

True Conversion to God

Lord's Day 33

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Preached on: Sunday, April 17, 2016

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Our Scripture reading this morning is found in the epistle of Paul to the Ephesians. Ephesians 4. We begin reading at verse 17. 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians. In verse 17,

17 This I say therefore, and testify in the Lord, that ye henceforth walk not as other Gentiles walk, in the vanity of their mind, 18 Having the understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God through the ignorance that is in them, because of the blindness of their heart: 19 Who being past feeling have given themselves over unto lasciviousness, to work all uncleanness with greediness. 20 But ye have not so learned Christ; 21 If so be that ye have heard him, and have been taught by him, as the truth is in Jesus: 22 That ye put off concerning the former conversation the old man, which is corrupt according to the deceitful lusts; 23 And be renewed in the spirit of your mind; 24 And that ye put on the new man, which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness. 25 Wherefore putting away lying, speak every man truth with his neighbour: for we are members one of another. 26 Be ye angry, and sin not: let not the sun go down upon your wrath: 27 Neither give place to the devil. 28 Let him that stole steal no more: but rather let him labour, working with his hands the thing which is good, that he may have to give to him that needeth. 29 Let no corrupt communication proceed out of your mouth, but that which is good to the use of edifying, that it may minister grace unto the hearers. 30 And grieve not the holy Spirit of God, whereby ye are sealed unto the day of redemption. 31 Let all bitterness, and wrath, and anger, and clamour, and evil speaking, be put away from you, with all malice: 32 And be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you.

That far we read in God's holy inspired word. May God bless that word to our hearts.

I want us to read this morning from Ephesians 4. I'm going to read 22 through 24. Ephesians 4:22-24.

22 That ye put off concerning the former conversation the old man, which is corrupt according to the deceitful lusts; 23 And be renewed in the spirit of your mind; 24 And that ye put on the new man, which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness.

I want to use those verses this morning to look at the truth of Scripture summarized in Lord's Day 33, the first three questions, questions 88 through 90, found in the back of the psalters which deal with the conversion, true conversion. The questions and answers read as follows.

Q. 88 Of how many parts doth true conversion, the true conversion of man consist?

Of two parts; of the mortification of the old, and the quickening of the new man.

Q. 89. What is the mortification of the old man?

It is a sincere sorrow of heart, that we have provoked God by our sins; and more and more to hate and flee from them.

Q. 90 What is the quickening of the new man?

It is a sincere joy of heart in God, through Christ, and with love and delight to live according to the will of God in all good works.

Lord willing, next Lord's Day we'll treat question and answer 91.

Beloved congregation, in our Lord Jesus Christ are you converted? The Catechism reminded us last Lord's Day that no unchaste person, idolater, adulterer, thief, covetous man, slanderer, robber, or any such like shall inherit the kingdom of heaven. That means if you continue in a wicked and ungrateful life, if you are not converted to God, then you are on the road to hell. That's the message that was left us at the end of Lord's Day 32. That's not talking about the believer who honestly struggles against sin every day, but that's talking about someone who has both feet firmly planted in sin and who refuses to turn from that sin.

Are you converted to God? Because if you are not converted, God commands you to turn from your sin in true sorrow; turn to God with sincere joy, believing in Jesus Christ as the whole of your salvation. Conversion is the work of God through Jesus Christ, the work of God that turns the regenerated sinner from the way of sin to the way of righteousness. We are turned from the service of the devil to the service of God, and when God accomplishes that marvelous work in our hearts, we will hate and flee from our sin and we will delight in the way of God's righteousness.

The Catechism in this third section concerning thankfulness is teaching us about a life of thankfulness and it's true, if it is true that the Holy Spirit is working in us to conform us to the image of Christ, and it is true, if that's true, then we will do good works. But now, the Catechism does not want to leave the impression that if we are now new creatures in Christ we are going to live a perfect life, because the truth of that is far from it. We are new creatures in Christ and yet we still battle with sin every day. Instead, our lives will show daily conversion; a daily putting off of the old man and a daily putting on of the new man in Jesus Christ. That's what a life of thankfulness is all about. Daily conversion.

So we want to look at that this morning: what is true conversion to God? Let's note in the first place that it is a twofold turning; secondly, it's a radical turning that goes right to the root; and lastly, a gracious turning.

