

True Conversion to God

Lord's Day 33

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Bible Text: Ephesians 4:20-24
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Our Scripture reading this morning is found in the book of Ephesians. We read Ephesians 4 beginning at verse 17. The apostle in chapter 3 finished his doctrinal section and calls for glory to be given to God, "Unto him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages," and then in chapter 4 exhorts us to "walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called," in order to give glory to God. And now this section continues that thought, Ephesians 4:17.

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.

Before we turn to the Catechism, let's read from Scripture Ephesians 4:20-24 in connection with Lord's Day 33.

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.

In connection with those verses, we treat the truth of Scripture summarized in Lord's Day 33 Questions and Answer 88-91. I'll read those.

Q. 88. Of how many parts doth 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.

Q. 91. But what are good works?

Only those which proceed from a true faith, are performed according to the law of God, and to His glory; and not such as are founded on our imaginations, or the institutions of men.

Beloved congregation in our Lord Jesus Christ, the seriousness of the subject of true conversion was emphasized in the last Lord's Day, Lord's Day 32 when the Catechism asked, "Cannot they then be saved who continuing in their wicked and ungrateful lives are not converted to God?" And it answers, "By no means." Someone who is unconverted will not inherit the kingdom of God. It behooves us, then, to make sure we are among those who are converted to God, not to do that in our own strength but to see that we are those who have been converted by the power of God. That's why the Catechism spends this Lord's Day to teach us what true conversion is. There are lots of people who claim to be converted, they claim to be Christian and yet they continue in their wicked and ungrateful lives; they continue in sin as if it doesn't matter how they live; they show by their lives that they are alienated from the life of God, they are strangers to that new life.

True conversion is something that will be evident. It will be evident to ourselves and it will be evident to others in two respects: first, we will be those, as Ephesians declares, we will be those who put off the old man which is corrupt according to the deceitful lusts; and then secondly, we will be those who put on the new man, which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness. Beloved, as believers, we want to be sure that we are converted, that our conversion also is an ongoing daily conversion, and then the question we may ask ourselves is, "Does that conversion manifest itself in my life? Does my conversion manifest itself in my speaking the truth in love to my neighbor? Does my conversion manifest itself in my willingness to labor with my hands doing the work that God sets before me? Does it show in good and edifying words that minister grace to those around us? Does my conversion show," we ask ourselves, "in my kindness towards others and in my willingness to forgive even as Christ forgave me?"

When the Holy Spirit works conversion in our hearts, it will be evident. You don't have to be in the dark wondering whether we are truly converted or not. It will be evident in our lives so we treat the subject of true conversion to God. Let's note in the first place, it's two parts, mortification and quickening. Secondly, its divine source. And lastly, its good works. True conversion to God.

When we are converted to God, beloved, we will see those two things, we will see the mortification of the old man, that is, the killing of the old man, and the quickening, the making alive of the new man. The first part of that conversion is described in Ephesians 4:22 as the putting off of the old man. The old man is called a man because it involves all the parts, all the faculties, all the dispositions of our persons. He's a man. That's us. And he's called the old man because we carry those corrupt dispositions from the very time of our conception in our mother's womb. He is also called old for this reason, because we ought to regard the old man as we regard old things, old things that are worn out, that are useless, that need to be put away.

Then the mortification of the old man is described as a putting off. That same word, putting off, is used for taking a robe and taking it off and putting it aside. We need to do that with the old man, like taking off a dirty, sweaty, stinky shirt and putting it away. Now we could keep wearing that shirt but who wants to do that, to wear a rotten, stinking piece of clothing? When God regenerates us, beloved, we want to put off the old man. Just as we would cringe, we cringe at the thought of a dog who returns to his vomit. That's a picture that Scripture itself uses. We cringe at that and yet we do worse when we refuse to put off the old man. So God calls us to put off the old man. He calls us to be sorry for our sins, to see them as stinking works of the old man.

We need to see our sins not just as something that's detrimental to ourselves, something that hurts ourselves, they do that, sins are detrimental to ourselves, but we ought to especially see our sins as great offense against God, against our holy and righteous heavenly Father. How can we commit these things against our Father? Then in true sorrow if we have that sorrow for sin, then we will want to put off those corruptions.

