

**Menlo Park Presbyterian Church**  
**950 Santa Cruz Avenue, Menlo Park, CA 94025 650-323-8600**

Series: The Ripple Effect  
James 1:17

September 20, 2009

**“The Rock”**  
**John Ortberg**

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You will have noticed we live in a world where the rate of change just keeps increasing exponentially. When you look at a map, you see geographical change. When I was growing up, there was this place called the *Soviet Union* that use to get talked about a lot...doesn't exist anymore. New countries come and go. Technology changes. This year's freshmen in college will have never used a card catalog. Don't even know what one is. Seventy percent of four-year-olds have already used a computer...by the time they're four years old.

Turn to the person next to you, if you don't mind, and guess what country...out of all the countries in the world...do you think is ranked number one in broadband Internet penetration. Just turn to the person next to you. Which country...number one in the world in broadband Internet penetration? The correct answer...the correct country...Bermuda. Did you all get that one right? You knew they had those great shorts, but who knew? USA...#19. Japan...#22.

Everything keeps changing. In the time it took infants to become adolescents we all got cell phones and iPods and GPS's and TiVo's. The economy keeps changing. This is in a viral video called *Did You Know?* The top 10 in-demand jobs that will be around in 2010 did not exist in 2004, which means we're preparing kids for jobs that do not yet exist, using technologies we have not yet invented. There was a day when people looked for steady jobs...50 years...retirement...gold watch...pension. No more. The U.S. Department of Labor estimates the average student will have 10 to 14 jobs...by the age of 38, by the time they're 38 years old.

Culture keeps changing. In 1969, a politician in Great Britain predicted, "It will be years...not in my time...before a woman will become Prime Minister." The politician who said that was named Margaret Thatcher, who of course became the first woman Prime Minister. The universe keeps changing. When I grew up, the solar system had nine planets. Do you all know what happened to Pluto? I always loved Pluto. Doesn't even get to be a planet anymore. The music people listen to... The clothes people wear... People used to wear jackets and ties to go to baseball games. No more! These are all changes going on in the world around us, and we don't get to vote on them.

Then it gets more personal. Your body is changing. Have you noticed that? The number of hairs on your head...the number of wrinkles in your face...the number of neurons in your brain. People make billions of dollars telling you that you can control and reverse the change. You can Botox it, Rogaine it, liposuct it, aerobicize it, moisturize it, pasteurize it, cryogenically freeze it, but it's still a one-way street. It's not just change. It's change and decay. How do you cope with a changing world?

Well, you know, you can kick and scream. Friends of ours have a seven-year-old son who I will call Petey. He hates change, just *hates* change. He'll latch on to something, doesn't want to let it go. He got a vest he loves to wear. I'm not making this up. He wore that vest literally every day for two years. He slept

in that vest. Periodically his mother would have to rip it off his body to wash it, and he would stand by the washer and the dryer until it came out so he could put it back on.

They had an old, beat-up family van. Somebody gave them a brand new van as a gift. The old van rusted out, fabric torn, uncomfortable, shocks didn't work...it was a mess. The new van was a dream. Individual seats...they swiveled...cup holders, DVD player, computer games, Jacuzzi, and they thought, *Little Petey is going to love this van. At least it's going to be one new thing where he is going to like that.*

They covered his eyes up, took him out in the driveway, and said, "Tada! Our new van!" His immediate response was, "Where's our *old* van?" They said, "It's gone! It wasn't any good. We have this wonderful new van." They put him inside, and he burst into tears. He is sobbing out of grief for his old van. They couldn't believe this. "Petey, why are you sad? The old van was a mess. What's one thing the old van had that the new one doesn't have?" He is sobbing...seven years old... His immediate response, "Memories!"

What do you do in a changing world? You don't get to vote on it. Sometimes you like the change. Sometimes you don't. Sometimes there is loss involved. Sometimes changes are brutal. As we start this series, what I want to say for this message is the only way to navigate a changing world is to hold on to an unchanging God. The only way to deal with radically changing times and not get crushed by them is to get very clear on what is timeless.

We're starting this series called *The Ripple Effect*. We're going to go through it together as small groups and individuals. Ripples are a picture of impact. You throw a rock in a pond, and the ripples spread out. But here is the main deal we look at today. The impact does not begin with us. It begins with God. The rock isn't you and me; it's God. It begins with how does God impact...how do His ripples spread in me and in you?