True conversion to God. Are you converted? If you and I are converted, we will turn around. We will be turned away from sin and turned to God. We must be converted if we are going to enter the kingdom of heaven. In Adam, the whole human race turned away from God. By nature now, having that corruption that we inherited from Adam, we hate God and all his ways. All we like sheep have gone astray. We have turned every one to his own way. By nature, we were going away from God in rebellion but Jesus Christ took upon himself the guilt of our sins, the Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all. Jesus Christ took that guilt upon himself, he suffered the punishment that we deserved, and in that sacrifice he earned for us all the blessings of salvation including conversion.

Conversion turns us out of the way of evil and into the path of righteousness, therefore, conversion is a twofold turning. That's the picture that we receive throughout Scripture, depart from evil, there is the putting off of the old man, and do good, there is the putting on of the new man. 1 Peter 4:2, "That he no longer should live the rest of his time in the flesh to the lusts of men," that's putting off the old man, "but to the will of God," that's putting on the new man.

Ephesians 4 gives us a number of those illustrations of putting off the old man and putting on the new man. Verse 28 of Ephesians 4, "Let him that stole steal no more," put off the old man, "but rather let him labour, working with his hands the thing which is good, that he may have to give to him that needeth," put on the new man; labor and give to those who have necessities. Verse 29, "Let no corrupt communication proceed out of your mouth," put off the old man, "but that which is good to the use of edifying, that it may minister grace unto the hearers," put on the new man. Verse 31, "Let all bitterness, and wrath, and anger, and clamour, and evil speaking, be put away from you, with all malice," put off the old man, "And be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you," put on the new man.

The Scripture is full of that twofold turning. Conversion involves the abandoning of the lust of men and the living to the will of God. You can talk about the separate aspects of putting off of the old and putting on of the new but you cannot separate those aspects because true conversion involves both. God not only forbids the doing of evil, but he commands the doing of good. You cannot separate those two aspects.

So when you and I experience conversion, we will see those two aspects: the mortification of the old man, the killing of the old man, and the quickening or the making alive of the new man. That's what Ephesians teaches us in those verses that we read, verse 22 of chapter 4, "That ye put off concerning the former conversation the old man, which is corrupt according to the deceitful lusts," and then verse 24, "And that ye put on the new man, which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness." The old man is our corrupt and sinful nature that we inherited from Adam, and our new man involves the renewal of our natures in the image of Christ and that renewal makes us delight in the good and hate the evil.

You, regenerated child of God, still have the old man. If it were not so, the inspired apostle would not tell us to put him off. We still have the old man clinging to us. We call him the old man because he has been with us since the moment we were conceived in the womb of our mothers. But we call him a man, not in distinction from a woman, but a man because the old man involves every part of us. It involves all the faculties of what makes us human, and so we talk about the corruption of our human nature. If you and I are going to be saved, we need to be renewed and the first part of our renewal involves the mortifying, the putting to death of the old man.

It would be nice if we could just kill the old man suddenly. In one minute he would be alive, and in the next minute he would be done away with altogether. We would like it if we could obliterate the old man once and for all, but that's not the way killing him works. Instead, he is put to death little by little, kind of like killing the old man by starvation. Obviously we won't be killing the old man if we feed him all the time. We fall into that. Sometimes we feed, deliberately feed the old man, but if we want to kill the old man, we have to starve him. Stop feeding him. Don't provide him with opportunities. And yet though we talk about killing the old man, as long as we remain in this life, the old man will always be with us.

What does killing the old man look like? That spiritual corruption, what does it look like to kill him? Well, as the old man is put to death, we will be more truly sorry for the fact that we have offended God by our sins, and if we are truly sorry for our sins, we will hate them and we will avoid them more and more.

Do you want to kill the old man? Killing the old man is certainly not embracing the old man. Sometimes we do that. Killing the old man is not merely chaining him in an attempt to control him. That never works. He always seems to become unchained. But killing the old man neither is that just shutting him out of the house and then letting him back in when it's time to eat. Killing the old man means doing away with him so that he never comes back and that means, beloved, if we are struggling with a besetting sin and we say, "Well, I'm not going to get rid of that altogether," then that's not killing the old man. That's saying, "I'm going to, well, I'll put him outside just for some time." No, we have to deal radically with the old man, get rid of him altogether, but that's painful because the old man is part of me and part of me loves the old man.

