

Personal Renewal

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Preacher: Rev. Thomas Hinson

[0 : 00] Good morning, everybody. Welcome to Church of the Advent. If we haven't met, my name is Tommy. I'm a pastor here. I would love a chance to talk after the service. We've been looking during this Advent season at the theme of renewal. Advent is a time where we prepare for Christmas, and so it's very appropriate to ask why Christmas is such good news for the world. Why beyond all of the gifts and all of the friends and all of the family time and all of the food and all of the lights and all of that, why is it actually good news for the world, something that goes far beyond sentimentalism?

And the reason is because life is hard. I don't have to tell you that. You look around and the world has some pretty serious problems, right? So, globally, there are things like environmental degradation or natural disasters or poverty or war. Personally, if we think about our own lives, we struggle with things like seasonal depression or loneliness or resentment and alienation even within our own families, job stress, resentment toward our bosses, all kinds of personal struggles that I think more often than not take up the vast majority of our emotional energy. And so, we've been thinking about the brokenness of the world, and we would say as Christians that all of these problems, all that is wrong with the world globally and personally stems from four kinds of relationship that are broken. And we can think of those four relationships like four concentric circles. At the very center, we have a broken relationship with God. And then radiating out from that, other kinds of relationships become subsequently broken. Our relationship with ourself is broken. There are disconnects and fragmentations within us, parts of ourselves that we don't fully understand, that we can't fully control. Then our relationship with other people is broken. And then finally, our relationship with the natural world is broken. And so, one of the reasons we believe Christmas is such good news is that we believe that Jesus came in order to heal and restore all of these relationships. And so, we talked last week about how Jesus restores and renews our relationship with God. That is spiritual renewal. And this week, we're going to focus on that next circle out how God renews the relationship that we have with ourselves. And so, we're going to be talking about the theme of spiritual renewal. And to do that, we're going to be looking at Ephesians chapter 4, verses 17 through 24. If you want to go to a place in Scripture that really has a lot to offer when it comes to personal change, how people change, how people are renewed, there are a few better places than this chapter, Ephesians chapter 4. And so, we're going to look at personal renewal, what that means. And what it shows us is that personal renewal is at least two things. Personal renewal is an all-or-nothing commitment that we make. And it's also an inside-out change or process that we experience. So, it's an all-or-none commitment, and it's an inside-out change, according to Paul. Let's pray, and then we'll dive in.

[3 : 40] Lord, we thank You for Your Word, and we come as people who know, more or less, that we need to be renewed. Lord, we know that there are times that we say or do things that we regret, times that we treat people in ways that don't reflect how we feel toward them, times where we catch ourselves feeling things that we never thought we would feel. Lord, we know that there are ways in which we feel disconnected. Lord, ways in which our past may haunt us, ways in which we feel out of control over what is happening to us. And so, Lord, in all of these ways, we pray that Your Word would knit us back together. Your Word is that which took chaos and transformed it into an ordered, flourishing world.

And so, we pray that You would take the chaos inside us and speak and make it ordered so that life can flourish within. We pray this in Your Son's holy name. Amen. So, first of all, when we talk about personal renewal and we begin to ask this passage, Paul, what personal renewal means, we see that it is, in one sense, an all-or-nothing commitment that we make. And so, we have to distinguish the way Christians talk about personal renewal from the way many people in our culture would talk

about self-development or self-improvement. Self-improvement is something that our culture, I think, is obsessed with. If you look at the self-improvement industry, it's a \$10 billion industry. \$10 billion industry, the kind of self-help, self-improvement market. So, you have books, you have podcasts, you have online classes, master classes, you have wellness apps, you have life coaching and gurus who offer themselves as life coaches, you have myriad diet and exercise plans, you have personality inventories like the