So, here is what we're looking at today. It's important for you as an individual...for me as an individual...it's real important for us as a church...to get real clear about in a rapidly changing world where a lot of things will change...where a lot of things must change...what doesn't change? Because if a church gets muddy and confused about what's the anchor...what has to remain changeless and what's the stuff that will change, can change, sometimes must change...if there is confusion there, then it's a mess. So we're going to, if nothing else, just get real clear today on what's the stuff that does not, must not, will not change.

1. *The character of our God does not change.* That's really good news. Ever been around a moody person? One minute they're way up; the next minute they're way down. Trying to figure out how to relate to them is really, really hard. I read this this last week on the Internet. A woman wrote her husband accused her of being moody. He actually bought her a mood ring. Do you all remember mood rings? You put them on and the color would change based on what mood you're in. He bought her a mood ring and pressured her to wear it so he could tell what mood she was in. This is what she wrote, "We've discovered that when I'm in a good mood, it turns green. When I'm in a bad mood, it leaves a big red mark on his forehead. Maybe next time he'll buy me a diamond," she writes.

I was reading a book about leadership in corporate culture. Do you know what the number one question is that employees in an organization ask of the administrative assistant to the CEO? The number one question...what kind of mood is the boss in today? Because if the boss had a bad mood, man, I don't want to go into that office. If you have a moody friend...if when you were a child you had a parent who struggled with mood swings, maybe violent mood swings (some of you know that pain)...it can be brutal.

Every human being on earth goes up and down. Not God.

Friends will let you down. Neighbors will move away. Even a boss who you might love will retire one day. Our God does not change. In a changing world, our God does not change. This is from the book of James. Let's read these words together out loud, "*Every good and perfect gift comes from God with whom there is no variation or shadow of turning.*" It's not just that He doesn't vary. There is not even a *shadow* of it. Not a hint. It never happens. God never has a bad day. God never wakes up on the wrong side of the bed.

When you pray, you never need to worry about catching God in a bad mood. Our God never changes. That doesn't mean He is distant or frozen or impenetrable or unmovable. It means His character is absolutely rock-solid consistent, and you can take it to the bank. His faithfulness never changes. He was faithful to Abraham, faithful to Moses, faithful to David, faithful to Esther, faithful to Ruth. God has never failed a single human being, and guess what? You're not going to be the first. He is not going to fail you.

Our God's holiness never changes...whether we like it or not. God hates sin as much today as He hated it 3,000 years ago. Human standards fluctuate...what people think is right or wrong, or if they even think there is a right or wrong. That goes up and down. Not with God. God never says, "Well, go ahead and yell at your kids today. Go ahead and hoard your possessions and forget the poor. I guess it's not such a big deal." God never does that. The prophet Malachi said a long time ago through him God says, "I, the Lord, do not change. My holiness never changes. My faithfulness never changes." God's wisdom never changes. God's omniscience never changes.

We live in the Information Age, and it changes all the time. In 2006, there were 2.7 billion Google searches. In 2008, there were 31 billion Google searches *every month*. Now, you know, who did people use to ask before there was such a thing as Google? Internet has changed everything. Got basically cranked up in 1995 commercially. Last year, one out of every eight couples who got married met online. The Internet just amazes us.

You want to blow your mind, you think about the richness and the vastness of the mind of God. You think about that. Every new discovery, every fact from every realm, every aspect of existence from one discipline to another, from one world to another in this world and every other one, in this universe and any other one that exists, from eternity to eternity, is all held in God's mind in each moment with effortless ease. He sees it all. His wisdom never changes. So if you need wisdom, He is a good one to ask.

His love for you never changes. Man, do we need a solid place of love. We moved here years ago the same week our oldest daughter started college. So it was change for all of us, but for her, it was just kind of...she was swamped by change because she was going off to school. A wise friend gave her a little image for why that move was so hard, for why the change was so traumatic. She said, "It's kind of like you're in a little boat. When you go off to college, you're setting off in your little boat. You're going off to sea, and you have this dock. Then you find out your dock is moving as well."

She told us about that little picture, and it just kind of turned lights on for everybody in our family. Nancy's immediate response was... Nancy was an only child in a family where there was a lot of independence. Nancy said, "I feel like I was always in my boat, but I never really had a dock." My family was kind of the other way around. We had a lot of closeness, but independence was more of a struggle. I said, "I had a great dock; I never had a boat!"

Everybody is like...you have a little boat, and it's going to sea. You're going to hit storms, and you need a dock you can count on. No human being can give you that dock. If you think they can, you're set up for heartbreak. People can love you; you love them. They're not your dock. Only God. He always loves you, always prizes you, always cherishes you, always holds you in His heart.

