



Matthew 4:12-25
You Can Change

Earlier in our study of the book of Matthew we met John the Baptist, the last of the Old Testament prophets who came to prepare the way for Jesus. And he did that by calling people to repent. People from the capital and all around Israel went out to hear what John had to say and see what God was doing through him.

People were broken by what they heard and saw. God was on the move, convicting people, showing them sin they needed to confess, areas that needed to change in their life, and they responded by saying "Yes, that's me. I need to change." And so, John baptized them to symbolize the old being washed away and the dawn of a new beginning.

But, not everyone liked John's message.

Some people resisted, including people with power and authority, which they used to shut John up, both literally and figuratively:

Matthew 4:12 Now when Jesus heard that John had been put in prison, He departed to Galilee.

13 And leaving Nazareth, He came and dwelt in Capernaum, [9 hour walk] which is by the sea, in the regions of Zebulun and Naphtali, 14 that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by Isaiah the prophet, saying:

15 *"The land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali,
By the way of the sea, beyond the Jordan,
Galilee of the Gentiles:*

16 *The people who sat in darkness have seen a great light,
And upon those who sat in the region and shadow of death
Light has dawned."*

17 From that time Jesus began to preach and to say, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

Friends, one of the things I have become absolutely convinced of, one of the things I have built my life on, is the conviction that if God wants to do something, He's going to get it done. In this case, if God wants a message to get out, it's going to get out.

He sent John the Baptist to declare, "[Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand](#)" and when John was put in jail, Jesus took it up. When Jesus was crucified, buried, and resurrected, the early apostles took it up – as you read the Bible you hear Peter, John, Paul and others calling out "[Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.](#)" In Revelation, the

very last book of the Bible, you find Jesus sending messages to seven churches calling them to repent.

So again, if God wants the message to get out, it's going to get out. If God wants to get a message to you, you're going to hear it. You might not receive it, you might not like it, you might reject it, but you're going to hear it.

So obviously, we need to hear the call to repent. Repentance is an essential part of the Christian faith. We must be absolutely clear about that. The entire reason we worship God is because we know we need to repent. The death of Jesus Christ on the cross, which is central to our entire faith, is completely bound up in our need to repent. If we don't need to repent, then He didn't need to die.

You see, we all mess up at some point in our lives. In big ways and in little ways, we head in a different direction than God has called us to go. We hurt other people, we neglect other people, and we ignore or disobey God. We live for something other than Him. We live for our grades, or our sport, or our boyfriend or girlfriend or spouse or kids, we live for our own comfort or the approval of others. We live for money or success. Something drives us, there is something we will fight and sacrifice for. And most of the time, it is not God.

So, He comes into our lives and He makes us aware of that. Through circumstances or quiet convictions or the conversation of a friend or because we hear someone preaching about Him, He gets our attention and impresses on us the profound difference between what's happening in our lives and what He wants to see happen. We become aware of the fact that God is speaking to us and He is calling us to change.

It happens to people who have never known God before, and it happens to those who have already given their lives to Him because we all naturally drift away and need to repent which means to turn back, face God, and move toward Him in response to His call.

Repentance is more than just feeling bad about what you've done, that's remorse. You can feel bad for years and never actually change. You can wish you would change or wish you could do things differently, that's regret. Don't confuse them with true repentance – true repentance is a change of mind and heart that leads to a change of life and thought; to turn from evil and turn toward good, to turn away from self and toward God.

Repentance involves both a sincere desire and actual effort to change. If you have repented of your sins, you can you point to evidence of changed attitudes and actions in your life, changed desires and reactions.

So let me ask: can you do that? Can you point to change? And can you say: this is where God is calling me to change right now? This is the hard thing that God is working on in my life, right now?

I'm a pastor, not a prosecutor, so I want you to know that you **MUST** change, you must repent of things in your life that are not pleasing to God – and again, that may mean you

need to repent with your whole life by turning it all over to God and receiving forgiveness in Christ, or it might be in specific areas of your life where you're growing as a Christian – it doesn't matter who you are we all need to change somewhere. So I have to stand here and tell you this, but as your pastor, I also want to make sure you hear it the right way.