What should I do when a besetting sin, a gangrene has infected my right hand, my beloved right hand? What should I do? If I try to save my right hand, though it's turning black and the flesh is dying and I say, "But I want to keep it." It's only going to get worse and the infection will spread and it will eventually kill me. Killing my old man according to what Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount, means that I take an ax and I take it to my right hand and I chop it off as painful as that may be because I know what's going to happen if I leave that gangrene all to itself. I know it's going to kill me. Radical action. That's what Jesus is talking about when he said, "If your right hand offends you, cut it off." Well, maybe I can get away with just cutting off my finger. But that doesn't work. If that doesn't work, I go back farther. I cut it off, my whole hand, if that's what it takes, spiritually speaking.

What should I do if I have another besetting sin, a wandering eye that leads me off the path of righteousness? Every time I use that eye it leads me off of the path. Do I really want to go that way? Killing my old man means I take my finger and I gouge out that right eye. That's what Jesus said. "If thy right eye offend thee, pluck it out." That's what killing the old man is. It's not playing around with the old man.

Is that your experience, beloved? Do you see in yourselves a putting to death of the old man? Are you truly sorry for your sins and do you honestly hate sin? We can say we hate sin but do you honestly hate sin so much that you are willing to take steps to be done with the old man? It's easy to fool others but God will not be mocked.

Killing the old man, that's what true conversion involves but it also involves a quickening of our new man. The new man is the renewed nature that God gives us when he causes us to be born again and gives to us the life of Jesus Christ. The old man is that human nature in the absence of God's image. The new man is the restoration of God's image in us. Those excellent gifts that Adam and Eve forfeited in the garden that they threw away, God graciously restores to us. And we call the new man new because God gives us something we did not have by nature.

God gives us new life. He makes us new creatures and that's the idea, too. In Ephesians 4:24 when it talks about the new man, it talks about something that God created. Ephesians 4:24, "And that ye put on the new man, which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness." After God, that is, after the image of God we are created again.

The new man is new because he is being renewed after Christ's image and just like the old man, our new man involves every faculty. That's why we call him the new man. Our heart is renewed. Our mind is renewed. All our spiritual faculties are renewed. And if we are going to be renewed, there must be not just the putting off of the old man and becoming neutral. That's impossible. But also a putting on of the new man. Colossians 2:13, "And you, being dead in your sins and the uncircumcision of your flesh, hath he quickened," hath he made alive, "together with him, having forgiven you all trespasses." Now you can see having forgiven your trespasses, the basis of that new life in the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross. There has to be that sacrifice so that we can be

forgiven and so that we can have the blessings of salvation because we ourselves have not merited them. Christ must merit them for us.

There is a sense in which that new life is given to us all at once. You students will remember the distinction that we made in class. We call regeneration in the narrow sense when that new life is just given, but then there's also regeneration in the broader sense in which that new life is given to us more and more. 2 Corinthians 4:16 talks about that ongoing renewal of the new man. 2 Corinthians 4:16, "For which cause we faint not; but though our outward man perish, yet the inward man," that is, the new man, "yet the inward man is renewed day by day." Is renewed. That renewal is ongoing. That's evident from the fact in the Greek that that verb "is renewed" doesn't say was renewed in the past as if it's all done. It doesn't say our inward man will be renewed in the future. But it says our inward man is renewed in the present, that is, is being renewed.

What does the quickening of the new man look like? Well, as that new man is renewed, we rejoice in God our Savior, and out of that thankful joy for what God has done for us, we love God and we delight to live according to the will of God in all good works. The new man will say, "I am so thankful for God's goodness to me. I want to show him my thankfulness. I want to know how I may serve him and show my thankfulness."

Can you see, beloved, your new man being renewed? I don't say can we measure that renewal. That's impossible, but do you see the battle of the old man and the new man? Do you see the delight to live according to the will of God in all good works? That's what true conversion is about. Daily conversion. Mortification of the old man. And quickening of the new man.

We ought to understand that true conversion is not merely an outward phenomenon. If conversion is faked, and many times it is, a hypocrite will do just enough to fool others. People might go to church twice on Sunday. They might read their Bibles. They might pray in public with flowery language. They might act in a civil manner towards others. They might give money to the church. But none of those things done separately or even all together proves that someone is truly converted. Those are outward things.