Myers-Briggs and, yes, the great golden calf, the Enneagram, right? We have all of these tools for self-improvement. And all of these, all of these are aimed at helping us identify and then tweak and sort of develop different aspects and facets of our lives, right? So, think about your career, think about your family life, think about your social life, think about your personal wellness, think about the volunteering that you do in some of your free time, think about your creative outlets, think about your recreational activities, right? All of these are different aspects of life. And self-improvement is about tweaking all of those different things so that you can become the best version of you. People have even started thinking about marriage in this way. There's a book that came out a few years ago by a psychologist named Eli Finkel, and he says in his book, it came out in, I think, 2017, he says, you know, the way we think about marriage has radically shifted over the last few decades. Marriage is no longer seen by more and more people. It's no longer seen as a lifelong self-donating commitment that you make to another person. It's more and more seen as simply one of many tools for self-improvement. And so, it's okay to marry somebody for a while if you believe that might help you in your journey of becoming the best version of you. And so, because of our focus on and obsession with self-improvement, it's not surprising that many people think of religion this way. It's a tool for self-improvement. And so, for more and more people, and I talk to people like this all the time, it doesn't matter as much whether a religion is true. What matters is whether or not we see it as being beneficial to our self-improvement project, right? So, I'll talk to people who say, oh, that's great that you're religious, you know. I read that science has shown that prayer and meditation, that those things are beneficial to your health. They're good ways of dealing with anxiety and depression and reducing stress in your life. And so, I pray too. And I say, well, who do you pray to? And they say, well, that doesn't really matter. It's just the act of sitting down and praying that's beneficial, right? That's the attitude that more and more people are taking toward religions in general. And so, it's not surprising then that people increasingly feel free to simply pick and choose which aspects of various faiths they like. It's kind of Chipotle metaphysics, if you will. So, people, you know, they say, well, if this aspect of this faith makes me feel good about myself, if it inspires me, if it helps me in my personal wellness, then it stays. But if this costs me or if it challenges me or if it forces me to rethink parts of my life, if it makes me feel bad feelings or sad feelings, then we're going to let that part go. So, that's the self-improvement approach to religion. What I want to make clear is when the Bible talks about personal renewal, it's something completely different. It's all or nothing. And you see that first in John chapter 3, the gospel reading that we had. A man named Nicodemus is a well-known, successful man in the community. He's a leader of the Jews and a Pharisee, but he visits Jesus at night in secret. He doesn't want his friends to know that he's coming to Jesus. And he's probably hoping to get a little inside access to Jesus. He's probably found him compelling, and he's probably hoping for a little bit of life coaching from Jesus, maybe some tips on how to live a better life. And Jesus seems to know this because Jesus catches him completely by surprise. In verse 3, Jesus responds to Nicodemus by saying, truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God. And it's very clear from Nicodemus' response that he finds this as shocking as we would. He says, how is that even possible to be born again, to start over from square one in your life? But what Jesus is trying to make clear is this point. Jesus did not take on flesh in order to become part of our self-improvement project. That's not the purpose of the incarnation.

[10:32] Jesus was born in the flesh so that we would have a chance to be born in the Spirit. That's why Jesus came, to offer us the opportunity for rebirth. And so, here's how Paul puts it in our passage. He says in chapter 4, verse 22, that Jesus is essentially calling you to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds and to put on the new self created after the likeness of God in true righteousness holiness. All right, hopefully it's pretty clear that this is not about tweaking yourself here or there. It's a complete and total overhaul. In, you know, real estate terms, it's a gut job of your entire identity. And so, he says, first of all, put off the old self. And this is, the verb tense here implies a past completed action. This is something that you decide once and for all to do. You

put off the old self. And what's interesting is, if you notice, at the beginning of our passage, Paul says this, now this I say and testify in the Lord that you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do. And for a long time I read this, for years I read this and thought it was talking about, that he was talking to Jews. He's saying to the Jews, don't be like those Gentiles over there. But what you realize if you go back earlier in Ephesians is, he's actually talking to Gentiles. So, he's writing to Gentiles and saying, no longer walk as the Gentiles do. So, what does this mean? It means that the people he's talking to have so put off the old self that they put off their Gentileness and they've become something altogether new. That's no longer what defines them. And then he says, put on the new self created after the likeness of God. And of course, the one who bears the likeness of God is Jesus Christ.

