

## Changing

Hello reader, whose name we don't yet know! Nice to meet you.

First read **Matthew 12:9-14**

What is needed in order to change?

If we were to say to you: "A masked man sticks a knife into the belly of a woman", what would you think? No - don't read straight on, think of your answer first...

We don't know how vivid your imagination is - and no, we don't need you to send us your answer :) Most people to whom we ask this question 'live' say that what comes to mind is the sinister image of an attacker, taking the life of innocent women in a dark alley. That was the first image that we got, too, when this question was first put to us.

It's interesting- apparently this sentence carries the same association for many people. At the same time, most of them will have never witnessed a scene like this with their own eyes, except perhaps the few that have been raised in a criminal neighbourhood. Most of us have only seen this in movies, or comics, or books.... yet still the image somehow stays with us.

There are always more interpretations

But this isn't necessarily the only possible interpretation. What if we tell you that the mask is green? Usually the 'live' faces start to look a bit confused - what has that got to do with it? (And what effect does this new information have on your own association?). And then it starts to dawn on some, but others only see the light when we tell them that the scene takes place in a hospital. Ah, so it could be a surgeon, starting to operate! Suddenly the image changes from something negative to something positive - and all because we've added just one or two new pieces of information.

This is how our (and your) mind works. When information comes in (in this case one sentence), your mind tries to connect meaning to it. It uses the 'old' images already present in your memory as a frame of reference. The more familiar these 'old images' are, the easier it is to connect new information with them.

Your thinking is determined by what you feed it

This is not a new insight. Psychologists use these kinds of exercises to discover what you feed your mind (and, in a certain sense, yourself) with. That is important, because how you act is largely determined by how you think. If, for example, your mind is fed with anger, you will probably act angrily. When you're serious about your Christian lifestyle, you don't want that. And so the answer seems to be: *think differently*, because then you will *act differently*. It is not for nothing that Paul calls upon his readers (Christians!) to *renew their thinking*.

Unfortunately that is easier said than done. Renewing your thinking is about more than just adding some new data to your mindset. In our example above, adding 'green' and 'hospital' seemed to be enough for a new insight into that one sentence. But what about the effect on your *thinking*?

How about a second test? What do you first think of when reading this sentence: "He took aim and shot, and hit him right in the face"? If you had that sinister image with the first sentence, just like we did, there is good chance that this second statement makes you think of a gunshot. Or have our preceding paragraphs warned you to such a degree that you're now trying to think of alternatives? Maybe you're thinking: "No, it must be something else!" Hmm...something *else*? Instead of *what*? If you are thinking about alternatives, you are looking for *another* frame of reference, rather than the one you're familiar with....

Jesus knows God's intentions

For statements like the one in the paragraph above, all of this doesn't seem too important. But how about statements about God? We see this in today's text. Jesus asks a question on the Sabbath. This is not to start a theological or legalistic debate - because of His unique Divine origin He knows more than anyone what God's original intention is for the Sabbath, and He doesn't want to question this in any way whatsoever. But Jesus also observes how the Pharisees treat the Sabbath (how they *act*), and that this way of acting doesn't fit with God's intentions. For that reason Jesus addresses the Pharisees' *thinking*.

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Rom 12:2  
Eph 4:23

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Mt 5:17  
Lc 11:39-44  
Ex 20:8-10

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In fact He does the same as what we did at the beginning of our letter, asking them: “If God says to you ‘Keep the Sabbath’, what does this make you think?” Well, reader, this is also a nice question for you. What does it make *you* think about God? And about yourself? Take the time to really think about this; the rest of our letter will wait....

What is your image of God?

You too have an image of God - but how do you know if it is ‘right’? You might *think* that you have a complete image of God (“I’ve been going to church for such-and-such length of time, and I have read the bible this or that many times!”) - but how can our limited thinking contain a complete image of the Eternal God? Already many centuries ago Job was honest enough to admit that his couldn’t.

Unfortunately, the Pharisees in today’s text are not that honest. Even more: despite the rational arguments Jesus gives, they are not prepared to change their thinking about God. Evidently adding new information is not enough - at least, not always.

