

“A ‘DICKENS’ OF A CHRISTMAS (#4): THE PERSON THAT I WAS...”  
(Isaiah 6:1-7; Matthew 2:1-3, 11-12)

**[PROPS NEEDED: Two “A CHRISTMAS CAROL” Movie-Clips;  
Large Mirror at exit with basket of reflective pieces as souvenirs]**

[East Cobb U.M.C.; 12-23-07]

--I--

1. Read Texts: Isaiah 6:1-7; Matthew 2:1-3, 11-12 and Pray.
2. **[WATCH FIRST MOVIE-CLIP** (Ghost of Christmas Future Montage) – Time: 3:02]  
  
A–Today we’re concluding our series “A ‘Dickens’ of A Christmas” in which we’re relating Charles Dickens’ classic tale “*A Christmas Carol*” to the biblical Christmas story.  
  
B–To do that, we come face to face with the final of the three spirits sent to bring about the redemption of Ebenezer Scrooge: ...a voiceless, faceless shadow known only as the Ghost of Christmas Future.  
  
C–And through Scrooge’s encounter not only with this spirit but the other two, as well, by the end of Dickens’ tale, Scrooge is able to say, “*I’m not the man [the person] that I was...*” – he was *changed!*  
  
3. Well, if we think about it, CHANGE is precisely what Christmas is all about – the change that can take place in our own hearts and lives when we encounter the Christ-child Jesus.  
  
A–Someone once said, “*Change is God’s main business.*” <sup>1</sup>  
  
B–So if Christmas is all about the power to change, then what exactly is it that brings this about? And how can *we*, like Scrooge, experience the power of change in our *own* lives today?  
  
C–Well, both in Dickens’ story & today’s scriptures, I believe we find a basic outline for “**Three Steps To Change**” that I want us to briefly explore. <sup>2</sup> (See bulletin “Sermon Notes”)

-II-

4. First of all, if we want to experience the power of change in our own lives this Christmas, we’ve first got to **ACCEPT THE TRUTH ABOUT OURSELVES.**  
  
A–In today’s scripture from Isaiah 6, we find the author’s *sinful* self being confronted with the holiness and *sinlessness* of God, leading them to call out in Verse 5 “*Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips.*”  
  
B–And although they’re different words, Isaiah’s reaction here is essentially the same desperate reaction of Ebenezer Scrooge when confronted by the Ghost of Christmas Future with the harsh truth about his own self – “*No, don’t let it be so, spirit!*” Scrooge says.

C–In John 8:32, Jesus says “*the truth shall set you free*”–and this is so true of ourselves.

1–But as one person has observed, “*the truth will make you free, but first it will probably make you miserable.*”<sup>3</sup>

2–...Because you see, its difficult to face truth about ourselves – as Scrooge learned from the Ghost of Christmas Future and those who rejoiced in his death, truth can often be uncomfortable, awkward, and even painful.

3–But remember, too, that it wasn’t until he faced this harsh reality of who he *really was* that change in Scrooge became even possible.

D–By the same token, in our own lives those of us who never admit that we need help to change an attitude or behavior can never grow or mature in life.

E– And so part of what it means to be a mature Christian is to look in a mirror (so to speak) and see ourselves as we truly are – to be honest with God, with ourselves, and even with each other about the truth of who we *really* are, warts and all.<sup>4</sup>

5. A 2<sup>nd</sup> step, however, must always follow the 1<sup>st</sup> – and that is that if we’re to experience the power of change in our own lives, we must also **ACCEPT THE REALITY OF GOD’S GRACE.**

A–Recall that in the scene where this Ghost invites Scrooge to uncover the shroud, after trying Scrooge says, “*I’d like to spirit, but I haven’t the power– I haven’t the power.*”

1–Well, friends the power to change *does NOT* come from ourselves (or even from *us* accepting the hard truths *about* ourselves, as important as that is).<sup>5</sup>

2–Instead, change comes **ONLY** from God Himself through his offer of grace, mercy and forgiveness.

B–In today’s first scripture, we find Isaiah confronted not only with the harsh reality of his own sinfulness, but in Verses 6-8 he’s also confronted with the grace and forgiveness of God – a forgiveness that makes his “*guilt*” disappear and his sin be “*blotted out.*”

C–And in the Matthew 2 passage, we hear the story of a man who (*unlike* Ebenezer Scrooge) *refused* to accept God’s grace offered that first Christmas: ...King Herod.

1–Later in the chapter (Vss. 16-18) it tells how he was so jealous of the baby Jesus and so infuriated about being tricked by the Magi that he ordered all children in Bethlehem under the age of 2 to be killed.

2–Herod, you see, represents those of us who, when confronted with the hard truth about ourselves, choose to be bound up by arrogance, pride and self-righteousness, rather than allow God’s grace to forgive and transform us.

D–You see, unlike Herod, both Isaiah and Scrooge discovered that by the power of Christmas, we don't *have* to be the same selfish people that we've been in our past.

1--In the words of 2 Corinthians 5:17, "*If anyone is in Christ, they are a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!*"

2--Through our acceptance of God's grace and forgiveness, we *can* change– in Scrooge's words (and the words of today's title), we *don't* have to be "*The [Person] That We Were.*" <sup>6</sup>

6. Finally, though, for our transformation to actually work, there's a third step we have to take: we have to **COMMIT TO CHANGE & TO A PROCESS TO SEE IT HAPPEN.**

A–Scrooge himself illustrates this in today's clip when he tells the Ghost of Christmas Future, "*I WILL keep Christmas in my heart and all the year long. The Spirits of all three Christmases shall thrive in me. I will not shut out the lessons they teach.*"

1–You see, Scrooge here is acknowledging that true change can only occur when we both commit ourselves to it and to a process to ensure that it lasts "all the year long."

