



EVEN YOU COULD
CHANGE

PRESENTED

by

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on

*The
Back to God
Hour*

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EVEN YOU COULD CHANGE

What do you think? A man had two sons; and he went to the first and said, Son, go and work in the vineyard today. And he answered, I will not; but afterward he repented and went.
Matthew 21 : 28, 29

The first time Yoshimasa Nakagawa and Roland Fisher met, the one was a warrant officer in the Japanese air force, the other a captain flying a B-24 Liberator bomber for the United States in the South Pacific. Pulling out of a bomb run over a Japanese held airport in the Philippines on September 5, 1944, Capt. Fisher spotted Nakagawa's twin engine Gekko fighter coming at him with machine guns blazing.

But before the B-24 could be shot down, the Gekko's guns jammed. The 20-year-old warrant officer, full of the brave spirit of Japan's warriors, barked to his navigator that he would ram his enemy instead. Swinging over Fisher's bomber, Nakagawa came in from its tail and deliberately flew his airplane into the slower moving Liberator. For a few moments the two aircraft flew on as one, caught in a grotesque embrace. Then they broke apart, and both went spinning to the sea 1000 feet below. Amazingly, both pilots were able to regain control of their airplanes and bring them back home again. Each thought he had destroyed the other.

Several years later Fisher read Nakagawa's report of their collision in a book about the brave exploits of kamikaze pilots. The two men began to correspond and finally became friends. After many years, they visited one another in Japan. As they were about to leave each other, they stood for a final picture, and both were

astonished that just a quarter century before they had tried to kill each other.

People can change, don't they? They really do. Even fierce enemies can become friends.

There are any number of war stories that illustrate just how true this is. For some who still remember how we talked about one another and how we acted toward one another during the second World War, it seems rather strange so often to see former enemies conducting business together, and exhibiting mutual respect and friendship. But human beings are capable of unexpected adjustments.

You know, even you could change, even you. Who knows what big changes could come into your life during the next years? Why you know, you might even become a Christian. Do I shock you? Does that sound like if it is the most ridiculous idea imaginable? Before you dismiss it, let me tell you another war story that shows at least one man who hated Christianity became a Christian. It's about another Japanese pilot, if you don't mind too much.

His name: Commander Mitsuo Fuchida. Commander Fuchida led 360 planes in the attack on Pearl Harbor, December 7, 1941. Though all the rest of the 70 officers who led that attack died during the war, Commander Fuchida survived. The day before the atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima where Fuchida was stationed he was called to Tokyo for a conference. The awful experiences of the war confirmed the commander in his hatred of Christianity. But he became a Christian soon after the war through a remarkable set of circumstances. Today he is active in the work of Jesus Christ.

Yes, even you could become a Christian. And

I say this no matter how much you despise Christianity now it may be that you have seen movies that have ridiculed the Christian faith. Or it may be that you have deliberately rejected the Christian faith. You know something about it. Maybe you studied it in college and you have dismissed it from your mind as something unworthy of your attention. You are enlightened by science to be impressed by some of the incredible things you have heard associated with the Christian faith. Or maybe you are just an agnostic. That is, you don't think people can know very much for sure. So long as a person is sincere, that's about all one can expect.

And then, too, you might believe in another religion. There are fads in religion, just as in everything else, and you might be following one of them . . . one that shocks your parents, to be truthful, but it's rather popular these days. And the fact that it shocks them is kind of a bonus that goes along with it.

So there are all kinds of reasons why you might be laughing right now when I talk with you about the fact that you just might change and become a real Christian one of these days. But it could happen. People do change. Warrant Officer Nakagawa and Captain Fisher never thought they would be friends the first time they met and tried to kill each other. But they are friends today. And Commander Fuchida never thought he would become a Christian. But that's what he is today. That's why I say there's at least an outside chance that even you could become a Christian.

