

Turning Inside Out — Luke 19:1–10

Change is difficult! We have deeply ingrained patterns of how we cross our legs, shave our faces, pronounce our words and eat our food. It is hard for us to change the way we do even some simple things. But what about the harder changes, such as stopping smoking or starting exercising or redefining relationships we have at work and at home and elsewhere?

Change is so difficult that to some it may seem to be impossible! That seems to be the idea in the question that is asked in Jeremiah 13:23: “Can the Ethiopian change his skin or the leopard its spots?” The implied reply is, “No! It is impossible!”

Impossible? That’s what Mary thought when Gabriel appeared to her nine months before that first Christmas and told her that she was to be the vehicle through which God would come in human flesh into this world. In response to her wonder the angel explained in Luke 1:37, “...nothing is impossible with God.” It was then that Mary said, “I am the Lord’s servant. May it be to me as you have said.”

Mary couldn’t imagine the changes God was planning to have take place inside her! It was beyond her experience to foresee that the “incarnation” inside her body would be the Christ child who would be seen outside her body. But she was ready for whatever God wanted to do inside her, whether she understood it or not.

Are you ready for whatever changes God would like to bring inside of you? Are you willing to experience all the changes necessary to make you become the kind of “Inside Out” person God wants you to be?

How do we make this happen? How do we actually change to become what we should be on the inside and then turn the inside out?

The message is “change” and the suggestions are both practical and biblical. Actually, I have found so many biblical references and examples of change that I have become somewhat frustrated over which

ones to include and which ones to exclude. But, for at least the first few suggestions on how to change, let’s use the story of Zacchaeus in Luke 19 as an example.

On the outside Zacchaeus had it made! He was a chief tax collector and rich. He was an important and wealthy man. Everyone knew him. Others were subject to him. He could buy whatever he wanted. But he wasn’t content. Despite all the outward appearances there was something missing in Zacchaeus’ life. If he had been content he would never have left home to do what he did that day in Jericho.

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What is the point of greatest discontent inside you? Where are you least satisfied? What would you most like to change? That is the place to begin! Is there a specific sin in your life that you need to deal with? Do you have doubts about your salvation? Are you dissatisfied with yourself? Do you make crippling comparisons of yourself with other people? Are there regrets about decisions you have

made along life’s way? Maybe your discontent has to do with dealing with anger, coping with singleness or marriage or divorce or coming to terms with limitations.

Like Zacchaeus maybe you have been the victim of criticism

about your vocation or your height or some other physical characteristic. Whatever it is, the point of our internal discontent is the place to begin to change. That is where we are motivated so that is the place to get started. Of course, we may later find that God has some changes in store for us that are far from where we began! We may even find that the starting place of discontent becomes irrelevant in the process of change. But, the place to begin to change is the point of greatest discontent.

The second suggestion is to start moving to-

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ward change. Just getting going is essential to change. This in no way means that doing wrong is better than doing nothing at all. However, doing nothing at all may be just about as bad as doing something wrong. Sometimes we just need to get going. We need to get out of bed even if we don't know where the day will take us. We need to get the car rolling even if we don't know the direction we are to go. It is pretty hard to steer a stationary car!

Zacchaeus "wanted to see who Jesus was." I doubt that he really knew why. All he knew was that there was some discontent in his life and that Jesus from Nazareth was coming through Jericho. Zacchaeus may not have even connected the two. He just did something.

Actually, what he did was to move along a thread that had in it two strands — a strand of information and a strand of action. He had a tidbit of information. He had heard a little about Jesus, so he wanted to see for himself. When he couldn't get a glimpse of the Messiah, he recognized his handicap and did something about it.

Zacchaeus acted. He climbed a sycamore tree. He added action to information. It was not a particularly dignified thing for an important politician in the city of Jericho to do. But he did what he needed to do and acted upon the information he had in order to get new information that was necessary to bring about change.

When Zacchaeus acted he saw Jesus and Jesus spoke directly to him and extended a self-invitation to Zacchaeus' house that day. The new information required a new action and he responded joyfully and said to Jesus, "Come on over." Then Zacchaeus slid down the tree and took Jesus home with him. The thread of information and action continued until Zacchaeus changed in wonderful ways he never dreamed of when he rolled out of bed with his inside discontent that morning!

Those of us who want to change on the inside and then turn inside out can learn a lot from Zacchaeus! We can learn to get moving even when we do not fully know in what direction God will lead us. Just start moving toward change. We can learn from Zacchaeus to seek out Jesus and whatever information he has for us. The information is different for each of us because we each need different changes. But we can learn to do whatever we

need to do to move toward change.

There are lots of us who would be too embarrassed to climb a tree. In the same way there are many of us who are too embarrassed or too proud to go to a counselor or take a seminar or read a book or do whatever we need to do to get the information we need to change. But we can learn to act on the information we have. With each new piece of information from Jesus, Zacchaeus acted and then got more information.

Sometimes we wonder why God doesn't tell us more. The reason is that we haven't done anything about what he's told us already. The way to more information is to act on the information we already have.

Does all of that make sense? Maybe it would help to run through an example. Suppose you are discontent with your spiritual life. You take action and go to church. At the church service you get information that the Bible is available and prayer is powerful. You act by buying and reading a Bible and praying daily. You get information from the Bible about salvation and the filling of the Holy Spirit. But you don't understand it. So you act by talking to a pastor or other Christian to get some counsel. That action gives you more information on how to better understand the Bible, pray to God and experience the filling of the Holy Spirit. Action, information, action, information. It all leads to change — from the inside out. But remember, like Zacchaeus, we must start moving toward change if we really want to get there!

