

God is Unchanging & Faithful
Mal 3:6-10, Heb 1:11-12

Brothers and sisters, there's an old joke about how many people it takes to change a light bulb and I'm particularly fond of the church denomination version of it... I thought I would share it with you this morning. So here we go - How many people does it take to change a light bulb in these various denominations??

Charismatic: Only 1 – Hands are already in the air.

Pentecostal: 10 – One to change the bulb, and nine to pray against the spirit of darkness.

Reformed: None – Lights will go on and off at predestined times, and if God wants the light bulb to change, He will ensure that it happens.

Baptists: 4 – One to change the light bulb, and three to serve coffee and refreshments.

High Anglicans and Roman Catholics: none – they prefer to use candles.

Christian Missionary Alliance: 6 – One woman to replace the bulb while five men review church lighting policy.

Presbyterians: at least 3, one to put forward the motion to change the bulb, another to second the motion, a moderator to call the vote and however many others it takes to get a majority.

Liberals & Progressives: We choose not to make a statement either in favor of or against the need for a light bulb. However, if in your own journey you have found that light bulbs work for you, you are invited to write a poem or compose a modern dance about your light bulb for the next Sunday service, in which we will explore a number of light bulb traditions, including incandescent, fluorescent, 3-way, LED, long-life and tinted, all of which are equally valid paths to luminescence.

Valleyview-ers - No worries, Pastor Grant will change the light bulb!

Lutherans: None – Lutherans don't believe in change.

Now that last answer reveals to me that the person who posted this particular version of this joke on the internet was in fact a Lutheran, because that's the whole point of the joke – to highlight the fact that you believe your particular Church denomination is not dealing well with the fact that it needs to change.

So, if you were Baptist – you would say Baptists don't believe in change, if you were Alliance, you would say Alliance doesn't believe in change, if you were Presbyterian you would say – wait a minute, my great-grandmother donated that lightbulb you can't change that!

But all joking aside brothers and sisters, I would say that for the past one hundred years the Church has been under significant pressure to change – because of the way our society has changed.

And we can see this right? We can see the ways in which our society has changed socially, technologically, industrially, educationally, economically, politically and especially morally

and spiritually. And as a result of these changes the Church, as a whole, has become increasingly insignificant and irrelevant in our society - and affiliation, attendance and donations have all declined along with our influence.

And many Christians and Church leaders have reasoned that this trend could be reversed by supporting and embracing all these societal changes within the Church. If we could just change and be like our society then our society will find us appealing and like us again...

So we've renovated our facilities to make them more updated and accessible, we've been creative and innovative with our youth programs and worship services, we've adopted marketing and management techniques to help run our congregations, we've even shifted our preaching and teaching to have more practical application... but its not been enough has it?

We've still been losing ground and influence and significance for the past forty years, and so we've come to the point where

some Church leaders and Christians are pushing to change... who God is and what His word reveals to us about Him... as if what the Church has been teaching about God for the past two thousand years and more if we take the witness of O.T. Israel into account... as if somehow this is all incorrect, because over the past one hundred years as our society has changed, God has somehow changed with it.

But brothers and sisters, the scriptures make it oh so very clear that this is not the case. Both passages that we read this morning confirm that in fact... God. Does. Not. Change.

God himself says in Malachi 3:6 *“I, Yahweh, do not change.”* And the writer of Hebrews echoes this in 1:12 *“You remain... the same.”* And we can add to those passages Numbers 23:19 *“God is not man, that he should lie, or a son of man, that he should change his mind. Has he said, and will he not do it? Or has he spoken, and will he not fulfill it?”*

The very name of God, that He reveals to Moses in Ex 3:14; Yahweh - I AM who I AM also means I WILL BE WHO I WILL BE,

it has an unchanging permanence in its meaning, and even if people and societies change over time... God doesn't.

Isaiah 41:4 God says *“Who has done this and carried it through, calling forth the generations from the beginning? I, Yahweh—with the first of them and with the last—I am He.”* I AM who I AM with the first people... and I WILL BE WHO I WILL BE with the last of people. And in Revelation 4:8 the Four living Creatures who surround the throne of God proclaim that He is the God *“who was... who is... and who is to come!”*

And that doesn't only mean that God is everlasting, and uncreatedly infinite as we have learned – it also means that WHO God was He still is and He will continue to Be... in who He is, He doesn't change. So, God's unchangeability, His immutability flows out of His self-existence and His infiniteness.

God's very nature as self-existing, undependant upon anything else for His infinite everlasting existence requires that this

aspect of Himself never change – because if it did... God would not be able to exist as God.

Additionally, since God is perfect and has ALL He needs within Himself, to imply that change is needed in God is to imply there is some sort of lacking or deficiency in need of improvement or growth... or that there is some kind of deterioration or decay, neither of which are true of God. That is simply not possible when God is self-existing and uncreatedly infinite and ALL self sufficient.