Notice in the Catechism how it emphasizes that conversion is an inward reality. Question and Answer 89, "What is the mortification of the old man? It is a sincere sorrow of heart." It's inward, something that God has worked in our hearts. "The sorrow of heart, that we have provoked God by our sins." No else can see that sorrow of heart. There may be sins in the past nobody else knows about and we say to ourselves, "Why did I do that?" There might be no consequences that we feel, but we still regret, we still are sorrowful for that sin.

Quickening is a sincere joy. That's Question and Answer 90, "What is the quickening of the new man? It is a sincere joy of heart in God, through Christ." True conversion is not merely an external turning from sin and an external following of God's commands. True conversion includes that but we make a serious mistake if we think that external works are not at all important.

Conversion includes the external turning but true conversion involves especially the inward. There must be more than just an external turning. There might be a drug addict who turns from his drugs and he takes up a productive job in society and it looks good, but that's not necessarily true conversion. He might simply be leaving his drugs to feed his greed. All he's doing, then, is turning from one idol and turning to a bigger idol. He says, "This idol is not worth it because it's getting in the way of this other idol and I'm going to serve this idol, the idol of greed." That's not true conversion. Turning from one sin and simply turning to another, that's not conversion.

He might hate the consequences of his addiction but he is not turning away from it because he sincerely hates that sin as it is sin against God. He doesn't care about God, he cares about this other idol. Yes, he may have a certain sorrow as he is hurting his body by those drugs, he may even have a fear of hell but that's still not true conversion. 2 Corinthians 7:10 says, "For godly sorrow worketh repentance to salvation not to be repented of: but the sorrow of the world worketh death." True conversion involves a sorrow of heart that we have offended God by our sins. We will say like David, "Against thee," speaking to God, "Against thee, thee only, have I sinned." That will be our primary concern in turning from sin.

Are we truly sorry for our sins? Am I sorry for all my sins? So sorry that I'm willing to take the ax to my hand and to take and gouge out my right eye? Am I that sorry for sin that I'm willing to do whatever it takes to be done with it? Because if there's just one sin that I say, "I know this is sin but I am not going to leave it. You're not going to make me leave this sin. I'm going to hold onto this sin. I'm not sorry for it." If there's just one sin, the cause that I embrace and I'm not going to leave, that calls into question whether I am truly sorry for any of my sins because that sin is against God, and if I'm a child of God, that sin ought to grieve me to some degree. If I truly hate sin, I won't want that gangrene in my flesh. Does it make sense that I would want to keep that one sin?

Along with that sorrow of heart, then true conversion is also a joy of heart in God. Sorrow of heart for our sins is not the only way to know about our conversion, true conversion involves also a joy. Romans 14:17, "For the kingdom of God is not meat and drink," it's not just external things, "but righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost." If we lack that joy, we are liable to sink into despair. If all we do is think about our sins and sinfulness, we are bound to be gloomy. When David repented of sin, what did he pray to God? He prayed that God would restore to him the joy of his salvation and that joy arises from the knowledge of God's grace and mercy towards us. Our sins are forgiven. God has given us eternal life in Jesus Christ. Can you think of any better reason to rejoice? 1 Peter 1:8, "Whom having not seen, ye love; in whom, though now ye see him not, yet believing, ye rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory."

True conversion is a radical turning. It goes right to the radits, Latin for the root. It goes to the root. It goes to the heart. Without that good root, then the fruit cannot be good either. True conversion begins in the heart.

Some imagine that work to be their own work, but Scripture makes it clear that conversion ultimately is God's work. Ultimately. It doesn't take us out of the picture. We are subjects of God's work but it is God's work. Philippians 2:13, "For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure." God is the one who works in us so that we will the good, and so that we do the good. "For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do."

Hebrews 13:20, "Now the God of peace, that brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great shepherd of the sheep, through the blood of the everlasting covenant, Make you perfect," the God peace make you perfect, "in every good work to do his will," that is, make you mature. Who does that? God does that. That's the prayer of the author, the inspired author of Hebrews. Now the God of peace make you perfect, make you mature, "working in you that which is wellpleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ; to whom be glory for ever and ever."

