

EASTER CHANGES EVERYTHING

Easter is all about change. God took the worst possible situation – the death of His Son – turned it around, used it for good and changed the world. Easter changed history. It's the most important event of history. More than that it is still changing individual lives like me, like you, today.

Please turn with me to your Bibles and open it in 1 Peter 1:3-5. The Bible says, *“Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, 4 and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade. This inheritance is kept in heaven for you, 5 who through faith are shielded by God’s power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time.”* The purpose of Easter is not for religious people. Jesus Christ did not come for religious people. He couldn't care less about religion. He was only interested in people having a relationship with God not a bunch of rules, regulations and rituals. Jesus said, I came for religious outsiders, not the in crowd. Now turn to Luke 5:32. Jesus said, *“I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.”* Easter is God's invitation to you. What's the invitation? To have a changed life. The Bible says in 2 Corinthians 5:17 (NASB) , *“Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come.”*

What do you want to change? What do you want to change about your life? You probably think you're a pretty good person and you are. You think, “I've got a good life, I've got a great family, I've got a good career, I'm a pretty nice person, I live in a great place, I've got it good.”

But, it's nothing compared to what you could be. You are only using a fraction of your God-given potential. You were made for more than you are right now. Yes, you're good but it's nothing compared to what you could be.

That's what Easter is all about. How to change from good to better. We're going to look at it today. How to become a better person.

Let me tell you how you don't become a better person. You don't become a better person by trying harder. I'm going to try real hard and struggle and do better. That's not the way to do it.

Several years ago I wondered how to feel better about myself, how to become more confident. And I thought maybe one way is to put some muscles in my body or to increase my weight. And so when I saw "Body by Jake" on TV I immediately purchased one of his weight training gadgets. You know, that all-around machine that's supposed to develop every part of your body. Well, I huffed and puffed for a number of weeks but it was painful. So that gadget is now sitting in the garage of our house in New Jersey gathering dust and rust. I've given up on that. That thing is still sitting there in the garage and I haven't changed one bit. Why? Because you can't change by starting on externals. You've got to focus on internals. If you want to change it starts in your mind not in your body or your behavior. It starts in the way that you think.

A lot of times we think if we want to change to be better, just change something external about us, that will make the difference. Like if I change the way I do my hair or the clothes I wear or the car that I drive or I change the way that I look, that will automatically change me on the inside. It doesn't. Changing the externals does not change you. You've got to work on the inside.

That's what Easter is all about. It's about change inside of you. God says here's the first step. If you really want to be a better person...

I. OPEN YOUR MIND TO GOD'S POWER

You've got to change the way you think first. *"Let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think."* You don't change by trying harder. The average New Year's resolution lasts two weeks. That's about how long will power works. You try real hard, then you get tired and you give up. You change your life by changing the way that you think and by opening your mind to the possibility of God. The possibility that God exists, opening your mind to the possibility that He loves you.

Opening your mind to the possibility that He might know everything in our life and still care about you. That He knows the problems you're going through and He can help you.

But some of us have closed our minds to the possibility that God can do a miracle in our lives. We say, "I'm hopeless. I don't know whether God can help me." We say that because of the terrible circumstances we're in. We even entertain the notion that God is not interested in us, that he doesn't care about how we feel. That is not true. Jesus went through the most agonizing and torturous road of suffering. And because of what he went through he can sympathize with you. As we listen to a song called "Via Dolorosa" let the words of this song help you to see the pain Jesus went through.

VIDEO: VIA DOLOROSA

Jesus traveled the road of misery, went through the way of suffering. Why? For you! Because he loves you. He didn't have to go through all that. He is God after all. He commands the universe. He is almighty. He is powerful. But he

humbled himself. Came down to earth like you and me and suffered like you and me. In fact, he suffered more than anybody could suffer. He wanted to sympathize with you. More than that, he wanted to rescue you, to save you.

You may feel like it's still Good Friday for you. But remember, there is Easter Sunday. There is hope after despair. There is joy in the morning after weeping at night. Jesus Christ makes sure of that.

So, open your mind to the possibility that He has power that you don't have and you could tap into that power and make some changes that you haven't been able to make on your own. It starts by opening your mind to the possibility that God is real, He exists, He loves you and wants to help you.

The Bible says, *"Many are far away from the life of God. They have shut their minds against Him. They can't understand His ways."*

The reason why you don't understand God is because you've closed your mind to Him and until you open your mind to the possibility of God there's not going to be any real lasting change in your life. Open it up.

What is it that seems impossible to change in your life? Have you got a bad habit? Do you say, "I just can't get control of my anger!... I wish I were more patient but I'm not... I wish I didn't exaggerate so much but I do... I wish I were more self-disciplined but I just can't stop this!" Do you have a relationship that you see falling apart? You've worked and worked on it but it doesn't make any difference. You're frustrated and you say, "This will never work. I give up." Let me tell you one thing: God has power that you don't have.

When you open your mind to the power of God, God can do incredible changes in your life that you never thought possible.