Everyone can change

Still, we read in the Bible about a fierce Pharisee who *does* change his thinking: Paul. He describes himself as what you might call a ‘hardcore Pharisee’ who was even educated by one of the most prominent scribes of those times. Paul didn’t hesitate to have those with different ideas to his own imprisoned, or even killed. When it comes to it, he could easily have been one of the scribes in today’s text, who were also ready to kill Jesus. As we saw, they were not prepared to change their thinking, whereas Paul did. How did that happen?

The answer is: an *experience*. On the way to Damascus Paul receives a very intense revelation from Jesus Himself, which touches him personally. Of course he had heard about Him, but there was so much being said about Him... And, just like in our example of the masked man, you can make what you want of something that you are told. But an experience turns “mere information” into something *personal* - after all, it is now *your* experience.

Experience makes you a participant

An *experience* is the difference between what information means, and what information means *to you*. An experience invites you to become a participant. To say the same in biblical terms: mere information is about your head, but experience is about your heart. And your heart is something very personal. Your heart is where you live.

Even if you tend to approach the world and your life predominantly with your head, in the end it is your heart that tips the scales. Your head enables you to define the value of something new, but it is your heart that tells you how much it is worth *to you*. Almost everybody who smokes knows that it is bad for their health - and still they light another cigarette. Why? Because in their heart they carry the conviction that the result of smoking is better for their well-being than the result of not smoking.

Your heart is where you live

This shows that your heart can also miss the point. But because your heart is - literally - deeper than your head, it is often unimpressed by logical arguments. Your heart is strong, and it determines your life more than your thinking. Jesus knows, better than anyone else, what the human heart can contain, and so He also knows where that might lead. He doesn’t want you to have such a life. His intention is to clear your heart of debris, and fill it with peace. *His* peace. For *you*.

That sounds good. But as long as your heart is convinced that what it is carrying now is better than Jesus’ peace, it wants to keep the ‘current contents’. Result: you reject something that you *believe* to be less, but in reality is much *more*. And your heart will not change at this point - unless it *experiences* that Jesus’ peace is indeed much better.

For exactly this reason Jesus became man. After all the words and statements of the Old Testament, it is now time to *experience* God personally. That is the meaning of Jesus’ healings and miracles: they are experiences that follow His teaching.

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Phil 3:5  
Act 22:3  
Act 5:34  
Act 7:58, 8,1  
Act 22:4

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Act 9:3-5  
Mc 8:27-28

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Mt 15:18-19  
Lc 16:15  
Jn 2:25  
Jn 14:27

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Mt 16:25

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Jn 6:2

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Lc 17:14-15  
Jn 9:25

Does this always lead to the intended results? What we see happening is that those who really *experience* something, change their behaviour. The *experience* of Jesus speaking to them makes them go to the temple, even if it does not bring all of them to fully trusting Him. The *experience* of sight leads the blind man to believe in Jesus. What we also see is that those people who do *not* let the experience into their hearts - the ones who want to remain as spectators - do not change their behaviour either. Unfortunately these are the ones who deliver incomplete statements about God, statements based on “information *about* God” and not on “experience *of* God”.

God invites you just as you are

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Rev 3:20

God wants you to know Him as He truly is. Even more: He wants to share your life with you, and He wants you to want that also. But without a personal experience this won't do; you cannot truly live with someone who you only know based on hearsay. For that reason He encourages you to open your heart to Him. He will not force His way in. After all: He has all the time in the world. Your time, though, is limited...

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Rom 12:2  
Eph 4:23  
Rev 21:5

Well, let's say that you answer to His invitation and open your heart for Him. Does that mean you're done? No, opening your heart is only the first step. The second step we have already seen: Paul's call to renew your thinking. When does Paul make this call? Indeed, *after* His experience with Jesus. To whom? To Christians - to those who (probably) have had a personal experience with Jesus, or have at least made a choice for Jesus. Paul knows that you can only become a true participant if your thinking also adjusts to the new life that began in your heart. God wants to make *everything* new - your heart and your thinking included.

There will always be questions

We don't know what image you (now) have about God. We *do* know what image He has about you. You matter to Him, and He cares about you. Of course, we don't know what this statement means to you. Maybe you are hearing all of this for the first time, and are now trying to imagine what it's all really like. Maybe you have heard this many times before, and are now thinking.... well, *what* are you thinking?!