Conversion is God's work and that means, beloved, we can never look back and see that work of conversion and say, "I did that by my strength." We may not do that, then we are patting ourselves on the back as if we accomplished it by ourselves. Who maketh you to differ? God works conversion in our hearts.

That means conversion is not about finding the right book that lays out seven steps to change your life. Conversion is not something we can work all by ourselves just as Ethiopian cannot change the color of his skin, Jeremiah 13:23, "An Ethiopian cannot change the color of his skin, neither can a leopard change his spots." Can an Ethiopian change his skin, the prophet asks? Or the leopard his spots? "Then may ye also do good that are accustomed to do evil." If those things can happen, then you are also able to convert yourself. Those things can't happen.

We cannot do good by ourselves in our own strength but God can work that in us and he does. God is the one who works conversion. Acts 5:31, "Him hath God exalted," Jesus Christ. "Him hath God exalted with his right hand to be a Prince and a Saviour, for to give repentance to Israel." God gives repentance. God causes that turning. Jesus himself says, "Without me, ye can do nothing."

When God turns our hearts, then we shall be turned and that, beloved, is why we need to pray. Pray for conversion. Pray like the prophet prayed. How did the prophet Jeremiah pray? He said to God, "Turn us, O Lord, and we shall be turned." Jeremiah knew that Jehovah alone can turn us and bring about that radical turning that begins in the heart, but is it not the case that that very prayer when we say, "Turn us, O God," when we pray that sincerely from the heart, is it not the case that God is already working in us? That turning? That we would want to pray that God would help us? Already that's the beginning. God is answering our prayer even before we prayed it.

We ought to pray, "Lord, do a work in my heart. Turn me and then I shall be turned." And yet, beloved, we must not think of ourselves as stocks and blocks. We rightly acknowledge and we rightly look to God to turn us, and yet that doesn't make us stocks

and blocks in the process. Stocks and blocks sit there and have nothing to do with it. They don't take that radical action. They don't cut off their right hand and pluck out their right eye. Stocks and blocks sit there and they make excuses, blaming even God. "God hasn't turned me yet." A stock and block believer says, "If God is going to get rid of this or that sin, that's his business. He hasn't done it yet." That would lay the responsibility of our sin on God but, beloved, we are responsible for our own sin.

And we ought to be active. We ought to take specific intentional steps. When I am battling that besetting sin, I don't say, "Well, all I can do is pray." No, I can take steps. If I can't manage the way I spend time on the computer, then I start cutting off my hand. And if that doesn't work to cut off my finger, I cut off the whole hand. I say, "I can't manage myself on the computer. I'm going to cut it off." I don't just sit there and pray and say, "Well, God hasn't turned me away from my sin." Have I taken the ax out and sharpened it and used it?

God wants us to take intentional action and when we do, why are we doing it? We're doing it because God already is working in our hearts. It's God's work. God's sovereignty does not take away from my activity. God works that activity, but then I don't sit there and wait and say, "Well, but God hasn't worked it yet so I'm not going to cut off that right hand just yet because, well, I don't want to." There is the old man that doesn't want to but the new man says, "I have to. I want to because I want to live. I'm going to cut it off."

So where rebellion once prevailed, obedience begins to take its place. It's a small beginning, daily conversion, turning away from our sins. We ought to give ourselves to that work. Yes, it's God's work but Jesus did not say if your right hand offends you, pray about it. Jesus didn't say that. And when we do cut that right hand off, then we can look back and say, "Lord, I thank thee that thou hast worked that in me that I would cut off that right hand because I never would have done it myself." We take drastic action against our sin and we take steps, too, not just to put away our sins, we take intentional action to put on the new man.

Are you converted? Do you see that battle of the new man and the old man? "Turn us, O Lord, and we shall be turned." God grant that we would be converted day by day to the glory of his name. Amen.

Our Father which art in heaven, we confess that we are weak and in our own strength we would not turn. So, O Lord, turn us and we shall be turned, and yet use the means even for thy name's sake. Turn us from sin and turn us to thee that we may love thee and delight in thy ways and give thee the honor and the glory that is due. Forgive us where we have fallen short and lead us that we may cut off our right hand and pluck out our right eye that we may live. We ask this in Jesus' name who earned for us all these blessings on the cross. For Jesus' sake. Amen.