But the real reason I say this is that there are things about the Christian faith itself that suggest that often people on the outside of it are a lot closer to it than they think. And I might add that there are things about the Chris-

tian faith that suggest that some of the people who are on the inside of it are not actually in it at all. Jesus gave this impression rather often during the course of His ministry. Here's a story He told near the end of it, just before He was to be crucified. It's found in Matthew 21: 28-32. This is what it says:

"Now, what do you think? There was a man who had two sons. He went to the older one and said, 'Son go work in the vineyard today.' 'I don't want to,' he answered, but later he changed his mind and went to the vineyard. Then the father went to the other son and said the same thing. 'Yes, sir,' he answered, but he did not go. Which one of the two did what his father wanted?" "The older one," they answered. "And I tell you this," Jesus said to them. "The tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the Kingdom of God ahead of you. For John the Baptist came to you showing you the right path to take, and you would not believe him; but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him. Even when you saw this you did not change your minds later on and believe him."

Now, that's really a simple story, isn't it? But it's enough to shake a person up. Maybe you have some very serious objections with respect to the religious establishment . . . the Christian establishment. When we speak of the Christian establishment, we mean ministers and evangelists and radio preachers and elders and deacons and Sunday school teachers and the people who go to church every Sunday and sit so piously within the congregation. Perhaps you have concluded, as most everybody has, that Christians in general are hypocrites.

Well, if that is your evaluation, this little story Jesus told is just one of the many old

and one of the many things He said that indicates that Jesus was entirely aware of this problem. Hypocrisy is the major problem of Christianity. If that is what you think, you are one hundred per cent right.

And so the story Jesus told about the two boys is a pretty scary story for anyone who is a member of the church or who perhaps has a special responsibility in it. Such people can never forget the boy who said to his father, "Yes, I will go," but he didn't go. And you know, that's the way it can easily become among Christians. They spend a good deal of time going to church, and they express their piety in many ways, but they say yeps, and they don't do. They talk a lot, but they don't do a lot. Their religion can easily become the kind of religion Jesus hated. He hated that kind of religion so much He never missed an opportunity to unmask it for what it is and declare that people who had that kind of religion were on their way to hell.

So if you know, any people who are Christians now and they are smug and self-confident, then you might as well know that they are not real Christians even if they carry the name. Real Christians who read the Bible are frightened by it. They are humbled by it. They are people who know they are sinners and only a great work of God will save them. They read the story Jesus told—the story we just read together—and they shudder. And they pray all the time, "O Lord, don't let me be like that second son. I am in such danger of becoming like him. I go to church so much and I am considered a religious man. But I don't always do the will of God. God, please don't let me be like the second son, who said, Yes, Lord, will do your work, but he never did it."

But if Jesus' words make people who are already in the Christian movement feel uneasy, they also should make those outside of it somewhat uneasy, too. For with this carefully signed story, Jesus indicates that even though a person may feel very secure in his rejection of Christianity, he might change. Jesus' words destroy the smugness of believers, but they destroy the smugness of unbelievers, too. To show how strangely the Christian movement advances, Jesus declared that tax collectors and prostitutes go into the kingdom of God before the dyed-in-the-wool, regular members of the religious establishment.

Now, we don't always like tax collectors nowadays either, but our feeling is nothing like was in Jesus' day. We don't like tax collectors, just as we don't like dentists. Isn't that we don't like tax collectors as persons, it's just that we don't like the disagreeable job they must perform. But in those days the tax collectors were a despised class who were hated not only for their work, but they were hated personally because in their work they supposedly betrayed their nation. And of course prostitutes, the members of the oldest profession, were despised then as they are now. These people were the lowest on the scale of society, so far as the smug members of the religious establishment were concerned. But Jesus said that they went into the kingdom of God first.

I don't want to imply that just because you are not a Christian now, I consider you like the tax collectors and prostitutes of Jesus' day, though you may well be part of a way of life that you are ashamed of yourself. I only bring this up to show Jesus' point of view. Jesus did not look at externals. When He looks at our world, at our country, at our community, He

does not just check off who is a church member and who is not. He is not interested in formal membership in His church. There is only one event that makes a man a Christian. And it could happen in your life just as well as in anyone's life. It might even happen to some who are already members of churches. Do you know what this essential event is? Let me tell you.

