

What is Christian conversion?

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[0 : 00] Well, it's sometimes pretty amazing to see what people can do with their garage. More and more garages today are not used to park cars anymore.

People tend to park their cars outside or they see their garage as something they can use for something much better than just to park a car in. And so people use their garage for additional living space these days.

Often they convert them into something else. Here are some examples of some garage conversions. There you see a garage, a smelly old garage, turned into a modern office. The next one, a garage is turned into a TV room in an office upstairs.

That's a very good use of space. The next one, a gym. Garage has been turned into a gym by one person. And finally, a kitchen, a second kitchen. I bet you if you like cooking that you'd love a second kitchen.

Or maybe, you know, the wife is a little bit possessive over a kitchen and so the husband needs his own kitchen. Maybe that's why they did it. I don't know. But you can see that when a homeowner decides to convert their garage into something more useful, when it's done well, it doesn't look like a garage anymore, does it?

[1 : 12] If you stood inside and you looked, you wouldn't know that you were in what was once a garage. It's got a completely different purpose. And even though it has the same four walls, it's pretty much lost all of its garageness, if you like.

Well, that's converting a garage. But it's exactly what Christian conversion means as well, if you think about it. It's no mistake that when someone puts their faith in Christ, we talk about them being converted.

Now, it's an interesting word to use, isn't it? Conversion. Because, you see, the true faith in Jesus leads to a life that will look very different to what it did before.

A converted life. It's what Jesus calls being born again, and that's literally what it is. It's quite a shocking phrase to use, born again. It means true conversion is nothing less than starting an entire new life.

And yet I think there are many people today, when I look around in the church, in the world, there's many people who call themselves Christians, but haven't really undergone that conversion.

[2 : 23] They haven't really started that new life that Jesus is talking about. People can come to church. People can say the right things. They might pray. They might read the Bible. But their life and their priorities day to day are all too often not that different from the world around.

Well, you know, according to the Bible, they're not really Christians at all. Because a true Christian, according to the Bible, according to Jesus himself, a true Christian is someone who's been converted.

Someone who's been born again. Someone who's undergone a real fundamental change in their life. And the question I want us to consider, the question that we should all consider this morning, is what does this change of life entail?

How do I know that I've gone through this change? What does it look like? You know, if you line ten people up in a room and you're asked to point out who's converted, you wouldn't be able to, just by looking at them.

You know, they don't have some kind of holy glow, or a halo, or a cheesy smile on their face. Yes. They don't wear special clothes. You know, they don't necessarily wear badges like the Mormons do, saying, I'm a true believer.

[3 : 34] No. How do you know? If it's not in their clothes or their appearance, what is it that makes Christians different from the world around? It's a very important question that we've got to ask.

And we find out the answer to that in the passage that Penny read for us this morning, Ephesians chapter 4. It's summed up, really, in verse 21 to 24. It's on the screen behind me, but you can have your Bibles open there as well.

Because it's here that Paul defines, for the Ephesian Christians, what a Christian really is. You know, this is one of the first Christian churches that were ever established. And Paul wants them to make sure they know what it is to be a Christian.

And he writes this. He says, When you heard about Christ and were taught in him in accordance with the truth that is in Jesus, you were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which has been corrupted by its deceitful desires, to be made new in the attitude of your minds, and to put on the new self created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.

And so there, just in a couple of verses, we have a summary of what it means to be converted, truly converted. And there are three parts to it, I wonder if you noticed.

[4 : 45] We'll look at each in turn. Firstly, put off. Put off. There are certain things in life that a truly converted Christian will stop doing. What things?

Well, things that Paul calls deceitful desires. These are what characterize the old life, according to Paul. So what are these deceitful desires?

What is he talking about? Well, what does the word deceitful mean? I mean, what is deceit? Well, deceit is trickery, isn't it? Deceit means lies. It means false promises.

Like when a con man comes and promises that you can have, I don't know, some electronic goods at a rock-bottom price, and he sells it to you, and then you try to run it at home, and you find out that it's broken.

You know, that's deceit. It's trickery. It's a false promise. And so deceitful desires are desires that trick you. Desires that we have in our lives that promise you things that they don't deliver.