A third suggestion is that we should behave the way we want to become. In Luke 19:8 we find that "Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, 'Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount.'" Understand that at that point Zacchaeus knew Jesus less than one day. At that point Zacchaeus had not lived the Lordship of Jesus Christ even though in the text he addresses Jesus by the title Lord. Zacchaeus had not yet given half of his money to the poor. He had not restored anything, much less four times what he had taken, to those whom he had defrauded. All of this was future! But in that moment when he stood in front of Jesus and said these words, he was beginning to behave the way he wanted to become. What a great and powerful

principle for change in our lives!

Actually, this is both a simple and a complex principle at the same time. It is simple in its profound truth that we begin major change in our lives by behaving in the way that we want to become. But it is also complex in that it deals with the inside and the outside of us. The inside changes the outside. But the outside changes the inside, too.

Let me try to explain. We make an inside change about outside behavior. That changes outside behavior in ways not yet totally changed inside. But the outside gives momentum to the inside for further changes. There is an ongoing process. It is a synergism. The two work together for change on the inside and on the outside.

There is another interesting hint about change in what Zacchaeus did. He built in a certain measure of success. He started doing what he could do — giving *half* of his goods to the poor. On another occasion Jesus suggested that a rich man sell *all* that he had and give it to the poor. Zacchaeus may have eventually given all. He may have quit his questionable profession as a collector of taxes for the hated Romans. He started with a very big step, but one that was likely to succeed.

Sometimes we try to change everything immediately and we fail miserably. We choose to revolutionize our spiritual lives by reading the Bible in a month and praying six hours every day. We add fasting to the effort. Results? Nothing! Part of the process of changing is starting with something attainable and trusting God for the impossible.

We often find that God rewards our faith and simple beginnings with the power to change what we would have found impossible to change. Do you want to change from the inside out? Then, like Zacchaeus, start behaving the way you want to become. And be sure to build in some success when you get started!

A fourth suggestion is to allow adequate time. At this point we must leave Zacchaeus behind because the rest of his story is not told. We do know that there was a tremendous change in that one day in Jericho; however, we don't know how long it took to really change Zacchaeus from the inside out.

But we do know about many other changed Bible characters.

Peter's story is told in Acts 10. On the inside he was a Jewish legalist who was quite intolerant of the lifestyle of Gentiles. He was strict in his own habits and insisted on such strictness in others. God wanted to change him from the inside out. God gave him a vision. It did not take. God gave him a second vision. Not quite enough! It took three times of heavenly communication to change Peter. It takes time to change.

Paul's story is told in II Corinthians 12:7-8. On the inside he was getting proud about all the revelations

God had given him. God gave him some kind of physical affliction on the outside that Paul didn't like. Paul prayed for it to be taken away. God said no. Paul prayed

again. God said no again. Paul prayed a third time and God said no a third time. God didn't want to change Paul's physical condition on the outside but his spiritual condition on the inside. Paul was hard to change. It took time.

Our story is told in II Corinthians 3:18: "(We) are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit." It does not say here that we were changed, although there is a truth to that, nor does it say that we will be changed, although there is that truth as well. It says that we are being changed! Allow God time to change you!

Some of the changes will be immense in one day, like Zacchaeus' first day with Jesus. Others will take repeated heavenly work, like with Peter. Some will be over a period of many prayers, like Paul. But there will always be a process of change going on so that God can make us more and more into the likeness of Jesus Christ!

Delight in the changes already done. Don't give up on ones now in process. Look forward to the changes yet future. Allow adequate time!

The fifth and final suggestion is to trust God! This is not last in importance. It is last for emphasis. All four other suggestions won't do much good if we are trying to change ourselves without faith in

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God and his power.

Luke 12:22–31 tells us that change includes some of those things we might like to change but are unable to change. Jesus says:

Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat; or about your body, what you will wear. Life is more than food and the body more than clothes. Consider the ravens: They do not sow or reap, they have no storeroom or barn; yet God feeds them. And how much more valuable you are than birds! Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life? Since you cannot do this very little thing, why do you worry about the rest?

Consider how the lilies grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you, not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today, and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, how much more will he clothe you, O you of little faith! And do not set your heart on what you will eat or drink; do not worry about it. For the pagan world runs after all such things, and your Father knows that you need them. But seek his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well.

Jesus talks about the things that are on the outside and how hard they are to change — food and clothes. But he really gets to the point in verse 25 when he talks about adding to the length of life or to our height (it sort of depends on which Bible translation you use — maybe Jesus meant both!). Jesus acknowledges that all these outside things are quite important to us, and rightly so. But he makes his big point in verse 31.

Seek God first. Decide on the inside to make his priorities your priorities. Acknowledge that, without his power, change is impossible. Trust his wisdom, power and schedule for change. Put him first on the inside in order to change from the inside out — and in order to take those inside changes and turn them outside!

Change begins with discontent. Start moving toward change. Behave the way you want to become. Allow adequate time. Trust God.

Reinhold Niebuhr had a summer home in the little town of Heath, Massachusetts. He would occasionally preach in a little church nearby. At the end of one of those sermons in 1934 he prayed a prayer that caught the attention of Howard Chandler Robbins, a summer neighbor. Robbins asked him for a copy of that prayer and Niebuhr handed him a piece of paper with the added comment, “Here, take the prayer. I have no further use for it.” Others felt differently.

The next year Robbins published it as part of a pamphlet. It was subsequently picked up and republished into millions and millions of copies during W.W. II by the USO and since then by Alcoholics Anonymous and other organizations. In that prayer Niebuhr prayed: “O God, give us the serenity to accept what cannot be changed, courage to change what should be changed, and wisdom to distinguish the one from the other.”

To that I would add, “...and to trust you, Lord, all the way, for all the changes, from the inside out! Amen!”

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