

Conversion

Fight The Urge To Fit In part 6

Summary: We believe that authentic Christian life begins with conversion to Christ which involves repentance and faith in him; conversion to Christ results in justification (forgiveness) and regeneration (new birth). These are gifts that cannot be earned or inherited.

Scripture: Romans 12:1–2; Acts 2:32–40

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The Conversion of Jean Val-Jean

In the 1862 historical novel *Les Misérables*, by Victor Hugo, the main character is Jean Valjean.¹ Valjean is an ex-convict, who becomes a force for good in the world but cannot escape his criminal past.

Released from prison, Valjean cannot find lodging in the town of Digne because his yellow passport marks him as an ex-convict. The benevolent local bishop, Monseigneur Beineven, gives him shelter.

At night, Valjean runs off with the bishop's silverware. When the police capture Valjean, the bishop pretends he has given the silverware to Valjean and presses him to take two silver candlesticks as well, as if he had forgotten to take them.

The police accept this explanation and leave.

The bishop then tells Valjean,

Do not forget, never forget, that you have promised to use this money in becoming an honest man ... Jean Valjean, my brother, you no longer belong to evil, but to good. It is your soul that I buy from you; I withdraw it from black thoughts and the spirit of perdition, and I give it to God.

Then, running from the town, in turmoil as he processes the unexpected kindness he just experienced, the novel, describes the results in the soul of Jean Valjean:

He wept for a long time. He wept burning tears, he sobbed with more weakness than a woman, with more fright than a child.

As he wept, daylight penetrated more and more clearly into his soul; an extraordinary light; a light at once ravishing and terrible. His past life, his first fault, his long expiation, his external brutishness, his internal hardness, his dismissal to liberty, rejoicing in manifold plans of vengeance, what had happened to him at the Bishop's ... all this recurred to his mind and appeared clearly to him, but with a clearness which he had never hitherto witnessed. He examined his life, and it seemed horrible to him; his soul, and it seemed frightful to him. In the meantime a gentle light rested over this life and this soul. It seemed to him that he beheld Satan by the light of Paradise.

How many hours did he weep thus? What did he do after he had wept? Whither did he go! No one ever knew. The only thing which seems to be authenticated is that that same night the carrier ... who arrived at Digne

about three o'clock in the morning, saw, as he traversed the street in which the Bishop's residence was situated, a man in the attitude of prayer, kneeling on the pavement in the shadow, in front of the door of Monseigneur Welcome.

This may be a fictional account of a character's conversion to faith, as he responds to the grace of God shown to him by a kindly, Christian man, but the scene powerfully depicts the transformation that begins in one's soul once God's light begins to shine within.

What becomes of Valjean, I will leave to you to discover as you read the 2,783 pages and 655,478 words of this novel, in the original French—which I have read twice (not in the original French though).

What & Why?

Therefore, brothers and sisters, in view of the mercies of God, I urge you to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God; this is your true worship. Do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may discern what is the good, pleasing, and perfect will of God. (Romans 12:1–2)²

Our theme passage for this sermon series is from *The Letter to the Romans*. These verses, essentially, describe the process of Conversion—the before, during and after of placing one's faith in Christ Jesus and living a Christian lifestyle.

Once you understand and appreciate the mercies of our Creator, you will feel compelled to worship, serve and obey him, and to do so wholeheartedly—which is to say you will love the Lord God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind and all your strength, and do so all the time, in all places, everywhere and anyway you can, insomuch as you can.

That is how compelling are the mercies of God, once you understand and appreciate what he has done in creating us and saving us.

Only such wholehearted worship, service and obedience is holy and pleasing to God. Any other degree is 'meh', it's "lukewarm", and lukewarm Christians make God puke! (Rev 3:16)

I cannot think of anything worse than our Creator, the Lord God Almighty, looking at me and thinking to himself, 'meh'. I have nightmares about such a scenario and the thought brings me to tears and desperate prayer ... that is how I know I am genuinely saved, that I am a legitimate and authentic child of God.

If you are here today and are not entirely sure if you are saved or not, then this sermon is for you. If you are here today and are wondering what is all the fuss about salvation, then this sermon is also for you. Keep your eyes and ears open.

What Is Essential About Conversion?

So far in this sermon series, we have considered what is essential to believe about Christ Jesus, God and about Humanity. We have considered also our need for Redemption and Salvation By Grace. Redemption and Salvation By Grace are what the apostle Paul described in our theme passage from *Romans* as "the mercies of God".