[5 : 46] And life is full of deceitful desires, isn't it? Full of things that we chase after. They promise us happiness or joy or something, fulfillment, and then we get them and they don't deliver.

Whether it's money or relationships or whatever it is. And Paul here describes the essence of the sinful life as a life that's spent chasing after these deceitful desires, like chasing the end of the rainbow.

A life spent, wasted, chasing after deceitful desires that will never satisfy. That is, in his mind, the characteristic of this sinful life.

And in fact, the root of all sin can be traced to these deceitful desires, can't they? I mean, think of it. How did we get into this mess in the first place? Do you know?

Do you know how it all started? How sin entered into our world? What made people first decide to ignore God right at the beginning? Deceitful desires.

[6 : 47] The serpent in the garden telling Eve that she can have power and wisdom and all that she's ever wanted. If only she just disobeys God. Deceitful desire.

Because it was a lie, wasn't it? We see what happened when we read Genesis. When she disobeyed God and Adam disobeyed God, they discovered that their sin actually cut them off from God and from everything good.

Because he is the source of everything good. Everything good is only found in relationship with God. And so, in chasing what they wanted, they actually cut themselves off from any chance of having what they needed.

But that's the nature of sin, isn't it? That's the nature of sin. Sin promises to fulfill our desires without God. That is essentially what sin is.

If you want to know what sin is, it's a deceitful desire that promises to satisfy us in some way without God. That is sin. And so it deceives us.

[7 : 45] And then it disappoints us when we discover that we're not satisfied. You know what I'm talking about? Those unsatisfied desires? You know, the leading cause, we're doing this marriage course.

And the leading cause of marriage breakups is when one partner is disappointed in the other for not fulfilling some kind of desire they had. And that they expected their partner to give them.

They're not satisfied in God and the marriage that God gave them. And then, you know what happens? They look elsewhere for those desires to be satisfied. That some other partner, they commit adultery or they look on the internet at porn or something.

That breaks the marriage up because of unfulfilled desires, deceitful desires. When they're looking in a person to give them what only God can truly give them. And they believe that sin can satisfy them much more than God.

What about money? That's a classic one. Spending your life chasing after money rather than God. Whether that's to get rich or just to be secure.

[8 : 49] Just to get a decent retirement. Whatever it is. Security or pleasure or riches. Or when you've spent your life chasing after money and you finally have all that you want and you buy all the toys you want.

It still doesn't make you happy. And it still doesn't give you the security you wanted. You know, even the richest people are insecure. Even the richest people are unhappy. My dad worked for a shipping line.

And my brother and I got a free ticket. Basically free ticket. To hop on a cruise. Around the world cruise. But we didn't go around the world. We just went from Cape Town to Durban.

We got to hop on. We got to taste. For a few days we got to taste the life of wealthy people. And this ship that was going around the world was full of these old retired wealthy British people.

And American people. And you know what struck us? They were all so grumpy. They were on a cruise around the world. And they were grumpy. And I mean, they had their moments of being happy and stuff.

[9 : 56] But mostly they were just grumpy and just irritated. And, you know, it's because these people had spent their entire lives saving up for something to make them happy.

And when they finally got it, they realized they still weren't happy. That's what Paul's talking about here. This life of deceitful desires. It never satisfies us. As I said, we were made by God to find true happiness, true relationship in Him alone.

In the Creator rather than the things He's created. But we never get that. And we always chase after the things He's created instead. Well, you see, a Christian, according to this passage, a Christian is someone who has stopped chasing after deceitful desires, which only corrupt our lives because they never satisfy us, and has started chasing after God instead.

Because they've come to realize God is the true source of their satisfaction and fulfillment, not the things He's made. And we can do that.

A Christian can do that. A Christian can truly chase after God and pursue relationship with God because Jesus has opened the way for us to do that. When He died to take the sins on Himself, the sins that separate us from God, to open the door so that we can go to God in relationship.

[11 : 21] He's opened the door of the cell, the prison cell of deceitful desires that we've been trapped in all our lives so that we can step through and we can find real relationship with the Creator, the source of all that is good.