So, he's saying the main thing that defines you now is your relationship to God in Jesus Christ. And you say, well, what is that relationship? And that's what he said in the first few chapters of Ephesians, like chapter 1 verse 5. In love, he chose to adopt us as his children. So, put on your adoptedness. Put off your Gentileness and put on your adoptedness. So, when you think about yourself in the late hours before you fall asleep, when you wake up early in the morning and you're stressing about your life and you're stressing about the broken relationships in your family or you're stressing over the person who walked out of your life and you're tempted to put that sense of rejection on, he says, no, put on your adoptedness. The God who created the unfathomable universe chose to adopt you to make you his child. Chapter 2 verse 19, you're no longer strangers and aliens, but you're fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God. God has done the unimaginable to give you a place at the table. Put that on, is what Paul say. So, the kind of personal renewal that Jesus offers through Christmas is all or nothing. We cannot pick and choose. It's not a buffet.

Every aspect of our life then has to be re-examined through the lens of the gospel. And if you think about yourself, it's not a static thing. You are actually a nexus of many different group affiliations and associations and labels. You are a kind of irreducible complexity of labels and group affiliations. And some of those are more central to who you are and some of those are more peripheral to who you are. But if you think about your family identity, some of us have a very strong family identity. If you think about your social identity, if you think about your birthplace and, you know, where you grew up and maybe that's a strong source of pride for you, right, like people from Texas, right, that's a huge part of who they are, right? It's their identity, right? Think about your ethnic identity. Think about your sexual identity. Think about your professional identity in your career. All of these things are part of who we are. And what Paul is saying is all of that needs to be re-examined through the lens of the gospel. And listen, that can be challenging in life because as you become more connected to and defined by Jesus and the people of Jesus, as you put off your Gentileness, whatever that is for you, the more you're defined by Jesus and His people, the less connected you will feel to those other groups. And that distance can be very strange to experience. So, the more you draw close to Jesus, you may actually feel more distance from your family. Because some of you grew up in families where they're not believers. Many of you did. Families of a very cultural form of

Christianity, very nominal Christianity, or no faith at all, or you're from a family of a very completely different faith. And you know that the closer you get to Jesus and His people, the more distance there is, the less in common you have with your family. This can happen with your racial or ethnic group. You sort of find yourself in this in-between place where there's less identification with this group because you're moving closer to Jesus, right? Or your political party. You have less and less in common with others in your political party. You don't feel like you fit in as well.

You're somewhere in between. You feel like a stranger in an exile because you're identifying more and more with Jesus. It creates that kind of distance. And you know, if we look at Jesus, what you see is this. Jesus does not fit in very well. If you look at Jesus in His life and ministry, Jesus did not fit our categories very well. Every time you're tempted to say He's a conservative, He does something that seems pretty liberal, right? Every time He seems to do something that makes you think He's on this side of the issue, He kind of says or does something that makes you think, well, maybe He also kind of is coming from this perspective. You know, there are some times in which He seems to strongly reinforce the centrality of Jewish identity. And there are other times when He seems to completely overturn Jewish identity. And so it's hard to see how Jesus fits our categories, and it's because He doesn't. And what that means is the more that we look like Jesus, the less we

will fit in to groups and categories in this world, right? So personal renewal recognizes this, and it means making an all-or-nothing commitment to Jesus, no matter what that means for these other groups and affiliations. It's an all-or-nothing commitment.

[17 : 42] The second thing that it means is it means an inside-out change. So the all-or-nothing, put off the old self, put on the new, that's a once-and-for-all decision that you make.

Past completed action, that's what those verbs entail. But right in between Paul's command to put off and to put on, he says, be renewed in the spirit of your minds. And the tense here is an ongoing process that is happening continually until the next life. It goes on and on and on. We are continually, in other words, being renewed in the spirit of our minds. And you say, well, what is the spirit of my mind? And I would say that's more than just how you think. It's more than just your attitudes and assumptions.