"I pray that you'll begin to understand how incredibly great God's power is to help those who believe Him. It's the same mighty power that raised Christ from the dead." Get this! The same power that raised Jesus Christ back to life two thousand years ago is the power that's available to you to make changes in your life. If God has the power to raise the dead, raise a dead person, He can raise a dead marriage. He can raise a dead career. He can raise a dead dream.

God can do anything. But there's a key. One word in that verse – understand. It says, *"I pray you'll understand how great His power is."* If you really want to change your life for the better, it starts with a new understanding. It starts with changing your mind.

If you want to be a better person, step one, open your mind to the power of God. Here's the second step.

II. OPEN YOUR HEART TO GOD'S GRACE

What is grace? In simple terms, grace is when God gives you what you need instead of what you deserve.

Grace is when God forgives you and then gives you a second chance and a third chance and a fourth and a hundredth and a thousandth chance to start over. That's grace. Grace is the power God gives you to do the changes in your life that you can't do on your own. We all need grace. So we need to open our hearts to God's grace.

We don't normally experience grace from other human beings. What's the chance of a policeman not giving you a ticket after pulling you over for speeding? I read the story of a minister who parked his car in a no-parking zone in a large city because he was short of time and couldn't find a space with a meter. So he put a note under the windshield wiper that read: "I have circled the block 10

times. If I don't park here, I'll miss my appointment. Then he added in capital letters, "FORGIVE US OUR TRESPASSES AS WE FORGIVE THOSE WHO TRESPASS AGAINST US". When he returned, he was surprised to find a ticket anyway from a police officer along with this note: "I've circled this block for 10 years. If I don't give you a ticket, I'll lose my job. And he added in capital letters, "LEAD US NOT INTO TEMPTATION BUT DELIVER US FROM EVIL."

So, we don't normally experience grace from other people. But God shows you grace 24 hours a day.

The next breath you're going to take is because God's grace gives it to you. Even if you committed the most heinous crime, God's grace allows you to breathe.

You say, "Wait a minute! I earned what I got!" Where do you think you got the power to earn it? Where do you think you got your brains, your health, your mind, your arms? Everything you have. You would not even be alive if it were not for the grace of God. Literally, every single thing in your life is because God is good and gives you what you need and not always what you deserve. That is the grace of God.

Sometimes we don't understand this. But the Bible says God wants to shower us with His grace. Ephesians 1:8 *"God has showered upon us the richness of His grace for He understands us and knows what is best for us at all times."* God understands you better than you understand yourself.

Sometimes we think we have to help out God's grace. You think, before I can open up my life to God, I've got to get my act cleaned up. I can't come to God because there's so much mess in it. I can't come to God the way I am.

God says, "Come to Me! Bring the good, the bad, the ugly, the embarrassing, the stuff you're ashamed of, the stuff nobody else knows about. Bring it all to Me and we'll work on it together."

The Bible says, *"We are made right in God's sight when we trust in Jesus Christ to take away our sins. And we all can be saved in this same way, no matter who we are or what we have done."*

Aren't you grateful for that last phrase – no matter who we are or what we have done -- God says we can have His grace.

I don't care what your religious background is. You may be Catholic. You may be Protestant. You may be Jewish or Buddhist or Baptist or no religion.

God says it doesn't matter. He's not interested in religion. He's interested in you having a relationship with Him.

He says you can come to Him no matter who you are or what you've done. The fact is all of us have blown it. We've all made mistakes. I don't measure up to my own standard, much less God's. I disappoint myself much less disappoint a perfect holy God. We've all made mistakes but God says, "I want to erase all your guilt. I want to wipe out all the things you've done wrong. I want to eliminate the shame." That's called grace.

When I was a young boy in the Philippines, one thing that always fascinated me was this thing called Drawing Slate. It was my iPad during that time. But it's not an electronic toy. It looks like that.

You write on it or draw pictures then when you're done, you just lift the plastic that you wrote on and when you put it back, the slate is clean, no trace of whatever you wrote or drew on it.

Our lives are like that. We commit wrongs but God says, "I want to wipe the slate clean from everything you've ever done wrong in your life."

Thousands of years ago, before you were even born, God knew that you would be sitting in a school building in Springfield, VA on Easter 2013, so He could get you to sit still long enough and get your attention to say this to you: "You matter to Me. I love you. I've seen everything that's gone on in your life and you can start over and this time I'll help you. That's what's going to be different. It's not just you trying to do it under your own power to be a better person. This time I'll help you." Some of you are up in years, in age. It's never too late to start over. God says, I will help you.

How do I get God's grace? *"Saving is all His (God's) idea and all His work. All we do is trust Him (not try harder) enough to let him do it. It is God's gift from start to finish."* You will never earn God's grace. You will never deserve God's grace. It's simply a gift, a gift of His love, His forgiveness, His help to change. All you do is humbly accept it.

The Bible says, *"But he gives us more grace. That is why Scripture says: "God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble." Submit yourselves, then, to God."* I hope you'll do that today, in this service. I hope you'll submit yourself to God. If you do that you will never be the same again. You will see changes in your life you never thought possible. If you do that, it will make an incredible difference because God's grace changes everything.