The relationship that Adam and Eve ruined, the relationship that they were cut off from, Jesus came to reverse that so we can come back into that relationship. And that's what a true Christian is. A true Christian is someone who's stopped chasing after those deceitful desires and has turned around, repented, and lives for God and chases after Him.

And yet so many so-called Christians don't walk through that door that Jesus opened. Do you know what I'm saying? And they still spend their lives trapped following the desires of the world every day.

They come to church, they call themselves Christians, and yet day to day, at work, at sports, wherever they spend their life, they're not really that different from the world around them.

You know why? Because their desires are no different. They chase the same things, so they look no different. They haven't put off that old life, those old deceitful desires. They're like prisoners who want to stay in their prison cell, even though Jesus has come to open the doors.

[12 : 33] They're too comfortable, they're too used to their prison cell. Even though Jesus has come and opened the way to a new life, a life that satisfies, the life that we were made to live.

But in order, you know, in order to step through that, in order to start living that new life, we need to first step out of the old life. That's the process that we see in this passage.

You've got to step out, you've got to put off before you can put on. Before you can live the life that Jesus has come and lived and died for you to live, you need to put off that old life and stop chasing deceitful desires.

You know, Paul describes this in terms of putting off and putting on clothes. That's the language he's using, changing our clothes. And it's a good illustration. Think about it. If you're invited to a black tie dinner, say, okay, you don't rock up in your t-shirt and shorts and your flip-flops, do you? I mean, it's a black tie dinner. It's a fancy affair. You want to put on decent clothes. Obviously, you dress up fancy. You dress in clothes that are appropriate for the situation. Well, in the gospel, Jesus invites you to something much better than a black tie dinner.

[13 : 48] He invites you to a whole new life. But you've got to dress appropriately for that life. You see? And before you do, before you dress appropriately for that life with the clothes that Jesus is coming and freely giving you, you need to take off your old ones.

You need to go to the change booth. And you need to change. You need to get out of your prison clothes. You need to get out of a life spent chasing after the things of the world. You've got to stop looking to this world for happiness and fulfillment.

You've got to step out of that because that's the first characteristic of a true Christian. According to this passage, they have put off that old life with its deceitful desires.

Secondly, though, once they've done that, they put on. Notice that? They put on. Not only does a true Christian stop certain patterns of behavior, they start new patterns of behavior.

Paul writes, Now that's an amazing thing, isn't it? Think about it. God's plan for people is to be like Him.

[14 : 55] That's always been His plan. When He first made us in the garden, He made us, we're told, in His image. Unlike any of the other animals, we can reflect attributes of God.

We can be like God. We can love. We can think. We can reason. We can communicate. That's what being made in His image means. It means to reflect who He is.

And who is He? Who is God? Who is God? I wonder what you'd answer if you were asked, who is God? Well, the Apostle John, he sums up who God is in one word.

He says, God is love. God is love. Now, of course, He's truth and He's justice and He's holiness as well. But God's central characteristic is love.

He made us specifically to experience that love and to reflect it to other people. That is why we exist. That's why God made us.

[15 : 54] Now, sadly, we lost that when we sinned. We failed to love like God. You know, it's interesting. The moment Adam and Eve broke relationship with God, they also broke relationship with each other.

They started to bicker and fight. And then, I mean, they had children and one murdered the other. So, right from the beginning, once that relationship with God was broken, love was broken.

Our image of God was broken. And that's when murder and poverty and exploitation and family fallouts entered into our world. Because we all just became selfish.

That's what we are, really. I mean, if you boil us down, our nature, our sinful nature is just to be selfish, isn't it? It's to look out for number one. It's to only help other people or do things for other people if it benefits us in some way.

Our nature is inherently selfish. That's what the Bible says. But you know what? That's not what God made us for. God didn't make us to live a life where we were looking out for number one, ourselves, all the time.

[16 : 57] He made us to love. He made us to love, which is the opposite of selfishness. Love is giving of ourselves to someone else with no desire to be repaid for it.

That is unconditional love. God made us for that kind of love, not to be selfish. But how can we do that? How can we love that way? When it goes against every fiber in our being, every part of our sinful nature wants to naturally, without us even thinking, look out for ourselves.