The spirit of your mind is the very center of your affections. It's the very heart of your desires. All right. So psychologists tell us, and this is kind of a consensus among a lot of people, that the brain has two independent systems that are always at work at the same time.

First, you have within you your kind of emotional intuitive side, your emotional instinctive intuitive side. And this is maybe even subconscious or unconscious. You're not always even aware that it's there. And then you have your rational thinking side. This is the part of you that processes and analyze and thinks, right? So these two have the emotional side and the rational side.

And Jonathan Haidt, who's a psychologist at NYU, says that our emotional side is kind of like an elephant. So that emotional instinctive part of you is like an elephant. And then he says that the rational thinking side of us is like a little rider that's perched on top of the elephant.

[19 : 36] Right? Now think about this. The little rider sits on top of the elephant and holds the reins and seems to be in control. But the point of the metaphor is to understand that the rider's control over the elephant is very precarious. Right? Because as long as the rider and the elephant want to go in the same direction, no problem at all. The rider can feel like they're in control. But as soon as the elephant wants to go in a different direction, it becomes very apparent that the rider is powerless to stop it. Right? Anytime the elephant and the rider want to go in two different directions, the elephant will win every single time. Because the elephant is vastly more powerful than the rider.

And so ideally in life, you want the elephant and the rider moving in the same direction. In other words, you want all parts of you aligned. I'm thinking I want to go this way. I've analyzed the situation and it makes the most sense to go this way. And then my heart wants to go this way. My instincts want to go this way. My body wants to go this way. Right? Those subconscious drives want to go this way. And so ideally you have alignment. But that's not always the case. It's not always the case. This is what Paul is getting at. He says, you know, the rider can choose to put off the old self and put on the new self. I want to leave my former way of life. I want to choose Jesus. But the spirit of our minds is the elephant. And Paul says, it's not enough for the rider to choose Jesus. You have to get the elephant, which is the emotional instinctive side of you, moving toward Jesus as well. You have to have that kind of holistic alignment. And this is why so many of us, and I hope I'm not alone in this, this is why we have felt that disconnect inside where my mind wants to follow Jesus, but my heart, my affections, my desires are moving in a completely different direction. And that disconnect can feel like it is really tearing you apart. It can really pull you into pieces. It's very uncomfortable to feel that way. And this is why Paul says in Ephesians chapter 4, 17, he says, you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do in the futility of their minds. Right?

Think of the little rider sitting up there powerless to do anything. Right? Your mind is pretty futile at the end of the day when it comes to where you're headed. He says, they're darkened in their understanding.

They're alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to their hardness of heart. It's a heart issue. They've become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity. Now, it's easy to read this at a first pass and think, why does he have to be so moralistic and judgmental and say they're doing all of these bad things?

[22 : 34] It has very little to do with that. What we have to realize is that there are some choices and behaviors that we engage in that soften our hearts. They open our hearts up to the truth and the love of Jesus Christ. They connect us into the life of God. They bring us more alive. And there are other choices that we make and behaviors that we engage in that harden our hearts, that close us off to the love and the truth of Christ, that deaden our hearts. And Paul says, hardened hearts, and that word can also be translated petrify. Right? So, your heart becomes petrified. And you

know, something that's petrified is not supposed to be stone. It's supposed to be a living thing. It's living tissue that has become stone. And he says, so these things that you're doing, they're turning the living tissue of your heart into stone, making it less receptive. And so, this is why he's so concerned.