You want to change? You want to be different? You want to be better? Yes, you're good but you can be better. First, open your mind to God's power. The possibility that He loves you, that He exists and wants to help you.

Second, open your heart to God's grace. That He wants to forgive you and give you a fresh start. Then here's the clincher...

III. OPEN YOUR LIFE TO GOD'S LOVE

SONG: NO OTHER LOVE (RACHEL LAMPA)

No one will ever love you more than God does. He loves you unconditionally. Jesus Christ proves how much God loves you by coming and dying on the cross even before you knew it or understood it. *"I pray that Christ will be more and more at home in your hearts as you trust in him...and may you have the power to understand, as all God's people should, how wide, how long, how high, and how deep his love really is. May you experience the love of Christ."*

That is my prayer for you here today. That you will experience the love of God. Not that you just know it in your mind. You've probably heard before "God loves you." So what? If you've never felt it then you've never been changed by it. It is only when you experience, when you feel the love of God that it starts transforming you on the inside. Open up your life to God's love so you can feel it.

Philip Yancey, the author of the book "What's so Amazing About Grace" tells the story of Jenny who grew up on a cherry orchard near Traverse City, Michigan.

Jenny's parents, a little old fashioned, tended to overreact to her nose ring, her music and the way she dressed. One night in an argument with her father, she screamed, "I hate you! I never want to see you again!"

And that night she ran away, catching a bus to Detroit. The second day in Detroit she met a man with the biggest car she'd ever seen. He offered her a ride, bought her lunch and gave her a place to stay. He even gave her some pills that made her feel better than she'd ever felt in her life. The good life continued for about a year. That man who she now called "boss" taught her a few things that

men like and since she was under age men would pay a premium for her. She lived in a penthouse and ordered room service whenever she wanted.

But after a year, she became ill and her boss became mean. Soon, she was out on the streets without a penny to her name. The little bit of money she made turning tricks all went to support her habit. One freezing night on the street sleepless and hungry, Jenny was overwhelmed with a longing to go back home, to the cherry orchards, the warm home and her golden retriever. Sobbing she called home three times only to get an answering machine. The third time she said, “Mom, Dad, it’s me. I want to come home! I’m catching the bus and I’ll get there about midnight tomorrow night at the station. If you’re not there I guess I’ll just stay on the bus to Canada.” On the seven-hour bus trip home Jenny began to have doubts. “What will I say? What will they think? Will they even show up? Will they even be there at the station?” When the bus finally rolled into the small station, the driver announced, “Fifteen minutes, folks! That’s all the time we have here. Fifteen minutes!” Fifteen minutes to decide her life. She nervously checked how she looked in a little compact mirror. As she walked into the terminal, nothing could have prepared her for what she saw. Forty people at midnight standing there. Uncles and aunts and cousins and brothers and sisters and mom and dad and grandparents.

All of them in silly party hats and blowing silly noisemakers and holding banners and a big banner that stretched the entire terminal that said, “Welcome home!” As her eyes filled with tears, her dad lunged forward out of the crowd to grabbed her. She said, “ Oh, Dad! I am so sorry!”

Her dad said, “Shhhh. We don’t have any time for apologies. You’re going to be late for the party. We planned a banquet for you at home.”

That is a picture of the unconditional love that God has for you. When you come home to God and say, “God, You made me but I’ve been disconnected from You, maybe all my life. But I’m coming home,” God throws a party for you. He says, “Welcome home! Welcome into My arms of love.”

The Bible says that God throws a party for you when you come home to Him. *“We throw open our doors to God and discover at the same moment that He has already thrown open His door to us!”* If you don’t get anything else I say today, I want you to get this next sentence. It is key. You were made by God and for God and until you understand that, life does not make sense. You were made by God and you were made for God for a relationship with Him. And until you understand that, life does not make sense. You were not put on this earth just to go to school, get a job, make a bunch of money, spend it, retire and die, to take up space, use resources, breathe the air, and die. No. You were made for an eternal relationship with God, one that goes on long past this life.

I hope you will do what this verse says, “Throw open the doors of your life to God and say, ‘Yes God, I’m coming home.’” It may have been a long, long time. It may have been all your life. Maybe you’re up in years. But if you do this, God's will receive you with open arms. Has God been trying to get your attention? I think so. I think that’s why He brought you here today. Because you were made for more than you’re living. Far, far more. He wants to help you. Your heavenly Father wants to say, “You can start over. This time I'll help you.”

Friend, you can start all over. You may feel like there’s no life in you anymore but you can be alive again because your master, Jesus, rose from the dead and he is alive!

Song: Alive, Alive, Alive Forevermore

Easter gives us the power to start over. Jesus gives us the power to keep going. He gives us the power to change, to be different. The bottom line is, Easter is not about big musical productions. Big numbers, big crowds.

Easter is really about personal, intimate, internal change in me and in you. If you miss that you miss the whole purpose.

Let us pray....