Further, God's immutability applies to both His being and to ALL of His attributes, or perfections as it is better to call them, since they are part of His being. For example we can't say that God doesn't change in His being but somehow His knowledge of events does change as they come to pass, or that God's truth was true for one set of circumstance but not for another.

God's immutability means there is no change in God's perfections, His purposes, His promises, His motives for His actions, His will, or His words. As Jesus Christ himself said in

Mark 13:31 *"my words will never pass away."* So, brothers and sisters, God's word doesn't change – because God doesn't change.

Now as we have been doing over the past few weeks in learning about God, let's toss this particular perfection of God around a bit and marvel at it and allow it to blow our minds so that we continue to grow in our appreciation for God's awesomeness.

And the best way to do this with God's immutability is to compare and contrast it - with how change affects us.

So, brothers and sisters, consider for a moment how every single one of us is either still at some stage of immaturity and still needing to grow or improve or develop our potential, or we are over the hill and aging and in decline.

When we are young we are needing to change in order to become more mature, more experienced, more accomplished and then before we know it we are changing and struggling to

lose weight, we have aches and pains, not as much energy as we used to, we forget things and we are just not what we once were...

But God, God has always been fully God – He was never an immature God who needed to come into His full Godness, He has always been ALL knowing, ALL powerful and ALL present! Compared to how we start out as infants and need to change into adults and then we start to deteriorate... God's immutability is amazing!

And let's consider what it would take to change whatever beliefs and convictions you hold dear and base your identity upon – this is who I am. Would you still be the same person you are now if you became rich? If you became famous? If you became powerful and influential? Or would it change you... as much as we'd like to protest that it wouldn't – the truth is that it would.

Or what about life experience changing us? When I was in college, young and idealistic about how society portrayed

women I vowed that my kids would never play with Barbie dolls! And then I had my little girl... and everything was Barbie dolls... our ideals can change...

And remember meeting those people who were old and bitter and cynical when you were younger... and you said "*I'll never be like that!*" But now you've seen enough corruption, lies and broken promises that you are twice as bitter and cynical as those people were...

But God, God hasn't changed His identity or character or His convictions about anything over the years. When God let Moses see the backside of His glory in Exodus 34:6-7, God described Himself as "*the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation.*" He is this same God today; He was this same God in eternity past and He will be this same God in eternity to come – He doesn't change.

And consider how we can be persuaded, pressured or manipulated to change. If we couldn't brothers and sisters, then the whole marketing and advertising, media and public relations industries would not exist, but they do... because given the right sort of presentation and information we can be convinced to change our buying habits, our voting habits, or change our perspectives about certain issues.

And its not just simply marketing and media manipulating us – consider how our feelings change towards someone we love when we find out they have been unfaithful to us? We can change even when we might not want to...

But God, God can not be pressured, manipulated, or convinced to change in any way – not even from within Himself as He witnesses His creatures rebelling against Him, blaspheming Him, provoking Him... God is not like us – you can't push God's buttons to make Him react to you so that you're the one in charge – God is not affected, He is Immutable.

Now that's isn't to say God does not feel for us, that He does not have compassion, that He does not desire to show mercy, to have pity or so on – that would be as contradictory to scripture as saying that God has changed... What I'm saying is that God is not **compelled** to change by this, He is not manipulated by it to do something that He didn't want to do, that He hadn't planned on doing... you understand the difference?

This is because God already knew everything about His creation and what would happen in it before He created it, and He had already decided what He was going to do about it.

It's this foreknowledge of God that prevents any unexpected external circumstances or His own personal reactions to what occurs from compelling Him to act or manipulating Him into changing His purposes or His plans or His will. It is also what enables God to reveal Himself to us as a God who genuinely cares about our needs and can respond to them as we experience them. This is why Jesus says in Matthew 6:8 that

our Heavenly Father *“knows what you need before you ask him.”*

Brothers and sisters - God doesn't change, He is immutable. This is mind blowing, and it is amazing! Amen?!

And for so many Christians, for God's people across the ages, this has been a source of comfort and strength and assurance as we experience change and uncertainty in this world. When things are turned upside down and everything that we thought was solid and certain falls away beneath us... we can regain our footing upon God who never changes and find our foundation upon His purposes and plans for His creation and for our lives.

But God's immutability can also trigger our sinful nature and cause us to respond with fatalism. We might conclude that God's mind is made up about our lives and circumstances and since He doesn't change there is no use in trying to change anything in our lives or praying to God about it - since we can't change His mind anyways!

But that's our sinful nature misleading us brothers and sisters, and we need to rebuke it. How do we know that God does not have a change for us in the future?? How do you know that He will not bring about good from whatever bad circumstances you are currently experiencing?? How do you know He can't change your perspective to help you see things differently??

We don't know that God won't do this... with God all things are possible – so there's no reason to be fatalistic, in fact this kind of fatalism is contradictory to what the scriptures teach us about in regards to prayer – as James 5:16 it says *“the prayer of a righteous man is powerful – and effective”*

And Jesus himself – as God in the flesh – teaches us in John 14:13-14 *“I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it.”* Prayer works because God answers.