He is always holy; He is infinitely wise; His character never changes. He is the foundation on which people who follow Him, who love Him, have been able to handle change now for thousands of years...all kinds...persecution, danger, governments toppling, different financial situations, physical illness. We can embrace a changing world. We can love it...IF we hold to an unchanging God. Otherwise, you know, we're in deep weeds. The character of our God never changes.

2. *Jesus is the hope of the world, and that never changes.* Hebrews 13:8, ***"Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow."*** Those would be great words for us all to carry out, so let's read those together out loud. ***"Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow."*** Politicians come, and politicians go. Leaders rise, and leaders fall. Administrations arrive, and administrations depart. Sometimes they do better; sometimes they do worse. But no politician is the hope of the world. Jesus is the hope of the world.

Therefore, this will never be a politics church. You know, periodically it will, as all churches do, get pressured to be involved in one political issue or another. It has a long legacy here for many, many decades of saying, "You know, politics are really important to read, to study, to be informed, to vote, for Christians to be involved...that's a good thing...but as a church, we're not in the politics business. We're in the Jesus business. This will always be a Jesus church." That must never change.

Jesus is Lord, and His lordship is the hope of the world; therefore, we don't put our confidence in any particular set of circumstances...political or economic or physical or health or anything. Because human circumstances are always going to change. I get the girl I want, and then she dumps me. I get the job I want, then the company folds. I get the money I want, but then my health starts to go. Circumstances will, you know, ebb and flow all the time. If I wait for them to get right before I live with joy and confidence, I will never live with joy and confidence.

But the writers of Scripture proclaim this truth, "Jesus is Lord." Therefore, a Jesus church. Therefore your invitation is to be a Jesus person. He, as we start this whole ripple deal, is our Hope. He is our Leader. He is our Savior. He is our Teacher. He is our Guide. He is our Forgiver. He is our Friend. We have nothing else to offer. We have Him. He is the hope of the world, and that will never change.

3. *The authority of the Bible will never change.* This is important for us to understand...the authority of the Bible. The prophet Isaiah said, ***"The grass withers, the flowers fall*** (these are images of change), ***but the Word of our Lord stands forever."*** There is something about the thoughts of God...the truth God proclaims...that is eternal. Information is not.

Technical information...people who are able to estimate this as well as anybody can tell us...is current doubling every two years. Technical information is doubling every two years. You think about that. This means a student getting a four-year technical degree, for that student, half of what they learn their first year is going to be outdated by their third year in college. Our son is a Physics major. I'm asking for half of his tuition back.

We are bombarded with information and starving for wisdom. We have more facts than we know what to

do with, but we don't know what they mean. How do you put them together? Three thousand books get published every day. You think you can't keep up? But then there is this one Book written by dozens of authors over hundreds of years that is sold more broadly, read more widely, has stimulated more scholarship and study, has influenced more people, has changed more lives than anything ever written, and it is the Bible.

It speaks to our existence, to the great questions of life, to why we are here, to who God is, to what God has done in history and in Jesus, to what makes a human being good, to where our earth is headed. It speaks with a power and a clarity and an influence that simply has no rival, simply does not. Now of course, we have to read it thoughtfully. Of course sometimes people misuse it terribly to make all kinds of goofy claims. But the fact remains...God has spoken through the Bible in a way that cuts through human darkness that is utterly unique and endlessly powerful.

The Scriptures have a way of opening eyes and convicting of sins and producing repentance and promising comfort and offering guidance and changing lives like nothing else that has ever arrived in this world. It is our authority; it's what we turn to. You know, in human relationships, a lot of times arguments get resolved just by like who was the better person at words. Who is the better arguer? Not for us. For us, the Bible is our final authority. Therefore, in a changing world, what will not, what must not change is our commitment to read the unchanging Word of God...to study it, to delight in it, to think about it, to wrestle with the hard questions in it. Most of all, to do what it says. The Bible is our authority. That will not change.

4. *The power of prayer does not change.* Human communication has changed a lot. The first commercial text message got sent in December of 1992 (the first *commercial* one). A couple of phone companies got together to do research around this one last year. Just looking at teenage texting behavior, the average teenager last year sent 25,000 text messages. That's double from the previous year, so they're still going up like crazy. Big debates about is it good, is it bad? It goes on in classrooms all the time. Is that good or bad? One of the bad aspects being written about more recently is people are hurting their thumbs. No kidding. You know, like tennis elbow, they're talking about texters' thumbs.