Putting off the old man, beloved, is not just something that we do once, "Well, I put off the old man, now that's done." That's not the way it is. Putting off the old man is something that we do every day. It's something that we have to do constantly. It involves growing in our hatred of our sins and sinfulness, and then following from that hatred, the old man, putting off the old man doesn't just mean having an attitude of hatred towards it but then actually fleeing from the sin.

Are we putting off the old man? That's a question we need to ask ourselves. Are we putting off those works that serve the devil? The good news, beloved, of the Gospel is that Jesus Christ was manifested in human flesh in order to destroy the works of the devil. That's why Jesus died for us, not just that we would receive forgiveness but that we would also by his grace, the grace that Jesus Christ earned for us, by that grace put off the old man of sin. 1 John 3:8 declares, "He that committeth sin is of the devil; for the devil sinneth from the beginning. For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that he might destroy the works of the devil." Who in their right mind would want to, in their right spiritual mind, would want to continue doing the works of the devil?

Do we not know that those works, those sinful works separate us from God? The Gospel calls us and draws us to God and it calls us to leave those works, to put off the old man. The Gospel calls us to a spiritual life of new obedience, but the works that arise from a spiritual life and the works that arise from spiritual death are mutually exclusive. You can't serve two masters at the same time, and the implication of that is that no one should think they are regenerated if they are complete servants of sin.

I don't mean to say that a regenerated child of God can't stumble into horrible sin, sometimes we do stumble as David stumbled who murdered Uriah, who took Bathsheba to be his wife. But David though he stumbled badly was not a complete servant of sin. God had delivered him from that bondage. God showed that David was not a complete servant of sin in the fact that David repented. God had worked repentance in his heart, but those who aren't sorry for provoking God by their sins, those who have no hatred of sin, they shouldn't imagine that they are the children of God. When God regenerates us, he calls us now as his children to manfully fight against the deceitful lusts of the flesh and to root them out of our lives; to put off the old man constantly seeking to be done with sin.

One of the things I remember about hiking in the Australian rain forest is the leeches that we would constantly find crawling up on our shoes and trying to get to our flesh to suck the blood from us. We would stop and we would take a break, carefully inspect ourselves for signs of leeches, and then when we found them, scrape them off. One time hiking I found myself dizzy and lightheaded. Didn't know why. I mentioned it to others who were hiking along with me and sure enough after a while, someone spotted the telltale sign that a leech had been on me. If I had seen it, beloved, it was on my wrist underneath my wristband, as far as I could tell, under my watchband, if I had seen it, how silly it would be for me to say, "Well, that's just a small little leech. A leech never hurt anyone." Putting off the old man, beloved, is like scraping off the leeches that sap the life from us.

It's a never-ending job. There is one after another. There is always something in the wilderness of this world. Don't ever say about a little sin, don't ever say, "Well, that's just a little sin. What could a little sin do to me?" Don't ever say that. We ought to be saying, "Get that thing off of me!" Indeed, we ought to be taking precautions not even to let them on us in the first place. That's the attitude that we ought to have toward sin. Is that your attitude, beloved, towards sin in your life? Do you find yourself more and more hating your sin and wanting to flee from it? Are you daily being converted?

The other side of conversion, of that conversion coin is the side that we refer to as quickening of the new man, making the new man alive. The new man is also called a man because just like the old man, the dispositions of the new man pervade throughout the whole person, all our faculties. Sometimes the Scripture calls that new man the inward man or the inner man. 2 Corinthians 4:16 is one example, "For which cause we faint not; but though our outward man perish, yet the inward man is renewed day by day."

He's called the new man because he comes as one after the old man. The old man we received when we were conceived in the womb. He goes way back to then. The new man appears sometime after that when the Holy Spirit regenerates us. But then the new man is also called new because the new man is excellent. As something new far supersedes that which is old and rotten and decayed, the new is better. The new man is the renewal of the image of God in our hearts.

That's what's declared in that passage that we read, that you put off the old man but then verse 24, "And that ye put on the new man, which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness." The new man is the renewal of the image of God within us. Adam lost that image when he rebelled against God in the garden, but by the grace of God, the grace earned by Jesus Christ, God restores that image within us. That's what Ephesians 4:24 is talking about, which after God, the new man which after God, created after the image of God is the idea. When God restores that image within us, when he gives to us the new man, he restores to us righteousness and true holiness.