And Jesus teaches us that we ought to be persistent in praying as well... as he illustrates in the parable of the persistent

widow in Luke 18:7 *“will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off?”* The answer of course is no – God will not ignore persistent prayer. He will answer it, in His time.

So, brothers and sister – it’s simply not true that prayer is pointless because God’s mind is already made up and He doesn’t change, its actually quite the opposite - I’ll explain.

As I was studying and reflecting and praying in preparing this message – it came to me, that whenever we encounter a contradiction between God’s immutability and scriptural examples which show God having changed His mind or deciding to take a different course of action, there are two things we must do.

First we must not allow our sinful nature to twist what seems to be an apparent contradiction into something makes God anything less than Who He has revealed Himself to be. He is unchanging in His Being and His purposes and His plans and His Will and in His perfections.

Secondly – as we allow God to be God in this way, and reflect further upon these incidents described in scripture, I believe we will come to see that its because God doesn’t change that in some situations, He appears... to have changed.

For instance, when Jonah brought the message of God’s judgment to the city of Nineveh, it was fully in line with God’s description of Himself in Ex 34:17 as not leaving *“the guilty unpunished; [punishing] the children and their children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation.”*

But God’s message of judgement had the opposite of effect of what Jonah was hoping for, instead of hardening their hearts it caused the Ninevites to repent and seek forgiveness from God, because as they said *“Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish.”* (Jonah 3:9)

And of course, God did relent... He had compassion and did not destroy the city as He had said He would. Because God hadn’t changed... remember... in Ex 34:6-7 God also described

himself as *“slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin...”* God does not change – and this is why in some situations in the scripture it appears that He does.

The same is true if we might be wondering whether the incarnation - God becoming flesh, entering into His creation to become a man - is a change in God’s being?

Now I’ll be honest, before I studied up on this, I would have said – with no intention of making God any less than who He is, fully wanting to honor this amazing act of God – that maybe it could be some kind of change...

But apparently I’m still growing and learning – changing... because Louis Berkhof’s explanation of the incarnation in this regard blew me away, and it gives far more honor to God than my well intentioned but incorrect assumption.

Here’s how Berkhof explained it; *“the purpose to create was eternal in God, and there was no change in Him when this purpose was realized by a single eternal act of His will. The*

incarnation brought no changes in the being or perfections of God, nor in His purpose, for it was His eternal good pleasure to send the Son of His love into the world.”

This is why both 1 Peter 1:20 and Paul in Eph 1:4 speak of Christ being chosen, and our salvation in Christ being settled before the creation of this world.

Thank goodness that God does not change – His commitment to our salvation flows from His immutability.

So if you were tempted to think that this was just one of those things about God which is more academic than practical for us... well I hope you’ve changed... your mind.

Because brothers and sisters, God’s immutability does not mean that He is against change nor should we be against change simply because it is change.

We need to understand that God is simply beyond change, in the same way that He is beyond time. In fact, I think we can

say that change is a creation of God in the same way that time is creation of God.

And so, knowing and understanding God's Immutability is part of how we acknowledge that God is distinct and separate from His creation, and it helps us to avoid committing idolatry with change in projecting it on to God, accidentally with the best of intentions, or purposefully... and we understand why this is a serious offense against God now as well.

However, once we put change in its proper relation to God as part of His creation then we can celebrate it as having been created good – in fact without creating change it would have been very difficult for Adam and Eve to have been commissioned to multiply and fill the earth and to rule over it and to tend and keep the Garden of Eden – as all of this activity implies the development and change of God initial arrangement of the creation.

And change was also affected by the fall into sin, instead of being something that would bring about further harmony and

fulfilment of the creation, change was used bring about death, adversity and toil, and antagonism between people – things changed... and not for the better. God cursed change... which is why we often experience it as something negative...

And yet change was part of God's promise for redemption, right from the start. God changed the relationship between the woman and serpent, the promise of a change for the creation, change in our hearts, change in our behaviors, and change in our relationship with God and others and with the creation run all through the scripture.

And there is one promise that still remains to be kept – that day where everything will change... in completion of the fulfilment of Christ's work. He will return and ALL things will be made new, we will see Him face to face, God will dwell with His people in the new heavens and the new earth - that's a BIG change that will last for eternity.

So, brothers and sisters – if the church is to deal with change, let us deal with change in its proper place as one of God's

creatures, created good, cursed by the fall, included in Christ's redemption and part of what we look forward to in the coming Kingdom!

Keeping in mind that all this change is possible for change... because of the truth about God that He does not change.

But I think that the scripture has a better way to summarize all this for us as we wrap this up.

In 2 Tim 2:13 Paul puts it in language that resonates with us relationally as says *"if we are faithless, he remains faithful. For He can't disown himself"*

Brothers and sisters, believe this and trust this truth;
God. Does. Not. Change. And neither does His Word.
Amen