A reporter named Greg Hardesty found that his 13-year-old daughter sent 14,000 text messages in one month. He wrote a column about it, and so many people got interested in that and tried to get in touch with her. The next month, she sent 24,000 text messages. So they took her phone away.

Why does this go on? It's because we are all hardwired to want to be connected. Because we don't like to *feel* alone. That's what's behind our desire to commune. The greatest form of communing is not cell phones or text messaging or even conversation...it's prayer. It's instantaneous. It knows no physical boundaries. Doesn't hurt your thumb. So Paul says, "***Pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests.***" Because when we work, *we* work. But when we pray, *God* works.

We're talking in this series about ripple effect and how the world gets changed one life at a time. But it's kind of an interesting thing. When attempts to change the world begin with human efforts, they have a way of ending up doing more damage than good. If you ever look at the history of utopian communities, they get started with real good intentions. They almost all end up as train wrecks. So we begin with prayer because prayer changes things. Because we're made to want to be connected to Somebody greater than ourselves. So therefore we'll pray. Pray when I'm afraid. Pray when I'm grateful. Pray when I'm with people I love.

It's kind of a funny thing. I was alone yesterday and just found myself kind of struggling spiritually. I called a real good friend and said, "I just want to tell you and ask if you would pray." Just the connection...I don't fully understand it. Pray when I'm alone. Pray when you need wisdom. Pray when something good happens, and you're grateful. Pray when you've done something bad, and you need to be forgiven. Pray when you're all filled up and ready to worship, "God, I love You." Pray when you're mad, and you need somebody to talk to. Pray when you're tempted, and you need help.

I'll tell you what I'm praying in this series these days is, "God, what would You like to do in my life? Is there an adventure? Is there somebody who You'd like to touch? God, because I know I can't control outcomes. There is so much I don't know. God, what would You like to do?" So many ripples that are visible begin with prayer that is invisible. The power of prayer doesn't change.

5. Another changeless rock...*the human condition doesn't change*. The prophet Isaiah said, ***"A voice says, 'Cry out.' And I said, 'What shall I cry?' 'All men are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field.'"*** It all changes so fast. We think we're in control, but we're not.

Philip Yancey wrote this last week about how his brother has suffered a series of strokes. Writes about how his brother is this brilliant guy...philosophy and piano major in college. Then he had some plaque shift in some arteries. One day Philip says he is talking about Nietzsche or Schubert, and the next day Philip is with him in an Intensive Care Unit and is rejoicing if he is able to count to five or mouth the words to *Happy Birthday*. Philip writes about the difference between people who say, "Good luck!" and people who say, "I'm praying for you" and mean it.

He said his brother tried Christianity and found it did not work for him. He felt at some level like God could not forgive him. Then this is what Philip writes. This is so poignant. "In the ICU though, he squeezed my hand tightly every time I prayed in his ear. Often tears ran down his immobile face." The human condition...its glory and its tragedy...does not change. It's a strange thing. We learn how to split the atom. Then we figure out how to use it to kill people. We invent the Internet, and its first big moneymaker is pornography, which degrades and enslaves so many people.

Every increase in knowledge or power that increases our ability to do good also increases our ability to do damage. We keep living with this illusion that there will be a solution to the human condition that comes about when there is more education or more prosperity, or we just need more technology or just more tolerance or just more medicine. But it doesn't fix us because it's not the problem. The problem got named a long time ago. ***"For all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God."*** Sin does not appear to be fading any time soon. So that leads to one more thing that does not change.

6. *The mission of the church does not change*. This is what God has asked us to do. These are Jesus' last words in Matthew 28. Let's read these together out loud. ***"Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I will be with you always, to the very end of the age."*** This is the mission He gave to the church. "Go and make disciples. Baptize them. Teach them to obey everything I have commanded you." Now a question...are we pretty much done with that task here in the Bay area? Have we pretty much finished the job because Jesus gave it to the Church? Are we like close to the finish line on this one?

I'll show you part of our mission. One of our elders, Max Hall, found the most accurate data we have gotten because this is hard to assess the spiritual condition of the Bay. This comes from an outfit called

*The Association of Religion Data Archives*. I didn't even know... Doesn't that sound like an exciting group to be a part of... The Association of Religion Data Archives? In San Mateo County, where this building is located, roughly 27,000 are adherents of evangelical churches. Now to be an adherent in this study means you could be a member or an attender, even a sporadic attender. So, maybe about half of adherents might attend on any given Sunday. That means about one-fourth of people who are involved in an evangelical church in San Mateo County are part of Menlo Park Presbyterian Church. About a fourth in this county.