That's what the image of God is all about. He makes us new creatures. 2 Corinthians 5:17 uses that same language, "Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new." Now beloved, a new creature, a creature is something created by the Creator. Some make the mistake of thinking that the new creature is simply God the Creator working in us, as though we were mere puppets. And now it's true, of course, that God the Creator works in us, but when he works he actually changes something about our creatureliness so that we are new creatures. We don't just become puppets moved by God completely apart from our will, but God actually changes our will.

He makes us new creatures and when God gives us the new man, then we receive a true joy in God as well as an earnest desire to reflect now the image of God that he is restoring in us, an earnest desire to seek after holiness and righteousness. That's what our spiritual growth is all about, more and more putting on the new man, and yet we have such a small beginning. One day when God takes us to glory, we will have only the new

man and no old man to deal with, but while we remain on this earth, beloved, he calls us to put on the new man because we always only have a small beginning of that new man.

The fact that we are called to put on the new man means it doesn't just happen automatically. God calls us to diligent effort. He calls us to give careful attention, to use all the means available to put on the new man. Then when we are converted by the grace of God, when we are being converted, we will see changes. That makes sense, does it not? There is a great deal of difference between the old man and the new man. If we are putting off the old man and putting on the new man, there are going to be changes. The old man brings error and corruption whereas the new man brings righteousness and holiness. The old man corrupts our understanding with all kinds of errors. He corrupts our wills so that we desire all kinds of wicked things. The old man yearns for the things, the wicked things of this world. The old man corrupts the whole of our walk of life, leads us away from God, but the new man produces good works that are righteous and holy. The new man leads us to seek after God. The new man gives us a renewed understanding. The new man worked by God in our hearts changes our will. The new man affects the whole of our walk of life.

So, you see, that putting off the old man and putting on the new man are not separate things, they both go hand-in-hand. They are two sides to the one coin, the gold coin of true conversion to God. If we want to leave off sin, we need also to replace those sinful thoughts and acts with righteous ones, putting off one thing, we need to put on another thing and that is illustrated in the chapter that we read. What will it look like when we put off the old man, when we put on the new man? It will look like this. When we put off the old man, we will put off lying, and when we put on the new man, we will speak the truth in love towards our neighbor. When we put off the old man, we will put away sinful anger, and when we put on the new man, we will make peace with our neighbor, our nearest neighbors. We'll make peace with them before the sun goes down. When we put off the old man, we will stop stealing and wasting that which God entrusts to us. When we put on the new man, we will work diligently so that we are able to give to others, so that we serve God with all those things that he has entrusted to us. When we put off the old man, we'll stop speaking corrupt words, words that hurt, words that cut down others. When we put on the new man, we will speak edifying things that minister grace to those who hear us. When we put off the old man, we will put away bitterness and wrath and anger and arguments and reproaching others. When we put on the new man, we will be kind and tenderhearted and forgiving.

Every one of us here today, beloved, is called to leave off our wicked and ungrateful lives and be converted unto God on a daily basis. Don't be like unbelievers who walk in the vanity of their mind. Unbelievers can only follow the dictates of a carnal mind. They follow after vain idols. Don't be like the unbelievers of the world who hate God and who hate their neighbor, but be followers of God. That's what the apostle declares in the first verse of chapter 5 of Ephesians, "Be ye therefore followers of God, as dear children," as his beloved children.

Now some imagine, beloved, when we speak about conversion that conversion, therefore, is mostly our own work. The Bible through the Holy Spirit calls us to give diligent effort to our conversion and then we are tempted to think to ourselves, "Well, therefore it's all my work." And to this point we've described conversion from that aspect as we experience conversion in that daily battle against sin, but we need to be clear, beloved, that conversion is God's work.

When God works, we also will work. Those are not separate things. That's not God doing 50% and we do 50%, but when God works, then we will work because he works, and therefore we can't separate our human diligence, that which we give ourselves to do, we can't separate that from the work of God. Philippians 2:13, "For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure." God works conversion in us. God works in us so that we will to do the good and we will to put off the old man, and he works in us to do according to his pleasure.