I want to make sure you know you need to change, but I also want to make sure you understand the mercy of a God who *will let you change*. Have you ever pondered that?

Have you ever thought how empty the planet would be if God just punished every sin instantly and automatically? How long would you last if God suddenly instituted immediate consequences for every sin? Would you even make it out of this room? Do you understand what a mercy it is that God even allows us to exist long enough to repent?

And what a greater mercy it is that He allows us to resist the call to repent! Very few people respond the first moment they know they're doing wrong. Most of us respond to conviction as it builds slowly over time. And yet God is patient with us! Do you marvel at that?

I also need to help us understand that the fact that God is calling us to repent means we actually CAN repent! You CAN change. God is not calling you to do the impossible. If God is coming to you and saying, this part of your life needs to change, or the entire direction of your life needs to change, if He is calling you to repent, then *repentance is possible*.

Some of you feel like you're stuck. And it doesn't matter if you're 12 or 43 or 67 - you feel stuck, you think, "This is who I am." You think, I've tried to change and it didn't work. Or, I've tried to change and I can't. Or that's for other people, not me. You think you're broken somehow or you've been sidelined, you missed what other people have.

And I want you to know, it's not true. If God is calling you to repent, if He is calling you to change, then, my friend, you CAN do it. It might not be easy. It might be really, really hard. It might not happen instantly, it might be a slow steady change over time, but it can happen. And you can rejoice in the progress you'll make. You are not God's kryptonite; you are not the immovable object to His irresistible force.

Not only can God change you, He can fix you. He can repair and restore you. You don't have to keep going through life the way you've been going. He can make you into something unrecognizable. My old pastor used to say, "God can restore your ability to blush." He can restore your innocence. You think you're hurt and scarred and jaded, you're frustrated and burned out and cynical, you're defeated and uncertain, you're just holding on and getting through. My friend, that is not the way God is calling you to live. You CAN change, and He is calling you to do it.

So how does it happen? Well, let me give you some practical steps.

1. Agree with God. We know we need to repent because He brings to our attention something that is out of line with His expectations. So agree with God, see it His way, ask

for forgiveness, and admit you need to change. This is the first part of repentance, agreeing with God about the issue. But then you need to actually live, think, and react differently. How do you do that?

2. Study your problem. Figure out what you're aiming for, and what is causing you to miss the target. Be clear and specific and honest about it. Look for what the Bible says about your issue. God's Word gives very specific instruction of what we need to know and how to fight for change. He has also given us the church, so look for wise Christian people and wise Christian books that can help you. God has put parents and pastors and other people into your life who can help you see things clearly and help you fight for the change. A word of warning here though – don't become an expert in the problem, become an expert in the solution. Remember, if God is calling you to change, you can. So don't get stuck in all the reasons why you did what you did, don't cling to a clinical diagnosis. Cling to Jesus.

3. Plan and employ a good offense or defense. When you are tempted, when you find yourself thinking the old thoughts or defaulting to the old reactions, when you find yourself battling the old desires, what are you going to do? Do you have a plan?

Smart businesses and teams have standard operating procedures or immediate action drills to cover how they respond to certain events: if this happens, we do that. Every time. And they train and practice until it's second nature. You need the same thing. If you are tempted, if you start to think about that thing, if you find yourself about to react, what is your new immediate action? Is there a verse you will quote to yourself? Is there a prayer you pray? Is there a worship song you will sing? EVERY TIME.

A word to the wise here - you need something simple and strong that you can depend on, because it will be a challenge, temptation is strong, your immediate action drill needs to be stronger, something you can cling to as you begin to put off old patterns and habits and put on your new, holy, and righteous identity in Christ.

One of our greatest problems is that we listen to ourselves rather than talk to ourselves. Rather than spiraling down into a depression by focusing on our problems, we need to remind ourselves of who God is: we should bombard our problems with the truths of God's Word. Pummel your problems with God's promises. When you're tempted to think, say, or do the wrong thing – quote God's Word back to yourself and fight for what is really true.

If you need help with this, go back to step two – study your problem and become an expert in the solution, discover what you need to focus on and cling to *instead of* your old patterns.

