083 or send an e-mail to searchtv@searchtv.org. Or you can call our toll-free telephone number. That number is 1-800-321-8633. We also have materials free on our website at www.searchtv.org.

The Edmond church will now worship in song, we'll read from Luke 15:17 to 24, and we'll see how people really can change!

Our reading today comes from the most famous story ever told, the story of the Prodigal Son, Luke, chapter 15, verses 17 to 24. "But when he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired men have more than enough bread, but I'm dying here with hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in your sight; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me as one of your hired men."' So he got up and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion for him, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly bring out the best robe and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet; and bring the fattened calf, kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found.' And they began to celebrate." What a marvelous story. Let's pray together.

Oh Father, we're thankful for the love and grace that's found in Your Son Jesus. And how He opens His arms for us when we're willing to change. Help us to make those changes. And may Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. In Jesus name, Amen.

Making changes in our lives is challenging, because the temptation to continue doing what we used to do remains strong. Now an alcoholic may stop drinking, but the temptation to drink will return over and over. The alcoholic must keep his heart strong and remind himself why he won't drink. He has to fight the battle over and over, but he can win. And there are thousands, thousands who have overcome the temptation. An alcoholic will always be challenged, but he can break the habit of drunkenness. Can a person change? Of course they can.

Many times it's not so much a question of whether a person can change as it is "do they want to change?" Many people make the excuse they cannot change, when the truth is they don't want to change. People start sinful practices and become addicted. They don't plan to be controlled by their appetites, but they become slaves. The Lord Jesus said in John 8 verse 34, "Truly, truly, I say to you, that everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin." Now that's a harsh reality. No one likes to be controlled. But because of Christ it is not the end of the story. My friend, I tell you, there is hope for you! There is a way to overcome the past.

Two verses later in verse 36, the Lord promised, "So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed." Jesus can set us free from sin and its control over our lives. Jesus helps the Christian to rise above the failures and moral stains of the past. God can help us become a new person, freed from the old and born again. The Bible says in 2 Corinthians 5 and verse 17, "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation—or creature. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come." The apostle Paul explains in God's Word.

He says in Colossians 3 verses 5 to 10, "Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. On account of these the wrath of God is coming. And in these you too once walked, when you were living in them. But now you must put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, seeing that you've put off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator." Now if people cannot change, why would God demand it? God's not cruel. He doesn't expect us to do what we cannot do! But God knows what we can do, and he knows that we can change our thinking, our behavior, and our lives.

The Lord told a story about a young man who changed in Luke 15 verses 11 to 24. Perhaps you remember the story. "That there was a man who had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of property that is coming to me.' And he divided his property between them. Not many days later, the younger son gathered all that he had, he took a journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in reckless living. And when he had spent everything, there was a severe famine arose in that country, and he began to be in need. And so he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. And he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate, and no one gave him anything. But when he came to himself, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have more than enough bread, but I perish here with hunger! I will arise and I'm going to go to my father, and I'm going to say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. And I'm no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants.'" And he arose and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. And the son

said to him to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. And I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' But the father said to his servants, 'Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.' And they began to celebrate."

This touching story reminds us of the fact that people can wake up to the life that they've been living and can come home to the Father. God meets every one of his children just like he did the prodigal son. He runs to them with open arms and He celebrates their return. The lost can be saved, and the dead can become alive spiritually. Change can and does take place! People don't have to remain the way that they've always been. They can change their lives. Repentance is a change of heart that leads to a change of life. God made us people who can change our thinking. Yes, we can control our thoughts, and we can control the focus of our lives.

The Bible says in Ezekiel 18 verses 20 to 23: That the soul who sins shall die. And the son shall not suffer for the iniquity of the father, nor the father suffer for the iniquity of the son. The righteousness of the righteous shall be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon himself. But if a wicked person turns away from all his sins that he has committed and he keeps all my statutes and does what is just and right, he shall surely live; he shall not die. None of the transgressions that he has committed shall be remembered against him; for the righteousness that he has done, for that he shall live. (Then God says) Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked, declares the Lord God, and not rather that he should turn from his way and live? God wants everyone to turn to Him, to change and do what is right that they may live with him eternally. Regretfully not everyone will change, and that brings us a heart ache.

I want to tell a true story of forgiveness and freedom. In 1935 a family in Oklahoma with eight children lost their father. The mother went to work as a nurse to feed the family, and the children had to spend much time raising themselves. The youngest boy as time went by got into the wrong crowd and began to do all the wrong things that rebellious teens do. He often drank and committed crimes. He would rather steal than pay for anything, even when he had money in his pocket. As a young adult he spent many nights in jail.

And he was a strong, young man; and if he had been drinking, he would tear up his jail cell. He was wanted for theft and burglary in several states. Once when he came home to visit family in the 1950s, he stole a check-writing machine, well he was caught, and went to prison for four years. Now this got his attention. And while he was there in prison, his oldest sister and her husband came to visit him and talk about the Bible and his soul. Some fellow prisoners were also Christians, and they taught him what he should do to be saved. Now he learned that he had never been baptized, that is according to the teaching of the Scriptures and he needed to be baptized.

Well he served his time and he came out of jail in 1962 shortly before his mother died. At first he was humble and spiritually motivated, but before long he returned to a rough life out in the oil fields of Oklahoma. He was often drunk and took illegal drugs. His mouth was foul and his behavior very obnoxious. For more than twenty years he forgot the promises he made to God while he was back in prison. In 1985 he attended my father's funeral and was very obnoxious, I said in my heart that I didn't care if I ever saw him again. I regret saying that now.

