

Thinking About Changes

by Forrest C. Gilmore

I'd like to start today by telling you a story I wrote quite some time ago. I call it the Parable of the Little Red Wagon.

Once upon a time, there was a young boy about 10 years old. One of his prized possessions was a little red wagon that his parents gave him when he was six. He took it everywhere he went as he walked around his yard. He carried other toys around with it, and he used it as a race car in imaginary races. Sometimes, he even walked with it down the streets of the little town where he lived, collecting pretty rocks and other interesting things he spotted and tossed into his wagon.

One day, as he looked at his little wagon, he realized that it was a bit tattered. The paint had been rubbed off in places, and some spots were rusty, so he got his dad to help him refinish it. They sanded off the rusty spots and gave it a fresh coat of shining red paint. That took a lot of work. Then he noticed that the wheels wobbled, and the handle was loose. The front axle was also bent from a large rock he hit some time ago. So he got a book that had information about wagons, and he learned all about them. He learned that wagons had four major parts: the body, the axles, the wheels, and the steering mechanism. He also learned about ball bearings, washers, and cotter pins. He straightened the axle, added some washers at the wheels, and oiled them. Now it rolled without squeaking. One day, he noticed the badly worn wheels, so he collected all the money he had and started toward town, pulling his shaky little wagon behind him.

Along the way, he encountered an old man with white hair. "Hi, Jimmy!" The man said. "Where are you going with your wagon?"

"I'm going to get some wheels," the boy replied. "How did you know my name?"

"I'm the mayor, the man replied. "I know everyone in this little town. In addition, my son owns the hardware store. You just go in there, and he'll take care of you."

So the little boy went into the hardware store. The owner greeted him with a smile. "What can I do for you," he asked.

"I need some wheels for my wagon," the boy replied. "How much do they cost?"

"Four wheels wheels will cost ten dollars," the man answered.

"But I have only three dollars!" the boy exclaimed, with a sad look.

"No problem. Today I'll give you a brand new wagon," the man said. "Just go over there and pick out the one you want. Leave your old wagon here; I'll dispose of it for you."

"Oh, no!" the boy exclaimed. "I love my little wagon. I have had it a long time, and I've spent many hours fixing it! I think I'll just keep it. These wheels will last a while longer."

With that, the little boy stuffed his money into his pocket, turned and walked out of the store, pulling his wobbly little wagon behind him. The man stood there among the shiny new wagons. As he watched Jimmy walk away, he rubbed a tear from his eye.

I wrote this parable to illustrate that sometimes to fix a problem or deal with a situation we have to simply admit that all we have done before simply isn't working and have to come up with a new idea or approach. However, we may see this as having to admit that we were wrong at one time, that we may have made some mistakes, and that is difficult for us to do. We are accustomed to doing things the way we always have and uncomfortable with change. It also involves admitting that something is wrong with the current situation, and we often are unwilling to do that. We'd rather just continue to get along just as we are. Problems that originate with us personally are particularly difficult to deal with at times. Sometimes, things around us change, and we may need to make some changes ourselves to accommodate the different situation.

There are a number of examples in the Bible that give us insight into the matter of making needed changes. We're probably all familiar with the problem described in Acts Chapter 6 where the Hellenistic Jewish widows were being neglected in favor of the Hebrew widows. The Apostles recommended that seven lay men be appointed to deal with the matter. But how long do you think that situation went on before someone finally got fed up enough to complain? Why did the Apostles have to take action? Why couldn't the people just work it out among themselves? Because people often are insensitive to others, and because most are uncomfortable with change.

Let's bring it home for a moment - Are there any situations in our church today where things are going on that may require us to change the way we do things? Think about that for a moment. Are you at all uncomfortable with something, or someone, in this body of believers? If so, what changes are you willing to make to correct the problem?

Let's look at some other Biblical examples of problem situations. Consider Matthew 19:16-22 (NASB)
16 And someone came to Him and said, "Teacher, what good thing shall I do that I may obtain eternal life?"
17 And He said to him, "Why are you asking Me about what is good? There is only One who is good; but if you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments."
18 Then he *said to Him, "Which ones?" And Jesus said, "YOU SHALL NOT COMMIT MURDER; YOU SHALL NOT COMMIT ADULTERY; YOU SHALL NOT STEAL; YOU SHALL NOT BEAR FALSE WITNESS; 19 HONOR YOUR FATHER AND MOTHER; and YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF."
20 The young man *said to Him, "All these things I have kept; what am I still lacking?"
21 Jesus said to him, "If you wish to be complete, go and sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me."
22 But when the young man heard this statement, he went away grieving; for he was one who owned much property.

Here was a young man who seemed to want a simple answer to a simple question - "What good deed must I do to have eternal life?" At first, Jesus took his question at face value, but He also recognized that the man had made a false assumption when he asked about what good deed he must do. Jesus responded frankly, saying that it is God who determines what is truly good, but the young man might start by keeping the commandments. "But which ones?" the man asked. Now, we may be getting some insight into this matter. You see, the rabbis debated at length over which commandment was the greatest. They also recognized that the violation of any commandment meant that their law had been broken. So was this man just trying to get Jesus to struggle with the issue, or was he sincere in wanting an answer to the dilemma?

Jesus responded by quoting a few commandments from Exodus, but He also included a quote from Leviticus 19:18 YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF."

The young man said, "I have done all these things! Is there anything else I need to do?" Either he was fooling himself, or he wanted Jesus to say something that would get Jesus in hot water with the religious rulers, for he knew that there were hundreds of rules they had developed to deal with how to apply the commandments found in Scripture. Well, Jesus decided to immediately confront the man. "Yes, there is something else you must do; sell or give away everything you own, then come follow Me."