4. Take action. Just do it. Choose to do what is right and best and make regular God-guided, Spirit empowered progress.

It's going to be trench warfare at times. So ask God for help in the battle daily. When it comes to the battle against sin, Jesus works through us, but not instead of us. He'll be at your side, He'll give you the armor and the sword, but you're going to have to face and fight the dragon.

Tell yourself, *the worst comes first* and then go face that thing you need to do. And then do it again tomorrow. Begin to change by God's grace and with His strength. Take a step in the new direction. Cling to what you know is true and right and take steps in the new direction of repentance.

Things won't become easy until they've been hard for a while. But with every choice, you're either getting closer to your goal, or farther away – so don't get better at being bad, get better at being good. If you feed the right things, and starve the wrong, over time your appetite WILL change and you'll start to see yourself in new ways. You'll begin to notice new desires; you'll start to see new reactions.

You change one element is a chemical formula and everything else changes too. Change one variable in an equation and the outcome will be different – perhaps slightly, perhaps drastically. So make a change, some change, and start moving forward in repentance.

For the first week or two, you may feel like its just failure after failure as you try fight. But don't give up, because in weeks 3 and 4 you'll see victory 50% or more of the time, and then by week 6 you'll hit a breakthrough and a year later almost all the major skirmishes cease and you're a new you. You can still be tempted, you can still be caught off guard and fall back, but your regular response is different because you're sowing to the Spirit instead of the flesh and you're beginning to reap what you've sown.

And remember the motivation for all of this. We're told to [“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”](#)

We need to choose: keep being my old self, or enter into the joy and peace and promises of the kingdom of heaven? Whenever I choose the old me, I'm also forsaking the joy and promises of God. I'm choosing something familiar and pathetic instead of something eternal and true. John and Jesus were saying there is a reason to repent, and it's here, right now – you can have something better and you can be someone better in the Kingdom of Heaven.

Most countries consider you a citizen if you were born there, so too with this spiritual kingdom, when you are born again, through repentance in Christ Jesus, you become a citizen. Citizens live under laws, and so there are guides for our behaviors as Christians, but citizens also receive benefits.

The state of Alaska receives large amounts of money from oil revenue, so each year they write a check to every legal resident of the state. Last year every man, woman and child got \$1022 for being a resident. But you have even greater benefits as a citizen of the Kingdom of Heaven, and they'll last much longer than whatever you might spend \$1000 on.

There's another profound difference between the Kingdom of Heaven and the governments of this earth: you have to be chosen for the Kingdom of Heaven. No one is simply born into it. No one just inherits it.

Think about it this way: your parents might have a car. So, you go grow up being driven around all the time. You might even have "your seat" in the car. For years and years you sit in the car and you go where it goes. Your family owns it. You know the paths it's going to take. You know how to get from your house to the grocery store or school.

But you can't use it; you can't drive it, until you have your own license. You can't say, my family owns this car. I know where I'm going. And head out on your own. You need a license. You need to study, and take training, and get time behind the wheel and then you need to be tested. And then, and only then, will you be allowed to take what your family already had, what you were used to being a part of, and make it your own.

So too with the Kingdom of Heaven, you can come to church every week with your family and not really belong. There has to be a time, a precise moment or a gradual season, where you experience the call to "[Repent. For the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand,](#)" and then respond personally. There has to be a before and an after. There has to be who I am with Jesus, and who I would be without Him. You have to see and know a difference. Otherwise, you're just along for the ride, but this isn't really yours. You're not really a child of God, and when we come to the border, you're going to have to get out.

Everyone must make their own, personal, decision about Jesus and this call to repent, to change. And some people resist. People like Herod Antipas who heard what John The Baptist was saying and didn't like it. Herod had taken his brother's wife as his own and John called him out on it, said he needed to repent and Herod didn't like it so he used his personal position of power to throw John in prison.