When the apostle Peter described these mercies of God to the people gathered in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost, it is written,

When they heard this, they were pierced to the heart and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, “Brothers, what should we do?” (Acts 2:37)

The apostle encouraged them to place their faith in Christ Jesus and to begin living a Christian lifestyle—in other words, he encouraged them to be converted to Christian faith and practice.

What then is essential to believe about Conversion?

We believe that authentic Christian life begins with conversion to Christ which involves repentance and faith in him; conversion to Christ results in justification (forgiveness) and regeneration (new birth). These are gifts that cannot be earned or inherited.

There are six things this statement tells us about Conversion:

Conversion Involves Repentance

When the Jerusalem crowd asked Peter what they should do, the first thing he said to them was to repent. For our part, **conversion begins with repentance**, but this is a seldom used word these days. What does it mean to repent?

“Therefore, house of Israel, I will judge each one of you according to his ways.” This is the declaration of the Lord GOD. “Repent and turn from all your rebellious acts, so they will not become a sinful stumbling block to you.” (Ezekiel 18:30)³

It does not take a brain surgeon to recognise that rejecting the leading of the Holy Spirit, and rebelling against the commands of God, does not lead to a flourishing life. Going our own way leads to hurt, hangups and bad habits.

There is nothing we can do to save ourselves. Our sin leads to the curse of death.

Once you recognise going your own way does not work, the only thing left to do is to turn away and turn back to God.

When my wife and I were newly married, we once travelled to Canberra, bringing with us a godly woman and mentor. As we approached Goulburn, my wife and I started bickering about whether the car needed to be filled up with petrol, and when and where to do it.

I will concede, before you all now, that I was being stubborn—It’s true; I know it’s hard to believe. So I missed the final turn-off to Goulburn and, as I am sure you all know, that is the last chance to fill up before Canberra. Not surprisingly, we ran out of gas.

While it was a minor inconvenience to call NRMA for rescue, I was completely embarrassed before our friend and mentor. She was very gracious though, did not seem to judge me for my stubbornness, but waited patiently with us.

Once we passed Goulburn, there was no turning back. And we only passed Goulburn because I stubbornly refused to recognise the predicament I was putting us in.

Do not be me! Do not be stubborn. Recognise the predicament you are in because of your sin. Turn back to God,⁴ repent before you are judged for your rebellious acts, your idolatry⁵ and your evil ways.⁶

Conversion involves repentance, which is to recognise what we have done wrong, what we have not done right, and that we can do nothing to fix, solve or correct our predicament for ourselves.

Conversion Involves Faith in Jesus

The next thing this statement teaches us is **conversion involves faith in Jesus**. Where we can do nothing to fix, solve or correct our predicament, Jesus can and has done so already.

To place our faith in Christ Jesus is to recognise he has already paid for our redemption, through the cross and his resurrection, and to trust that salvation by grace is available to and effective for us when we are converted to believing this is true for us. Faith is to abandon all reliance on our own efforts and put our confidence in Christ alone, in his word and his promises.

If you repent of your sin and turn back to our creator God, place your faith in Christ Jesus, then you are saved. You are converted from an unhealthy and wrong way of thinking, speaking and acting to the right way.

Conversion Results In Justification (Forgiveness)

Once you place your faith in Christ and trust his once-for-all sacrifice on the cross and through the resurrection, then you are forgiven.

The LORD came down in a cloud, ... passed in front of [Moses] and proclaimed: The LORD—the LORD is a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger and abounding in faithful love and truth, maintaining faithful love to a thousand generations, forgiving iniquity, rebellion, and sin. But he will not leave the guilty unpunished ... Moses immediately knelt low on the ground and worshipped. Then he said, “My Lord, if I have indeed found favour with you, my Lord, please go with us ... forgive our iniquity and our sin, and accept us as your own possession.” (Exodus 34:5–9)⁷

In this passage, we have the Lord God appearing to Moses, declaring his grace and compassion and forgiveness. We hear the response of Moses and his desire to be counted among the children of God.

It is the Lord's nature to forgive.

If we say, “We have no sin,” we are deceiving ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. (1 John 1:8–9)⁸

Forgiven, God declares us righteous, which is to be in right-standing before him, acquitted of our crimes, so to speak.

For no one will be justified in his sight by the works of the law, because the knowledge of sin comes through the law. But now, apart from the law, the righteousness of God has been revealed, attested by the Law and the Prophets. The righteousness of God is through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe, since there is no distinction. For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus. (Romans 3:20–24)

As we discovered in a previous sermon, there are many images for salvation. These verses remind us we can be justified, which is to be made right with God, and forgiven for our sins, which put us out of sorts with God in the first place.