But the Lord had something more in store for him. In 1987 he had gained a lot of weight, and the doctors told him that his heart was enlarged, like a cow's heart. They said he would soon die if he didn't change his ways. Many nights he would hunt raccoons and get drunk. And he sometimes woke

up in a ditch, not really knowing where he was. The doctor's words, though, hit home. He remembered all the promises he had made to God and to his older sister while he was in prison. And frantically he approached every preacher in town to find spiritual help. But none of them had time for him. One even threatened to call the law.

And then he remembered the two family members who taught him in prison. He called me one Friday night and asked me to come to his house and teach him about baptism. Well, the next morning I was there and I had my Bible. Now he knew that he hadn't been baptized according to the Scriptures and he wanted to know the truth. So I began with Matthew 3 and told him how Jesus fulfilled all righteousness and was baptized by John. I showed him that the one who believes and is baptized will be saved -Mark 16 and verse 16. We learned that the baptism of Christ was the new birth of water and the Spirit - John 3 and verse 5, and a person must be born again, verse 7. We also learned that we needed to repent and to be baptized for the forgiveness of sin - Acts 2 and verse 38. Now in baptism we also learned that you go down into the water and you come up out of the water - Acts 8 verses 38 and 39, and that baptism is an immersion, it's a dipping or plunging in the water. We also learned that when we're baptized, that our sins, it's at that time that are sins are washed away - Acts 22 and verse 16. We learned that baptism is into Christ, that's how you get into Christ, and it's also how you get into the death of Christ, that we're baptized into His death, that we're buried with Him in Baptism, and raised with him in baptism to walk in newness of life – Romans chapter 6 teaches. We also saw that our old man of sin was crucified with Him in baptism so that we can be free from sin - that's from Romans 6 verses 3 through 7. We learned many other things about baptism that day, that is that baptism doth also now saves us – 1 Peter 3:21. And that He saved us by the washing of regeneration, the renewing of the Holy Spirit – Titus 3 and verse 5. And after we had finished about three hours of study, five precious souls went down into that large pond behind their house and they were baptized.

Now from that very day my uncle never drank again. He began attending church every time the doors were open. His language was godly and his attitude was one of love and faith. He opened his big old heart to everybody, and loved everyone, and helped many, many prisoners. He began reaching out to the prisoners at the county courthouse, and soon many of them were being baptized. And then he went to other county jails, and it wasn't long until people there were being baptized as well. Soon he went to the Oklahoma state prisons where he taught young men who had fallen into the same sinful traps he himself had known in times past. Oh, he would speak straight to them about sin but with lots of love; and they responded to it. From 1987 onward he baptized more than a thousand souls into Christ with his own hands. My friends I have to tell you, never, never had I seen such a great change in a man.

But that kind of change is not so unusual for people who come to Christ. The Bible says in 1 Corinthians 6 verses 9 to 11, "Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Don't be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God (no they won't). (And then he pointed his finger, Paul did, and said) And such were some of you (that is in the Corinthian church). But (here's the other point) you were washed (God cleaned you up), you were sanctified (God made you holy), and you were justified (God declared you innocent) in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God." Oh I tell you, God helped them change from sinners to saints, and they made that change. Let's pray together. Oh Father, we're thankful that through Your love and through Your goodness You can help us to become the kind of people that You want us to be. Father we love You and we're thankful to You. And we pray

that Your Will will be done on earth as it is in heaven. In Jesus name, Amen!

You probably know people who've left a sinful lifestyle and have come to Christ. They made real changes in their moral and spiritual lives. When you come to Christ, you become a new person. You have a new start! You're born again! If God could make a difference in the life of my dear uncle, He can make a difference in people that you know too, and could make a difference in those Corinthians, if He could that He can make a difference in your life if you let Him. He can help you overcome every sin and become the kind of person that you want to be.

My favorite saying is, "I'm not all I ought to be (and I'm not); I'm not all I want to be; I'm not all I'm going to be; but, thank God by His mercy and grace, I'm not what I used to be." God can help each of us become the godly person that He intended for us to be. You can win over sin by giving yourself to the Lord. He'll help you overcome every sin and struggle that you face. Faith truly is the victory that we have in Christ our Lord. So are you willing to come to Him?

To become a Christian believe with all your heart that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. And out of faith and love, love for Christ, then turn away from what the Bible calls sin, take up your cross and follow the Lord Jesus. That change of heart, that change of life is what repentance is all about. The Bible everywhere teaches that people can repent. And after repenting, confess your faith and be baptized into Christ. Yes, baptism is an immersion in water in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins can be washed away. And when you're baptized the Lord will cause you to be born again, a new creature. God will add you to His family, the church of Jesus Christ, the church of Christ; and you'll be His child an heir of heaven. Won't you make that change and become a Christian?

We hope that today's study about changing our lives has stirred you to consider your soul. Think about what God says. If you live in the United States and want a free printed copy or CD of this message, mail your request to In Search of the Lord's Way, P.O. Box 371, Edmond, OK 73083 or send an e-mail to searchtv@searchtv.org. Or you can call the Search office toll-free at 1-800-321-8633. Now you can download these lessons or a newsletter online at our website: www.searchtv.org. There's also a schedule of our programs and a map with the location of churches that are in your area. We also offer free Bible Correspondence courses. Now if you get a hold of us, don't worry, we're not here to get your money. We're here to help you get to heaven.

We do ask that you please get involved with a church of Christ. Now if you're looking for a healthy, Biblical church home, we'll be happy to help you find one. We want you to worship with them. Just remember that we'll be back next week, Lord willing. So we ask that you keep searching God's Word with us and tell a friend, be sure to tell a friend about this program. God bless you and we love you from all of us In Search of the Lord's Way.