At that, the man went away disappointed. We learn that he had many material possessions, and he was unwilling to part with them. So why do you think the man was asking his question? Was he just curious? Did he really want eternal life, or was he just trying to put Jesus on the spot? Did he truly think he could meet the requirement if he could just pin it down?

In essence, Jesus was telling the young man that the change required of a person to inherit eternal life is a drastic one. Many people are unwilling to make such a change. Actually, it's not something we can do ourselves, no matter how many good deeds we do. Let's look at another situation:

John 3:1-3 (NASB)

1 Now there was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews;

2 this man came to Jesus by night and said to Him, "Rabbi, we know that You have come from God as a teacher; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him."

3 Jesus answered and said to him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God."

Nicodemus came to Jesus at night because he didn't want his fellow religious leaders to see him talking to this non-conforming young rabbi. He apparently wanted to know Jesus better, to get some personal insight into His teachings and authority. Jesus cut to the heart of the matter - "In order to see the kingdom of God, you must be born again!" Jesus said.

"What,?" Nicodemus exclaimed. "How is that possible?"

"You must be born of the Spirit!" Jesus told him. Then Jesus went on to explain that it was necessary to put one's faith in Him, God's son, in order to have eternal life, to see the kingdom of God, but that many people choose to continue their evil ways, to continue to live in darkness rather than coming to the Light.

Perhaps at that very moment, Nicodemus realized where he was. He had come in the darkness, but now, he was in the Light! Apparently, Nicodemus became a reserved but dedicated follower of Jesus, for we see him later defending Jesus during his mock trial before the Sanhedrin, and he later brought spices for Jesus' burial.

Among other things, this story teaches us that if we are willing to go against the crowd, to make a change from questionable behavior, and move toward the Savior, God will honor that. By going to see Jesus that night, Nicodemus heard Jesus speak these words: **"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."** John 3:16 (NASB) And his life was transformed.

Transformation - now that's a word that involves change. In fact, it means a significant change.

The Apostle Paul speaks about this in Romans 12:2 (NASB) *And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.*

Renewing our mind means that we have a new outlook on life. We tend to see things from God's perspective, through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. And if we see where a change needs to be made in the way we think or do things, we are willing to make that change. Paul goes on to give us some examples of how our life will be changed after such a transformation.

Romans 12:9-18 (NASB)

9 Let love be without hypocrisy. Abhor what is evil; cling to what is good.

10 Be devoted to one another in brotherly love; give preference to one another in honor;

11 not lagging behind in diligence, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord;

12 rejoicing in hope, persevering in tribulation, devoted to prayer,

13 contributing to the needs of the saints, practicing hospitality.

14 Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse.

15 Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep.

16 Be of the same mind toward one another; do not be haughty in mind, but associate with the lowly.

Do not be wise in your own estimation.

17 Never pay back evil for evil to anyone. Respect what is right in the sight of all men.

18 If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men.

When an opportunity arises where we need to apply one of these traits or actions, that is the time we must act. Putting it off will only make it harder the next time, or there may never be another opportunity.

For example, if a person or family from the community comes to our church for the first time and do not sense that we sincerely welcome them and display sincere hospitality toward them, they might never come back. Some won't come to our church in the first place if we haven't previously reached them in some way, either through our outreach efforts or by word of mouth from their neighbors. Furthermore, if we don't consistently practice these traits as we meet and work together, then some of those who have attended for some time may drop out. Often, just simple things make a difference. For example, if we happen to be sitting at the end of a pew and someone needs to sit in the same row, if are unwilling to get up and move toward the center, and we force them to squeeze in front of us, that could make a negative impression. Just the simple act of sitting in the middle of the pews and leaving the outer portion for later arrivers says something about our hospitality. Oh, we always have excuses for a lack of hospitality, but that doesn't change the fact of the matter.

The January (2012) issue of the Chimes has a great list of areas where we might need to change our focus. I hope that you'll take a moment later to read and think about them.

Some of these actions may seem uncomfortable at first, but as we practice them, they become second nature and become part of our character, and as more and more of us practice them regularly, the entire atmosphere of our church body is affected positively. By speaking about this, I don't mean to imply that we don't already do these things. For example, I though it was great that one of our Sunday School classes was willing to move into a smaller room so the youth could have more space. We just need to examine ourselves, individually, from time to time to be sure that we reflect the goodness of God that has been poured into us.

In 2 Corinthians 5:17, Paul says this: "*.... if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come.*" In other words, once we accept Christ, we will change, and if we don't change, something is wrong. Some things about us will change instantly; other changes may take some time as we mature in our faith and recognize the need for other changes in our viewpoint and lifestyle. Remember the parable of the little red wagon. Too many times, we cling to behaviors that we need to change. Christ wants us to think and behave differently. He wants to give us a new life and perhaps a new lifestyle through the gift of the Holy Spirit. Let us not grieve the Spirit by walking away from an opportunity for change that He places before us.

Let us pray

Now those character traits that we mentioned previously are all good, and your life will be better if you practice them, but I must remind you, doing these things will not bring you eternal life. That is a gift from God that simply must be accepted in faith. If you have not taken this first step, today is an opportunity to do so. Perhaps you feel the need to make this commitment public, or perhaps you just want to say publicly that you want to make some changes and move forward more boldly in your Christian walk. If so, I ask that you come forward as we sing our closing hymn