It is then as the statement tells us: **Conversion results in justification (forgiveness).**

Conversion Results In Regeneration (New Birth)

This statement tells us also that **conversion results in regeneration (new birth)**. This is to say there is a radical renewal of our inner being, by the work of the Holy Spirit, when we place our faith in Christ Jesus.

Jesus replied, “Truly I tell you, unless someone is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.” (John 3:3)

This is a hard saying because it is hard to imagine. Do we go back into our mother’s womb? Of course not, but the transformation brought about by our conversion is best understood as like a regeneration, a new birth.

Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, who does not change like shifting shadows. By his own choice, he gave us birth by the word of truth so that we would be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures. (James 1:17–18)⁹

Knowing the truth of God shines a light into us and opens our senses so completely that everything changes for us. This experience is expressed so well in the now classic chorus,

Floods of joy o'er my soul like the sea billows roll,
Since Jesus came into my heart.¹⁰

Regeneration results in a transformed life.

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, and see, the new has come! (2 Corinthians 5:17)¹¹

Our regeneration is symbolised in baptism.

Or are you unaware that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we were buried with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too may walk in newness of life. (Romans 6:3–4)¹²

Words cannot describe the freshness of life we experience when the weight of our sin and the curse of death is removed from our souls. The power of sin has no hold on us any longer; we are now free to move and live and have our being in the power of the Holy Spirit...

Authentic Christian Life Begins With Conversion

...which brings us to the next thing our statement tells us: **authentic Christian life begins with conversion**.

Many people believe living *like a Christian* is enough because, after all, Jesus’ teachings encourage a good lifestyle, they represent a good morality. However, *we can do good without actually being good*. And no amount of good we do can offset the wrong we think, say and do.

The prophet declared of the Lord God,

You welcome the one who joyfully does what is right; they remember you in your ways. But we have sinned, and you were angry. How can we be saved if we remain in our sins? All of us have become like something unclean, and all our righteous acts are like a polluted garment; all of us wither like a leaf, and our iniquities carry us away like the wind. (Isaiah 64:5–6)

Authentic Christian life is not about what we do as much as it is about in whom we have placed our faith. When you begin to trust Jesus, you will increasingly feel compelled to serve and obey him, for faith in Jesus demands a new lifestyle. As it is written,

But you must return to your God. Maintain love and justice, and always put your hope in God. (Hosea 12:6)

“Truly I tell you,” he said, “unless you turn and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child—this one is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. (Matthew 18:3–4)¹³

Conversion to Christ naturally results in a lifestyle based on very different attitudes and leading to very different actions than our fallen and sinful life once consisted of.

The new attitudes that blossom in our life of faith demonstrate that conversion also brings a new understanding.

Yet still today, whenever Moses is read, a veil lies over their hearts, but whenever a person turns to the Lord, the veil is removed. (2 Corinthians 3:15–16)¹⁴

When we place our faith in Jesus, our senses are ignited, such that we see more clearly, hear more thoroughly, touch more intimately, smell more deeply. I am, of course, speaking metaphorically, but life takes on a new brightness when the clouds are rolled away.

The Results of Conversion Cannot Be Earned or Inherited

When you repent and place your faith in Jesus, you are justified (which is to be forgiven) and regenerated (which is like a new birth), and increasingly experience an authentic Christian life far beyond your imagining. The final thing our statement teaches is **the results of conversion cannot be earned or inherited**.

The authentic Christian life is beyond anything we could imagine for ourselves—it is the free, full and forever life Jesus promised to his friends—it is also a life we cannot achieve for ourselves. Neither can we earn it, nor do we inherit it, as if it were a birthright.

We lost any rights or claims to the life our Creator intended for us when we went our own way.

But he was pierced because of our rebellion, crushed because of our iniquities; punishment for our peace was on him, and we are healed by his wounds. We all went astray like sheep; we all have turned to our own way; and the LORD has punished him for the iniquity of us all. (Isaiah 53:5–6)

The “him” of this verse is Christ Jesus, the Son of God, the Anointed One prophesied throughout the scriptures. By his bearing wounds on our behalf, we are healed. *The results of conversion* then *are a gift*, a gift that came at a cost, not to ourselves, but to Christ Jesus, our Lord.

Two Real Stories

You may not yet be convinced faith in Jesus and a Christian lifestyle is for you. Or maybe you are still not entirely sure if you are saved or not. If either of these scenarios describe you in this moment, then let me make this a little more real for you.

