

“Unless You Are Converted”

The Scripture text I want to use today is from the gospel according to Matthew: “Unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 18:3, New King James Version). These are words of Jesus. He says that unless we are converted we won’t be part of God’s kingdom.

The need for *conversion* is mentioned elsewhere in the Bible. In Acts 3, God uses Peter and John to heal a man by the temple gate, a man lame from birth. The healed man starts walking, leaping, and praising God, and the Jews gathered there are amazed. Peter preaches about Jesus, how they and their leaders killed Jesus. Then Peter says: “Repent therefore and be *converted*, that your sins may be blotted out, so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord” (Acts 3:19 New King James Version).

“Unless you are *converted*...”. “Repent therefore and be *converted*...”. What does this mean?

The Greek word translated “conversion” means to “turn around” “change”. In fact, most translations of the Bible use the words “turn around”, or “change”, instead of “conversion.” But we speak of *conversion* in other aspects of life. When I was growing up, at one point, my parents *converted* from an oil burner to a gas burner to heat our house. People *convert* from standard to the metric system. Someone *converts* from Catholicism to Judaism. Cars have catalytic *converters* to reduce harmful emissions. So, conversion is a *change*, a *turning around*.

E. Stanley Jones was a noted missionary-evangelist of the 20th century. He gave a definition for conversion that I like. He said, “Conversion is that change, gradual or sudden, by which we pass from the kingdom of self to the kingdom of God, by the grace and power of Christ.”

A fundamental point about conversion is this: It is a turning from self to the kingdom of God. It is changing from a life ruled and dominated by one’s self, to a life centered in Christ.

We need to be converted because human nature is sinful. “Sin” in the Bible basically means that we put self at the center of life rather than our Creator. I want to live life *my way, on my terms. I want to set the rules instead of God setting the rules.* This truth is expressed in the story of Adam and Eve. God placed them in a garden paradise, free to enjoy everything - except God told them not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The serpent tempts Eve. He says go ahead and eat, and you will “be like God”! You can be your own God. You don’t need God to set the rules. Live life *your way*.

Robert Raines wrote a book called *New Life in the Church*. He writes about the universal need for conversion: “Conversion is necessary because sin is real. The fact that one grows up in the church, acknowledges the Ten Commandments, tries to live by what he calls “Christian principles”, obeys the Golden Rule, doesn’t alter the fact that he is a sinner. The story of Adam is the story of every person. Everyone puts himself or herself at the center of the world. Every person is bent inward. By nature, everyone seeks his or her own will. This is deeply rooted in us and cannot be educated out of us or psychoanalyzed out of us.”

So, we can be a “good” person, and not be converted. We can be a religious person, and not be converted. We can be active in a church, and still not be converted to Christ. The key question is: Who’s at the center of my life? Me, or God? Have I turned from the kingdom of *self*, to the kingdom of *God* – where Christ and His will is at center of all I think and say and do? Someone has put it this way: “The center of conversion is the conversion of the center.”

The good news is that people who we think of as “bad people” can be converted and be changed by Christ. And people we label as “good people” can be converted and experience new life in Christ!

E. Stanley Jones called conversion that change, *gradual or sudden*, by which we pass from the kingdom of self to the Kingdom of God.” ***Our conversion to Christ can be a gradual or sudden experience.*** Often the impression people have is that if we are converted it has to be a sudden, dramatic experience that changes us all at once. But not everyone’s conversion is like that.

Thank God, many people have had a conversion experience where in a decisive moment their life is radically changed! The prime example of this in the New Testament is the conversion of Saul (or Paul). Paul was a Jew who persecuted Christians. Then, on the road to Damascus, Christ appears to him in vision, and in this dramatic encounter with Christ his life is radically changed. Perhaps you’ve had conversion like that, or know of someone who’s had that kind. Praise the Lord for those who *can* testify to the day or hour when they were radically changed by Christ!

But not everyone can point to this kind of experience. For some, their conversion is more gradual, like a flower slowly opening up to the sun. And this process of conversion is just as much a miracle! My own was like that. It was kind of a slow turning around. I can’t tell you the exact day, month, or even year when Christ entered my life. I was never taken to church as a youngster. Eventually I got into Sunday School, perhaps when I was 9 or 10. My thoughts began to turn more to God. I went through confirmation class, was confirmed, and joined the church. But as I look back, I’m not sure where I was in my faith. I believed in God, believed in Jesus, but my faith was more of a vague thing. Then in my teen years a new pastor came to our church. He was more evangelistic. He talked more directly and clearly about sin, and our need to receive Christ as Savior. At some point, I crossed over the line and was no longer living just for self, but for Christ. The whole thing was a gradual process, with no abrupt change for me.

So, if you have had a sudden, dramatic conversion experience, praise God! If not, don’t feel like your experience is second-rate, *as long as you’ve experienced that turning from a self-focused life to a Christ-focused life!*

”Conversion is that change, gradual or sudden, by which we pass from the kingdom of self to the Kingdom of God, *by the grace and power of Christ.*” Notice: “by the grace and power of Christ.” ***Conversion is something God does for us.*** Whenever someone is converted, it is always because *God has taken the initiative*, and reached out to us to draw us to Christ. It’s the work of God’s Spirit, the Holy Spirit – preparing our heart, making us receptive, creating a sense

of spiritual need.