And he says, when you do this, you're cutting yourself off from the life of God. So, some choices that we make, you know, your mind has chosen Jesus. And he says, but some of the things that you do with your body, some of the things that you do with your heart are going to coax the elephant to move in that direction as well. But some of the choices that we make are actually going to get the elephant moving in another direction. They're going to start to tear you apart. So, you know, think about when you feel lonely or when you feel depressed, right? It gets cold, it starts to rain more, it's dark, and you start to feel lonely or depressed or that kind of, you know, some of us just really struggle during the wintertime around here. And so, what do you do when you feel lonely or depressed or just tired all the time? Well, maybe some of us just start drinking more. Maybe you start drinking too much. Or maybe you go out and you just eat a bunch of junk food. Or maybe, you know, I used to joke about certain days that were stressful being Five Guys days, because all I wanted to do was to rush out on foot if necessary to the nearest Five Guys and just crush burgers and fries until I felt better. Maybe you spend a couple of hours looking at porn. I mean, maybe it's been, you know, months and months and months or years and years, but all of a sudden, you find yourself doing it, right? Maybe you kind of give in to the temptation to go on social media and stalk your ex and to figure out what they're up to. Maybe you go online and you start buying things that you don't really need. You're kind of on Amazon. And you kind of zone out. An hour later, you've spent hundreds of dollars on junk, right? And so, when we do these things, what we're really doing is we're teaching the elephant that this is the best way to deal with those bad feelings.

You're teaching that emotional, subconscious, intuitive part of yourself, when we feel this, this is what we do. And this will maybe not make us feel better, but it will at least make us feel less. And maybe that's okay. Maybe that's the best we can hope for. And the rider is saying the whole time, you know, the rider's like, I know I shouldn't be doing this. I shouldn't be looking at this. I shouldn't be buying this. I shouldn't be wondering what my ex is doing. I shouldn't be doing all, I should stop with this drink. I should not have another drink. The rider is saying all of this, and the elephant's like, mm-hmm, okay, all right. And then the elephant's doing exactly what it wants to do. And so, what Paul is saying is the more this happens, and the more the rider experiences that powerlessness, we become, as he says, callous. The rider just says, I'm exhausted. I'm done trying, right? Because you give yourself up to sensuality. And so, your heart becomes hardened and petrified, and for believers, your faith becomes more and more empty and hollow. It's interesting, when some people go through or express doubt in their faith, or when some people, not all the time, you know, we've talked about how deconstruction can be a really good thing, but some people, when they go through what they think is a deconstruction of their faith, sometimes it's because of intellectual reasons. But in my experience, you know, over the last roughly decade, in my experience, these things are more often because the elephant and the rider have become disconnected. They've been going in different directions for so long that the rider has finally given up. Like, the rider is just powerlessly pointing to Jesus. The elephant's going in this direction, and the rider's like, my arms are tired. These reins are doing nothing. And the rider's just ready to kind of throw in the towel. And so, when someone comes and says, I'm not sure if I'm still a Christian. I'm full of doubts. I'm not sure what I believe anymore. Does the Bible really say this?

[27 : 38] Can we really trust Scripture? And all of those doubts begin. Maybe it's intellectual, and it's worth saying. It's worth saying, so what are your intellectual obstacles, and what are the challenges that you're really running into? But it's also worth asking, who are you sleeping with? You know? Who have you given your heart to who doesn't give a rip about Jesus? How much are you drinking these days?

How much time are you spending zoned out online, you know, staring at your phone? Are you eating well? Are you getting enough sleep? You know, where's the elephant in all of this? Maybe this is the rider just trying to justify the elephant. You know, there's an old Anglican saying, what the heart desires, the will chooses, and the mind justifies. You know, so most often, my heart is desiring something over here. The rider has realized it's hopeless to try to change the elephant's direction. And so, the rider says, well, maybe I can make the best of this. Okay, we're heading in

this direction. Maybe I can start to just, maybe the Bible doesn't really have anything to offer me now.

Maybe we can't really trust Scripture. Maybe all of these doctrines are outdated and irrelevant to modern life. Maybe I should be listening to these people who are saying it all needs to evolve and change. Right? So, you begin to the riders and say, hey, you know, my life is going to be so much easier if I'm not constantly pulling the reins. My life is going to be so much easier if I can't align the elephant with me. I can align myself with the elephant. And this is often how it goes.

This is not to be judgmental. It's just to figure out what behaviors in our lives are coaxing the elephant to chase them down. And another way of putting it is this. You can't experience a life-giving, vitalized relationship with Jesus if you're simultaneously giving yourself over to things that deaden and harden your heart. You can't do it. So, this is why we need the gospel.