When you put two kids together, young children, you don't have to teach them to be selfish, do you? No. You'd have to teach them to share. Why? Because we're naturally selfish. We naturally want things for ourselves first.

So how can we possibly love the way God wants us to when it's totally against our nature? Well, we can only do that after we first experienced God's love for us.

That's the only way that we can learn how to love the way we should. Only when you know that God loves you will you stop looking out for yourself first because you know the creator of the universe is looking out for you and so you don't have to look out for yourself.

[18:12] Only then, when you're convinced that God loves you, can you be free to really love others like you should. And you know how we become convinced that God loves us?

By realizing what he did for us in Jesus. That's what the gospel is here to convince us. The gospel is here to convince us that God loves us more than we could ever imagine.

So that we can start loving the way he wants us to. The Bible says God demonstrates his own love for us in this while we were still sinners. Christ died for us.

When we didn't deserve it. When we were going our own way. Like lost sheep. Jesus who had no sin. The son of God left his throne in heaven.

To come be one of us. To take our son of himself and die for us. Not because of anything we've done. But just because he loves us. Just because he loves us.

[19:12] Do you believe that he did that for you? Do you? Do you believe that the creator of the universe came in the form of Jesus and died for you?

Do you believe that he loves you that much? Do you believe that all of your sins that you've committed against God were paid for when Jesus willingly stepped into place and took the wrath of God for your sins on himself?

Do you believe that? Well I have the authority this morning to tell you that if you believe that you are saved. You are saved and you can know for absolutely sure that you are loved by the creator of the universe.

And when you know that for sure, when you know that, when you can wake up and know that the creator of all of this loves you deeply, passionately, then it unlocks a whole new life.

Where you can start to love others with that kind of love that God has shown you. Where you don't need to chase after what's best for you anymore because you know the creator of the universe is looking out for you.

[20:19] And he's seeking what's best for you in ways that you could never seek for yourself. And so you can now seek the best of others. You can now be other person centered.

You can love like God created you to love. If you believe the gospel. And you can put your own wants and desires aside and you can live for God's desires.

And God's desire is for you to be like him. To bear his image in this world. To show those around you who God is through loving them selflessly, sacrificially, like you know God loves you.

And that is the new life. Those are the new clothes that Jesus gives you when he died on the cross. The gospel message, when you believe it, gives you these new clothes to put on.

These clothes of love. These clothes to live like God. Those are the new clothes that Christians put on once they believe the gospel. And they start to reflect the nature of God in their life.

[21:22] And that's how you know that a person truly believes the gospel. Because they become more and more like God himself. And so, a true Christian puts off the old life, chasing off the deceitful desires.

They put on the new life to be like God. But, so that's, I hope you see, that is what this passage is clearly saying. That is what characterizes a converted person who has come to believe the gospel. But as anybody who's been a Christian will tell you, this doesn't happen immediately. It's not a one-sauve. It's not like an overnight, you get rid of all your worldly desires and live a perfectly sinless life.

You know, in a flash. No. It's a process. Not a process that you go through to get saved. Don't make that mistake. It's not a process that you have to go through to get saved. No. It's a process that starts once you are already saved.

Once you're already justified, that process starts of you becoming a new person. And it's a continual, daily putting off of worldly desires that can never satisfy.

[22:23] And it's a refocusing on God alone to satisfy those desires. And it's a daily putting on of this new life that God has saved you for. A life of love and selflessness.

That is a daily process that a true Christian will be going through. But it happens slowly. It happens over time. And so the final question I want us to consider this morning, before we finish, is, well, how does this process happen?

And is there any way that I can help that process to happen in my life? Well, yes, there is. And we see it in verse 23.

Paul tells us just what needs to happen for this putting off and this putting on. And that is that we need to be made new in the attitude of our minds. That's what he says. That is central to what's

going on here.

Central to this conversion process. To be renewed in your mind. See, it all starts actually in our minds. We only put off a life of deceitful desires when we're convinced in our minds that God can satisfy those desires.

[23 : 30] It's only then that we won't chase after them anymore. When we're convinced that God can satisfy us. Are you convinced of that? Are you convinced of that in your mind that only God can truly satisfy you?