In fact the choice is yours now. What has reading our letter evoked in you? We assume there will be a lot of questions. For instance:

- What kind of things shape my frame of reference?
- How can I know what God's frame of reference is?
- In what way does Paul actually meet Jesus?
- How can I really know that what Jesus wants for me is truly better?
- If even experiences can be misleading, then how can I be certain that I experience *God*?
- If I'm not sure if *my* image of God is correct, than how do I know that *your* image of God is correct?
- You're talking about God and Jesus, but Who is the Holy Spirit, then?

All good and proper questions. Questions that we have had ourselves, and to which - eventually- we have found answers. We want to share these with you, but as you probably understand, we cannot put them all in one letter. For that reason we have written a whole series of letters, in which we journey with you step by step, to get you acquainted with God's purpose for your life - and with Him of course!

Okay, we'll conclude by answering one question. Yes indeed, the second statement could also be about a football shot....

Warm greetings, and God's rich blessings!

FATHER GERT  
Father Johan

### .... and now you.... your experience of God

After reading this letter, the most important question is probably this: "How can I have such an experience of God? Good question, about which we want to say two things.

First: *we* cannot organise such an experience for you, and neither can we tell you how you might organise such an experience yourself. An experience of God is being *given* to you by - indeed - God Himself. This means that you and we are in the same situation: we long for more of God, but we depend on what He is going to do.

Second: even if *God* is the One *giving* the experience, still *you* are the one to *receive* the experience. You are personally involved, and that means that your circumstances and lifestyle also play their part. We don't know you (yet), and we don't know the extent to which God already has a place in your life. We assume that you're reading our letter because you are *longing* for an(other) experience of God. If that is the case, then dare to ask yourself to what extent your circumstances make it more difficult to have such an experience. Because - and this is our point for now - *if* your lifestyle is indeed a hindrance for a personal experience of God, then that will not change as long as you don't change your lifestyle.

Again: we cannot impose an experience of God in your life, and so we are not going to promise you one. That would not be fair. What we *can* do is help you to scrutinize your (faith) life. It could very well be that, by changing some things, you considerably increase the possibility of an experience of God.

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#### Act 9:3-5

How does that work? The first step is: make clear to yourself what it is we're talking about. How do you imagine 'an experience of God'? What do you take as your 'model', your example? This might be an experience that is written in God's Word (like Paul's experience), but it could also be an experience that one of your friends has told you about.

The next step is: we use God's Word to discover how *He* intends you to experience (or rather, to encounter) Him. There is always a chance that your perspective is different from His. This way you learn a lot more about God and about how He lives, and that increases the possibility for a personal encounter.

This is how *Amen* works. In every letter we give you a specific exercise or practice, which is one form of experience, at least. Sometimes it helps to discover which experiences are *not* from God, because that helps you to recognise the experiences that *do* come from Him.

Every participant is unique, just like you, and so everyone has their own personal motivation for participating in *Amen*. To ensure that all themes that are important for you are actually addressed, we take a systematic approach. For example, take your question concerning an experience of God. There are all kinds of other issues behind this question. For instance: how can you be sure that God *wants* an encounter with you? For what reason would *He* want that? These kinds of questions are about the reason for and importance of your existence. But there are also questions like: an encounter implies some kind of contact, some kind of *relationship*. How does that actually work? How does that work *for me*? How is it *supposed* to work? These kinds of questions are about your design, and how you function.

The more you learn about God's purposes, the sharper you become at recognising when things are *not* done - by you, or by others - in accordance with God's intentions. We mentioned the example of the Pharisees, but of course there are many more. How come people make *different* choices than God, than you? What determines people's choices? What determines *your* choices? These kinds of questions are about (your) brokenness and becoming whole. This in turn shows you how God deals with you. What does He expect from you? How does He want you to respond to all that you endure in this life, to all that others do to you? How does He want you to deal with those *others*? These kinds of questions are about your identity. We could go on like this. But this would just be words and statements.... instead of that, what we want you to have is an experience. Our introductory series takes you on a spiritual journey which lasts for about half a year. In this way you will be able to discover for yourself the extent to which God's relationship with you enriches your life, and the kind of contribution *Amen* can make to that.

Thanks for reading our letter till the end, and who knows - till next time...?