[29 : 39] You know, the gospel is good news for the head and for the heart. It's good news for the rider and for the elephant. The gospel is good news for the rider because of this reason. For all of us who have ever felt that disconnect, where we wanted to choose Jesus but then we ended up going in this direction, and that feeling that you have of just shame and failure and futility and guilt and, you know, all of that. You know, the gospel says you don't have to sit in that shame and guilt. The gospel says this is exactly why Jesus came, because we are disconnected. Right? If we could always align our hearts and minds and go in the direction that we want to go, we wouldn't need Jesus. You know, so when Paul says that which I want to do, I don't do, and that which I don't want to do, I do, that's the rider and the elephant going in two different directions. That's why Jesus came, so that he could speak to our minds and our hearts and say, this is why I died on the cross, because this is the reality of the human condition.

And so, we don't have to sit in that shame or guilt. God's eternal nature is always to have mercy. And then beyond that, Jesus assures the rider that when you come to me and when I forgive you and when God adopts you, I give you my spirit. And the entire work of the spirit is to, over time, bring our hearts in line with our minds. It's to make us whole. It's to make us integrated. So, this is the ministry of the spirit. And then the gospel is also good news for the elephant, because the elephant, that emotional part of you, the elephant was made to feast on the love and the goodness and the beauty of God, not on the garbage that we so often feed it. And so, the things that we most want, which are things like love and belonging and meaning and purpose, can never be found in food or in shopping or in sex or in any of these other things. The only place you're truly going to find those things is in

Jesus Christ. And once the elephant in you gets a taste of that, once it tastes that, it will become more and more willing to go where the rider wants to go, which is to Jesus. And the gospel says that Jesus died for us because of his love for us, because God wanted to adopt us as his children. And that love will satisfy that hunger of that elephant if you let it. But you have to give it a chance. So, this is why it's so crucial for us to worship every week, to gather together like we're doing. This is why it's so crucial for you to find times and ways, if it's listening to a devotional online or a podcast, if it's time in the morning when you can read Scripture and pray, if it's on your commute to or from, if it's right before you go to bed, finding times. We don't build these disciplines into our lives because God will be disappointed in us if we don't. God delights in you always because you're his children. He's not angry or frustrated with you when he sees you neglecting these things.

The reason it's so important is because we have to retrain the elephant part of ourselves and show that part of ourselves where the true food and drink can be found.

[33 : 05] So, instead of shopping or going online or eating, you know, running down to five guys and numbing out or drinking too much, maybe one night instead you take that lonely or depressed feeling and you open into Psalm 42 and you pray with the psalmist, why are you cast down, O my soul? And you allow the language of Scripture to both give expression and voice to your pain and then to preach God's love and truth to your heart. And the elephant says, that feels good. That feels better than being dumb.

Maybe I'll do that again. This is why it's so important for us to do these things regularly. You're being catechized multiple times a day, hours and hours and hours a day by your iPhone, way more than you will be by Church of the Advent. And we can't even possibly compete with your phone. And so, you have to find other ways of showing the elephant where to eat and drink. So, personal renewal is an all-or-nothing commitment to put off the old self and put on the new by putting our faith in Jesus. And it's an inside-out change where our minds and our affections, the rider and the

elephant, become more and more aligned with Jesus. And hopefully, you're picking up on the central theme here. All of this is possible only because of Jesus. Jesus who became in every way like us so that we might one day become in every way like Him. Let's pray. Lord, we thank You for Your Word.

We thank You for Your Son. We thank You that You're not just offering us a set of beliefs or practices even, but that You're the God who has become flesh to feed and nourish us with Your body and blood. You're a God who has put Your Spirit in us so that even as we talk about these things on a conscious, intellectual, rational level, Your Spirit is interceding for us with groanings too deep for words, knowing our deepest needs, interceding and praying on behalf of us in ways that we can't even begin to fathom. We pray that our petrified hearts of stone would become hearts of flesh. Lord, as Your Word is planted and begins to grow in us. And we pray this in Your Son's holy name. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.