The call to repent is not easy to receive. People will respond to the conviction of sin with animosity, bitterness, fear, and even violence at times. We like our sin. We grow comfortable with who we are, we think it's our true identity and how dare someone tell us that we need to change, or say that we're wrong? It doesn't matter how clearly you lay out the benefits of the Kingdom of Heaven, it doesn't matter how clearly you announce the call to repent and the promise of forgiveness and help and hope in Christ, not all people want to receive it, and some will actively resist it.

John had been announcing the call for some time in Judea, the message had gotten out, so now with him in jail, Jesus took the message up north, to Galilee of the Gentiles. The light of the world came to shine in the darkness.

[18 And Jesus, walking by the Sea of Galilee, saw two brothers, Simon called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea; for they were fishermen. 19 Then He said to them, "Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men." 20 They immediately left *their* nets and followed Him.](#)

21 Going on from there, He saw two other brothers, James *the son of Zebedee*, and John his brother, in the boat with Zebedee their father, mending their nets. He called them, 22 and immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed Him.

As Jesus prepares to build this new Kingdom, of spiritual citizens, I want you to notice that He calls people, involves people, uses people. He calls human beings to follow Him and He accomplishes His purposes through them because they were willing to change.

These men are fishermen, it's the family business, they grew up doing it, they're comfortable with it. But suddenly Jesus calls them to do something they've never done before. He calls them to stretch, and to change and they have to determine how they will respond. But you have to know, He's not just calling them, He's also going to train them, mentor them, teach them and then assign them, and empower them.

So don't be afraid of God using your 'natural' gifts like He did with Matthew, but also, don't be afraid of obediently following God in things that are not your strength. Life is that way. Promotions come, new assignments and projects come, you get married, you have kids, you take care of your parents, you step out in ministry. These are things you've never done before, but if God is calling you to it, He will empower you for it, that the glory might be His alone. Everyone will look on and know, and you will know, that was Him, not you.

23 And Jesus went about all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing all kinds of sickness and all kinds of disease among the people. 24 Then His fame went throughout all Syria; and they brought to Him all sick people who were afflicted with various diseases and torments, and those who were demon-possessed, epileptics, and paralytics; and He healed them. 25 Great multitudes followed Him—from Galilee, and *from* Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and beyond the Jordan.

This summary sets the stage for what is coming in the following chapters – it's a sampling of the things Jesus did and said. Matthew wants us to know Jesus has complete power and authority over everything on this earth. He heals those who have been demon possessed, and demonstrates His spiritual power and authority.

But He also heals a group called epileptics or your Bible may say, those who have seizures, the literal translation is moonstruck, and it's most likely a way to say those suffering from mental illnesses. Jesus has the ability to restore and rewire your brain. And, He healed the paralytics. The point is: Jesus has the ability to help and heal those who are suffering spiritually, mentally, or physically.

In the Bible we learn that sickness may be the result of a particular sin, either directly or indirectly, but it always the consequence of living in a fallen world. And so the good news is: Messiah will conquer and end all that has been undone by the fall. Jesus is showing that He has comprehensive control over sin at the personal level and the global level as well. He can make ALL things right.

No wonder people come out in large numbers to hear what He has to say. We're all attracted by the possibility of getting our life straight. We're all attracted by a message of hope and healing and transformation. That part is an easy sell. So it's no wonder the early response to Jesus was overwhelmingly positive.

But then people heard the whole message, and understood He was calling them to repent, to choose between the kingdom of their own preferences, desires, and opinions and the kingdom of Heaven and they decided they weren't interested. They didn't think they could really do it, they didn't think they could really change. Or they simply didn't want to. They wanted to live their life, their way, and they the didn't see the need for all of this.

What about you? Where do you fall on the issue? Do you hear the call of Christ to repent? Is He inviting you into His kingdom? And will you come?

And if you're already a citizen, if you've already been born-again, if you're a Christian, is there any change He's calling you to make, anything that He wants to set you free from, any mission He wants to send you on?

Friends, the great news is: God wouldn't call us to repent and change unless change was possible. So listen to Him, come to Him and surrender to Him today. We're about to celebrate communion – the personal sacrifice of Jesus so that we can personally be changed. As we do so, it's a great time to consider the call to repent, to pray, to confess your sins to Jesus and give thanks for the fact that change is possible. So let's do that now.