All the folks who are adherents of evangelical churches all together make up about four percent of the total population of the county, whereas ninety-six percent are not adherents of an evangelical church. Some have claimed other religious affiliations. The largest category...about sixty percent...is what's called *unclaimed*. In other words, these are people with no religious affiliation at all, no community of faith, no larger body in which to learn about the God who made and loves them so they can become followers of Jesus. That's 411,000 people in San Mateo County. There are more unclaimed people than that in San Francisco County. There are more than twice as many unclaimed people as that in Santa Clara County.

But I know numbers like that are hard to wrap our head around. I can't reach 100,000 people. But here is the thing. I can reach one. Ripples go out one person at a time. We just need to be real clear on this. Our mission has not changed. We are not here for us. Jesus said, "Go and make disciples and baptize and teach people to do everything I have taught you." That's the mission, and it is has not changed. It is why the church exists. We're not close to the finish line. I can't reach 100,000 people but, you know, I can reach one. You can reach one.

I want to give you a picture of what God wants to do. This is all over the place on video this last week. It's a guy who is a baseball fan...loves the Philadelphia Phillies. Took his daughter to a baseball game. Has never caught a foul ball. Wanted to catch a foul ball. Some of you have seen this one? Now there is a picture of the heart of a father. So you take a look for a minute at the screen. I just love this picture. That's a dad with his daughter at a baseball game.

[Video]

Okay, now you look at his face for just a second. "Kid! I waited my whole life for a foul ball. I give to you this prize, and you throw it away! What are you doing?" But then, here is where the movement goes from fan to dad. Everybody in the stand sees what's going on, and there is this kind of gasp. Then this little girl looks up at her dad because all of a sudden she realizes she has done something really, really wrong. Now how does a father respond? Does he say to her, "You little turkey!" Just take a look at what a dad does.

[Video]

What a beautiful little picture of a dad and his child...even though he is a Phillies fan. There is such a hunger to see a father who loves. The media was lining up in his driveway. That's gotten like over a million hits on YouTube. Boy, am I having a senior moment. Is it YouTube? Okay. Thank you. Over a million hits on it. Because, you know, it's just this moment this little girl looks up at her dad like, "Did I do something wrong? Am in trouble?" Then those arms come around. "Hey, come here. I love you."

Human fathers sometimes get stuff right...a lot of times get stuff wrong. There is a Heavenly Father. There are 400,000 or 500,000 or 600,000 or maybe more all around us who face the possibility of a Christ-less eternity. Here is the message of Scripture, *"As a father has compassion on his children, so*

*the Lord has compassion on those who fear Him."*

Now let's get personal. You think of somebody who you love maybe far from the Father. I bet you if I was to ask how many of you have a friend, a mom or a dad, son or a daughter, coworker, brother or sister who is far from God and you're concerned about them, I bet every hand would go up. Now Jesus comes to us and says, "Now I put people in your little sphere of influence. You go. You make disciples of all nations." The job is not done until the Father can wrap His arm around everyone. We have a long ways to go. We're not here for us.

Most compelling talk I've heard in a long time about the challenge of reaching a changing world was given by a guy named Gary Hamel at an event called *The Leadership Summit*. Gary was actually rated by the Wall Street Journal as the number one strategic thinker in the business world. But for this talk, he looked at the mission of the church and kind of dared tens of thousands of church leaders to take up the challenge of doing Jesus' mission.

Gary actually attends here at our church, MPPC. So I told him, "Man, if you'd lay out a challenge like that for leaders of other churches, you ought to come and lay it out right here where you go to church." So next week, he and I are going to be here. We're going to kind of walk through what does it take to reach a world that is changing like our world is. I think it's going to be really riveting. But now we just want to place our lives in the hands of the God who does not change. So would you pray with me?

Now Heavenly Father, everybody in this room lives in a world...faces relationships, financial realities, emotional hardships, health problems...we cannot control. You are the God who does not change. So we put our hope, our trust, in You alone. Would You, God, begin those ripples in our hearts, in our lives? Would You give us a rock to stand on so that in this world...in our bodies with all the changes we cannot control...we do not live in fear? We do not live in yesterday. We face this day because it's Your day. We go into the world because it's the world You're claiming. We ask for this together in Jesus' name, Amen.