Most of the time, before conversion takes place, we have to come to a sense of need. It could be some crisis in our life, or the realization of our failures and weakness, or the recognition that, deep inside, we're not as good as people think we are. It might be that we just feel empty, and wonder about the meaning of our life. *The Holy Spirit has as many ways to create a sense of need as there are people!* Before I was converted to Christ, I just kind of felt lost and adrift in the world. As a teenager, I kept wondering, "Why am I here? What is the purpose of my life?" When I came to Christ, the Lord began to give me a sense of direction and purpose in life,

The Holy Spirit brings us to a sense of need, and then does the Makeover! We can't produce this fundamental change and re-orientation of our life by ourselves! We can't pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps! Now, we can work on ourselves. We can read self-help books, get counseling (and as a therapist, I believe counseling and therapy can improve our lives significantly). *But it can only take us so far! Only God can forgive our sins, change the human heart, and enable us to overcome the evil side of human nature!*

Let me say a word about ***what happens after conversion.*** Sometimes Christians can give the impression that after a conversion experience, everything automatically changes and the new converts live happily ever after! They never have doubts, they never give in to the same evil desires they might have had before they came to Christ, they never get discouraged or feel blue. Of course, all of this is not true!

My wife Nancy is a big fan of the Hallmark Channels. She says she likes "happily-ever-after" movies. A running joke between us is that if a movie is over on the hour (say 4 o'clock, 9 o'clock), about 4 minutes before the hour a wedding will take place. The couple get married and the movie ends. I have to admit, I went through a spell where I really got caught up in news channels., I got sucked in emotionally to politics and the hateful polarization going on these days. So Nancy says she'd rather watch her movies – and in a way, I think that's healthier than what I was soaked up in!

But one drawback with happily-ever-after, wedding at 3 or 4 minutes before the hour, is that it gives the impression that , once people get married, everything is great, and lovey-dovey! Now if you're married, *you know that's not true.* The wedding ceremony is not the *end* of the story, it's only the *beginning* of the real work that has to go in to a successful marriage! The wedding ceremony is the *easy part* (other than paying for it)! The hard part is only starting! ***That's way it is with our conversion, the beginning of our new life in Christ.***

After I was converted to Christ as a teenager, I *did* discover new joy, a fresh purpose, a deep feeling of serenity inside. My behaviors changed. I never was a really bad kid, but I stopped using profanity. I tried to be honest instead of lying or cheating and laughing about it. I *wanted* to read the Bible, and pray, and go to church. But in some ways, my life became more difficult and more complicated. It was harder in school to do what was right rather than just going along with the crowd. Quite honestly, I faced some of the same temptations I had before I became a

follower of Jesus, and at times I gave in to them, and felt terrible and guilty. But here's the thing: once I was converted, I had Christ, and the Holy Spirit inside, to help me with the struggles and problems. And my life really was going in a different direction once I surrendered my life and will to Him.

I mentioned earlier the Apostle Paul, and his dramatic conversion to Christ. Instead of being a terrorist who persecuted Christians he became perhaps the greatest leader in the Church. But later, he writes to those in the churches of Galatia, how when we come to Christ, the Holy Spirit lives in us, but the old person, the old sinful nature, (called the "flesh") is also still part of us. and these two natures are at war within us. "For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you want" (Galatians 5:17).

But he also says we have the resources, when we nurture the life of the Holy Spirit in us, to overcome evil, the sinful desires of our old nature. "Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh" (Galatians 5:16).

I want to close by looking at the Scripture with which I began this message. Listen to these words of Jesus found in Matthew 18:2-3: "He called a child, whom he put among them, and said, 'Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.'" Jesus said we have to be converted and *become like little children!* What's that mean? Look at a small child, and we get a picture of the attitude and character needed for conversion to take place and take root!

Jesus goes on: "Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 18:4). "Whoever *humbles himself*, as this little child...". *The Message* paraphrase renders this verse, "Whoever becomes simple and elemental again, like this child." There is a simplicity about very young children. They are ***honest and unpretentious, receptive, trusting, totally dependent on parents or caregivers.***

That's how we need to relate to God, our heavenly Father: ***truthful and real as we come to God, open and receptive to His Word and teaching, trusting – trusting God's promises, trusting Christ to forgive us, and totally dependent on Him for our life and salvation.***

Have you ever had a conversion experience, where you have moved from a self-centered life to a Christ-centered life? If not, you can have it today, by turning from your sins, and surrendering yourself to Christ and His will. Maybe you once had this experience and were changed, but you have drifted away. If so, today you can renew your commitment to Christ, and have a fresh start living for Him!

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But some years before, while yet young man, was present at stoning of Stephen.
“Then they dragged him (Stephen) out of the city, and began to stone him, and the
Witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul” Acts 7:58

Who knows what lasting effect that might have had on this young man.

Even after Paul’s radical spiritual turnaround on Damascus road, he spent three
years in Arabia before began to preach Christ (see Galatians 1:17-18)