Are you convinced of that? Or is your mind still telling you that the world can satisfy you better than God can? And we put on, you see, we put on a life of selfless love only when we're first convinced in our minds that God loves us and that he's working for our best in all things so that we don't have to.

Are you convinced of that? Do you see, you need to undergo a conversion of mind before you can undergo a conversion of life.

You need to believe these things that God has proven in the gospel, his love for you. The fact that only he can satisfy you truly. You need to truly believe them before you will change. And that conversion of mind happens when you read and you understand the Bible.

The Bible is here to convert our minds. That's why it's written in words that our minds can process and understand. And we can, it's not just, you know, spiritual feelings floating around the air.

[24 : 53] It's hard and fast, real communication from our God to engage our minds. Because this is where the conversion starts. When you read and when you commit your mind to understanding the Bible.

When you engage your mind in Scripture. When you go to Bible study. When you come to church. And you don't just sit in some kind of, you know, comatose state while the preacher preaches. You engage. You think about it. You take notes. You know, and you train your children to do the same. Even if they don't fully understand what the preacher is saying. You bring them up to think. To take notes. To engage their minds in what God's Word says. Because the more you hear and learn how things really are.

And the more you get to know God and His Word. The more you're able to put off the old life and live the new. The more you engage your mind in church and Bible study. The more you read the Bible at home.

[25 : 53] The more you can put off the old and put on the new. And so do you want to do that? Do you want to put off the old life? And put on the new life? Well then take every opportunity you get to sit under God's Word.

So He can work on your mind. Every time you sit under His Word. Every time you open the Bible. God has more opportunity to work on your mind. To convert it. To change it. And so. Being happy to attend church.

You know, only once every two or three weeks. In that case. It's kind of like being happy to drive your car. When only two of the four cylinders are firing. You know what I mean? I once had that. In a little city golf that I drove around. I was driving up. What's that? Red Hill or Black Hill. Up to Simonstown. And two of the cylinders just failed.

And I was riding on two cylinders. And if you've ever done that. If you've ever driven a car where the cylinders aren't firing properly. You know what I'm talking about. It's a slog. You can still drive. Your car will still go forward. But it will hardly go forward nearly as efficiently and fast as it should.

[26 : 59] And driving up hills is just a nightmare. Well, as a Christian. If you're only firing on two Sundays a month. Then let me tell you.

Putting off the old life and living the new will be a slog. It will be hard. And when you face difficulties. When you face the hills of life. You'll struggle through them. Without regular time in God's word. And time spent with the Christian community. You're really just handicapping yourself. Don't live a half-hearted Christian life. Just firing on two cylinders. It's just frustrating.

It really is. I want to save you the trouble. Don't. To use another metaphor. The one that Paul used. Don't try to wear the old clothes as well as the new. You know.

Because on a Sunday morning. On a Monday night. Tuesday night. Whenever you meet for Bible study. Or that hour that you spend reading the Bible at home. You can choose. Whether to chase after your worldly desires.

[27 : 58] Or to chase after God's desires. To live the old life. Or to live the new life. That's the choice you get. Take every opportunity. Don't try to wear the old clothes as well as the new.

Put off all that belongs to your old way of living. And be renewed in your mind. Through disciplined time in God's word. So that you can put on this new amazing life. That he has prepared for you. And live it to the full. Because Jesus said. I have come so that you may have life. And have it to the full. He said Jesus came to convert you and me.

And he died and rose again. To give you a brand new life. A life that God made you for. Not only in this world. But in eternity.

Are you ready to start living that new life. Now. Let's pray and ask for God's help to do that. Yes heavenly father.

[28 : 58] We've been reminded again this morning that. You came to change us. You came to truly convert us. And yet we know how easily we slip back into the patterns of the old life.

Help us. Lord. Help us. To live. To put off all that belongs to that life. Of chasing after desires that don't satisfy. Help us to put on the life that you have prepared for us.

That you have made available through Jesus dying on the cross for us. Help us Lord. To live. A life. Reflecting your image to the world. To love.

Like we were made to. We pray this in Jesus name. Amen.