B–In the same way, today's Matthew scripture speaks of some foreign astrologers ("Magi" or "Wise Men" as we sometimes call them) who follow a star to find and pay homage to the baby Jesus, but who (Verse 12 says), "*went home another way.*"

1–Now I know that *literally* this means they traveled a different road back to their own country, but I think it could also represent the way that they *figuratively* left the manger as changed/different people.

2–You see, I think that upon seeing Jesus, they were not only changed by the experience, but in "*going home another way,*" they were committing themselves to a process that would ensure that change.

C–You know at this time of year a lot of us begin making promises about things we're going to differently in the future.

1–And yet, so often it's the case that by February or March, these "New Year's Resolutions" have fallen by the wayside, and we're right back where we started. Why?

2–It's because when we promised to change, we *forgot* to commit to a *process* to ensure that it happens.

D–Friends, like the Magi, you and I can experience a joy this Christmas as we come face to face with the living Christ-child Jesus.

1–But I want us to remember that for it for us to be able to “*keep Christmas [today] and all the year long*” (as Scrooge says) – we’ll need a *process* to ensure that it happens.

2–The good news of Christmas is that we *can* be different people if we’ll *commit* to “*go home another way*” and like the Magi, *engage* in a process (a journey) to actually *do* it.

–III–

7. The bottom line that both the Ghost of Christmas Future and today’s scriptures teach us is that **Christmas is about the power to change.**

A–...And that as we learn to accept (1) the truth about ourselves, (2) the grace of God, and as we (3) commit ourselves both to change and to a process to see it happen...

B–...we’ll find our hearts and lives transformed by the power and joy of the Christ-child.

8. So, as the result of all this, what ever became of our friend Ebenezer Scrooge? Let’s watch and listen once more as Dickens’ words leave us with what I believe to be *God’s* challenge for *us* this Christmas...

[WATCH 2<sup>nd</sup> CLIP (Fred’s summary of Changed Scrooge) – Time: 1:11]

9. [PRAYER: *Almighty and Ever-gracious God, we confess that we have often been caught up in selfish pursuits, ignoring your power to change us in our hearts and our behaviors. Too often we’ve been like Herod, missing our opportunity to let your love break through our cold, callous hearts to truly CHANGE and TRANSFORM us through the power of Christmas.*

*So this season, Lord, grant us the power of your Holy Spirit so that we can look in the mirror of our lives to face the uncomfortable truth about ourselves, and also to receive the freeing reality of your grace and forgiveness. Take our old selves and make us NEW this Christmas, that we may follow you all of our days and walk unafraid into all of our tomorrows. We ask this in the name of the one who is the master of all change, your son Jesus Christ. Amen.]*

10. [HYMN:#230 “OLittle Town of Bethlehem”; Before Benediction, invite congregants as they walk out to stop in front of mirror and pick up reflective piece from basket to take home as reminder of the power of Christmas to CHANGE us]

### **ENDNOTES:**

1. Cited in From Humbug to Hallelujah: An Advent Celebration, p. B34.
2. These steps are based loosely on the processes described in two resources: (#1) *Event; Awareness; Decision* (“decide to do something about it”); *Commitment; Process* (“behavioral change over a period of

time” = this is the area most people fall short in); and *Change* (“the desired result = an alteration in our behavior and/or a new and higher level of maturity”), cited in Vince D’Acchioli, “Beyond the Quick Fix,” *New Man* magazine (July/August 2002), pp. 54-55; and (#2) From Humbug to Hallelujah: An Advent Celebration, pp. B90-B92.

3. Douglas Rumford, From Humbug to Hallelujah: An Advent Celebration, p. B90.

4. Even though NONE of us is sinlessly perfect, part of being in a community of faith (a church) means occasionally holding each other accountable for unChrist-like actions and behaviors, and like the Ghost of Christmas Future, reminding each other of the consequences of NOT changing. Remember that Jesus didn’t just come to “comfort the afflicted.” He also came to “afflict the comfortable.” Sometimes that means reminding each other that, uncomfortable as it may be, we will ALL face a day of reckoning – a day when the truth about our lives (warts and all) will be fully revealed to all. The Bible doesn’t give us this as threat, but merely as a fact (As one example, re-read Jesus’ story of the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16:19-31).

5. The good news of God is that the message of the gospel doesn’t stop with the truth about ourselves. God’s purpose in calling us to face the uncomfortable truth about ourselves is not to discourage us – any more than a doctor intends to upset us by telling us the hard truth about our disease. No, he has us face truth about ourselves so that we can not only *understand* the possibilities of healing for ourselves, but can also *appropriate* those possibilities in and through Jesus.

6. Remember at the end of the Dickens story how giddy and excited Scrooge was when he awoke from his experience and realized the change in his own soul? Well, when *we* embrace the Christ of Christmas and allow his grace and forgiveness to enter our hearts and lives, a new excitement and joy transforms the very way that we approach life itself. You see, in all of this we are reminded that at Christmas we *can* become new people, transformed by the grace and forgiveness of God.