Regret Over Rizzo

In primary school I had a good friend name David. He was a good and gentle boy, and his family were instrumental in my journey to faith.

One day, in the school yard, we were all playing a rather rowdy game, during which my friend, David, hurt me. I don't remember what he did but I know he did it. And I reacted.

I chased my friend, wrestled him to the ground, and started hitting him. After a hit or two, I thankfully came to my senses.

I felt remorse for reacting to my friend with anger and violence. We may have reconciled then, but he won't respond to my attempts on social media to rekindle our friendship. Perhaps he has not really forgiven me?

That the memory of that event still fills me with shame and remorse is an example of the weight of sin and the curse of death.

Tell me you don't have similar transgressions that weigh down your soul?

Redemption From Al

In middle school, being years 6-8 for me, there was a boy named Al at my school who clearly came from a poor and dysfunctional family. Sadly, I looked down on and judged Al because his family was worse than mine, which is really saying a lot.

In high school, toward the end of year 10, I was really struggling to find my place in the world. Who was I and where did I fit in? Naturally, I leaned toward the Punk and Goth kids, but was not yet acceptable to them.

One day, I bumped into Al. He had gone full Goth and had two rather attractive young women with him. We reconnected and spent the day together. At the end of the day, I was so desperate for inclusion, I asked to be part of his 'group'. He and they accepted me.

The acceptance of Al was an act of forgiveness—at least, I took it that way—and became an opportunity for me to step into a form of new life: a new style, new friends, a new confidence and new recognition from my peers for my newly discovered 'coolness' factor.

I hope you have had some kind of experience that has helped you make sense of your life, even transformed you into a new and better person than you were before.

Response

You do not need me to tell you whether you have thought, said or done anything wrong in your lifetime. You feel your own regret, even now, sitting here or wherever you are as you listen to this message.

You do not need me to tell you there is a better way to live, where you will always know the right way to go and will always have the power and conviction to do the right thing. You know the truth is out there.

You do not need me to convince you of your need for forgiveness and regeneration because you and I both know you feel or have felt that desperation deep in your bones already. You have likely tried to hide it from yourself and others by pursuing fame or fortune, beauty or strength, or tried to dull it through entertainment or other diversions, alcohol or drugs.

You know, like I do, the only answer is to turn back to God, place your faith in Jesus and believe his promises.

The transformation conversion brings does not happen all at once, but it does happen if you will allow the Holy Spirit to do his work in you.

That you can be saved, that you can be converted from a life of despair and destruction, is a gift from God with results far beyond our imagination and beyond what we can achieve for ourselves.

Turn back to God. You will be forgiven and you will be made new. You do not need to do good in order to be made good. Stop doubting and believe and receive these gifts and *you will be saved*, my friend. Welcome to the family.

If you have known that desperation and now feel a gratitude for these gifts, then *you are saved* my friend. Welcome to the family.

Let us pray...

Endnotes

- 1 The full text is available to read online at *Project Gutenberg*, <https://bit.ly/3BhlAsO> (accessed 7-Sept-2022).
- 2 Unless otherwise noted, all scripture quotations are taken from *The Christian Standard Bible* (Nashville, TN, USA: Holman Bible Publishers, 2017).
- 3 See also Eze 14:6; Ac 3:19; 26:20.
- 4 Dt 4:30-31; Lk 1:16-17 See also Dt 30:2-3,10; Lk 22:32; Jas 5:19-20.
- 5 Ac 14:15 See also 1Sa 7:3; Jer 3:12-13; 4:1-2; 1Th 1:9-10.
- 6 2Ki 17:13-14; Isa 55:6-7 See also 2Ki 13:11; 14:24; 15:9; Jer 18:11; 25:5; Eze 18:23; Da 9:13.
- 7 See also Nu 14:17-20; Ne 9:16-17; Ps 103:1-18; Isa 43:25; Mic 7:18-20; 1Jn 1:8-9.
- 8 See also Ps 51:7; 103:8-12; 130:3-4; Pr 28:13; Isa 1:18; Ac 2:38; Jas 5:13-16; 1Jn 2:1-2.
- 9 See also Jn 3:3-6; Tit 3:4-5; 1Pe 1:23.
- 10 Rufus H. McDaniel, "Since Jesus Came into My Heart" (1914).
- 11 See also Ro 12:2; 2Co 3:18; Gal 6:14-15.
- 12 See also Col 2:12; 3:1-3.
- 13 See also Gal 5:22-24; Eph 4:1; 5:8-11; 1Pe 2:11-12.
- 14 See also Jer 31:34; Heb 8:11.