Who is it that makes us fit and prepares us to do his will? It is the God of peace who raised Jesus Christ from the dead, that powerful God who works in us. Conversion is God's work so that, beloved, we can never look back at our daily conversion and say, "Today, look what I did." We may never pat ourselves on the back and say, "I was able to leave off that sin and why can't So-and-so leave off their sin?" as if we had accomplished that conversion by ourselves. Conversion is God's work.

Then conversion is not just about finding the right book that lays down seven steps to change your life in this or that area. Conversion is not something, beloved, that we can just check the boxes and accomplish by ourselves in our own strength. Can the Ethiopian change his skin? Can he turn his dark skin into light skin? Can he do that? Can the leopard change his spots? Jeremiah 13:23 says then if that's true, and it's not, "then may ye also do good, that are accustomed to do evil."

We can't change our own spots but God can and God does. God is the one who works conversion. He's the one who gives repentance. Acts 5:31, "Him," speaking of Jesus Christ, "Him hath God exalted with his right hand to be a Prince and a Saviour, for to give repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins." Conversion is God's work. "Without me," Jesus says, "ye can do nothing. You can't be converted without me working."

God has to turn our hearts and then we will be turned, and that's why, beloved, we ought to pray to him for conversion, daily conversion, as also the prophet Jeremiah prayed to God, "Turn us." Lamentations 5:21, "Turn thou us unto thee, O LORD, and we shall be turned; renew our days as of old." Jeremiah knew that Jehovah alone is able to turn us, Jehovah alone is able to accomplish that radical turning within us, and the fact that we would pray that God would convert us, the fact that we would pray that God would turn us away from those besetting sins, that's already, beloved, the beginning of God's turning work. He has already worked in us that we would pray such a prayer. "Lord, do a work," we pray to him, "turn me for thy name's sake."

Yet, beloved, we shouldn't think of ourselves as stocks and blocks in the process of conversion. If we were mere stocks and blocks, then God would not in Scripture call us to turn from sin. God would not in Scripture call us to be diligent to press for the mark. He wouldn't call us to that. Indeed, if we were mere stocks and blocks, we wouldn't need to hear the preaching of the word, we wouldn't need God's written word, we wouldn't need the fellowship of the saints. But we're not mere stocks and blocks. If we were mere stocks and blocks, then we wouldn't have to make any effort whatsoever to turn from sin and to turn from God, then I'd just leave everything to God. Don't have to think about putting off the old man. I don't have to think about putting on the new man. It's all God's business. If he's going to change me, he will change me. We mustn't think that way, beloved. Ultimately that ends up blaming God for our sin. "Well, God didn't change me. It's his fault." But he doesn't save us as stocks and blocks. The truth is that God works in us and when he works in us, he heals and corrects our wills so that we ourselves as a result of his work, give diligence and we turn from sin and we turn to him so that where rebellion once prevailed, now obedience begins to take its place.

God calls us to give ourselves to the work of conversion, to take drastic action against sin. That's what Jesus says, "If your right hand offends you," what does he say? We know what he says, "Cut it off. Take drastic action. Do something." And yet, we must labor in prayer, recognize that it is ultimately God's work within us. So we labor in prayer. We ask. We labor as those who know that unless the Lord build a house, they labor in vain that build it. Unless the Lord guard the city, the watchman wake but in vain. But that doesn't mean there doesn't have to be builders and there doesn't have to be guards. We labor too, attending to the preaching of the word.

Notice in Ephesians how it talks about learning Christ. Verse 20, "But ye have not so learned Christ; If so be that ye have heard him, and have been taught by him, as the truth is in Jesus." How was it that these Ephesians who were hundreds of miles away from where Jesus ministered, how did they hear Jesus? How did they learn of Jesus? Through the preaching. Jesus Christ speaks through the preaching and so if we want to be converted, we labor by attending to the preaching of the word. God uses the preaching, his mighty and powerful Holy Spirit uses the preaching to bring about daily conversion.

Are we being converted to God, beloved? When we are being converted to God, we will see the fruit. Just as if God makes a tree good, when he makes a tree good, what will happen? The fruit also will be good and so the fruit of true conversion to God will be good works. Not just works that look good on the outside but truly good works with which God is pleased. Yes, mixed with sin but when God gives us new life, when he infuses new qualities into our wills, that will affect our desires and that will affect our life. There will be obedience.