It is *repentance*. *Repentance* is the key word.

Jesus said, "A man had two sons; and he went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work in the vineyard today.' And he answered, 'I will not;' but afterward he repented and went." The important word in these sentences is *repented*. You've heard of repentance haven't you?

Now, this repentance, or change of mind, is not just the easy mind changing people do these days. We are easily influenced these days, and advertisers make the most of this. At one time fashion may dictate that skirts be one length, at another time, another length. At one time a man may be happy with his wife, but later he may change his mind and decide that he would be happier with somebody else.

So people keep changing their minds, for the most trivial of reasons and occasionally, as in the case of men and their wives, with great persiversity. When the Bible talks about mind changing, it isn't talking about the fact that people can easily swing from one extreme to the other.

What Jesus means by repentance is clear from His story, for in it He told of the preaching work of John the Baptist who came preaching the judgment of God and the coming of the kingdom. As soon as Jesus talked about the two

sons, and as soon as He made His startling statement about the way tax collectors and prostitutes go into the kingdom of God before the members of the religious establishment, He reminded His listeners how tax collectors and prostitutes had believed the preaching of John the Baptist and they had repented. Many of them had changed their lives remarkably. One of the tax collectors had become Jesus' disciple, the very Matthew who recorded Jesus' story about the two sons. And Mary Magdalene, also a follower of Jesus, was a repentant and reformed prostitute.

You see, repentance is the key to the Christian faith. People cannot become Christians without it. Throughout the Gospels this was the great cry raised over human life, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." When Jesus told this story He wasn't trying to be exceptionally dramatic and ruffle these people's feathers and hurt their feelings. He was just nailing down that central Biblical message that repentance is essential. It is necessary whether or not a person is inside or outside the Christian movement right now.

It is very well possible that a person just goes along year after year within a Christian church, and he has never felt the jolting, life-shattering power of the Word of God break him to pieces. This is what repentance is, you see. It happens when the full power of the Word of God penetrates people's lives and they suddenly see that they are dead men because of their sins which corrupt and mar their lives. And when they see this, they go to the cross where Jesus died and they plead that He will cover them with His blood and righteousness.

You know there is a widow's ~~opening~~ ^{opening} these days that things have gone terribly wrong. Then •

is a lot of breast beating and bemoaning the fear some quality of our times. But that isn't what God wants. He doesn't just want to have people feel that something is dreadfully amiss. He wants people to come and cry out, "O God, be merciful to me, a sinner." This has to happen to everybody. If you are in the church right now, but you've never said it, you've never felt, you've never confessed your sin and repented and turned to Jesus alone, then, I'm sorry, but you are still in very deep trouble.

And if you are outside the church and you have nothing to do with organized religion, the same is true for you. Jesus did not say that the tax collectors and prostitutes would go into the kingdom because they were tax collectors and prostitutes. But they would go in because they believed the message of the Bible and they repented. Don't think that Jesus likes the despised classes of people better than He likes respectable people. Not at all. He has a place for only one kind of people in His kingdom. Only one kind. That is repentant sinners. Repentance is the key.

Maybe you are not impressed with many things that are associated with the practice of Christianity. Well, I'll tell you ... God is not impressed with many of the things that are done in the name of Christianity, either. God is impressed with only one thing: repentance.

You must repent. Yes, even you. No matter who you are or who you think you are. You must repent of your sins and come to Jesus Christ. If you do that, you will be received into the kingdom of God.

PRAYER

O Lord, help those of us who are in the church and who hear the Bible preached to be truly repentant people. Help us to feel our selves to the full impact of the Scripture's message so that our smugness will be destroyed. Please don't let us be like that son who kept saying, "Yes," to God, but he never did what he said he would.

And help those of us who are not related to the Christian faith at all right now to see the basic issue. Use this message, God, to turn such people away from their smugness. Make them humble before the cross of Calvary.

We confess our sin. God, have mercy upon us. Receive us as repentant sinners into the eternal kingdom. For Jesus' sake, Amen.

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