

Unity Through Maturity

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Date: 11 August 2024

Preacher: Rev. Thomas Hinson

[0 : 00] The whole idea of self-improvement is fairly popular in the modern West, and it's attractive.

There's a lot of things that are appealing because I think there's a level at which we all have things about ourselves that we would like to change, that we'd like to improve. Some of us really think that we need to get in better shape, certainly true for me.

Some of us wish we could be a little less anxious. Some of us think that we should probably be a little more organized. Some of us think we really need to be more patient with our children. And all of these are good ideas and good aspirations to have.

But the underlying assumption behind the self-improvement culture that we live in is that we as people are for the most part good. That we are for the most part in a good place.

That we're good people who live good lives. And that what we really need are just a few little tweaks here or there to make an already good person better. Because of that underlying assumption, most people tend to view religion, and that includes Christianity.

[1 : 15] Christianity, most people tend to view Christianity as merely one possible path to self-improvement for those who are religiously inclined.

So people will say, well, there are studies that show that prayer helps reduce stress and anxiety. It doesn't really matter who you pray to. There are people who say attending religious services helps foster resilience.

It doesn't really matter which religious services. That's part of the self-improvement mentality. If it makes a difference, consider doing it. Now this morning we're going to be looking at a passage that we just heard read in Ephesians chapter 4.

It begins at verse 17 and it goes through chapter 5 verse 2. And we're going to see this. That not only is Christianity not merely one possible path to self-improvement.

But in fact, Christianity alone is able to offer something that you can't find anywhere else in our culture. And that is the promise of actual, real, flesh and blood transformation.

[2 : 17] So we're going to be looking at Paul's words to the church in Ephesus where he's talking about conversion. And we're going to look first at why we need it, and then we will look at what it means.

What is conversion and what makes Christian conversion unique? So let's pray, and then we will dive in. Our Lord, we thank you for being our God who is with us no matter what, who goes before us in all things, who loves us, who gave his life for us.

We pray now that you would simply fulfill your promise to be with us and to speak to us. And wherever we're coming from this morning, whether we're here fully focused in good spirits or whether we are struggling, and it's a miracle that we even made it in the door.

Lord, wherever we are this morning, we pray that you would speak to us as only your Holy Spirit knows what we need. We pray this in your Son's holy name. Amen. So first of all, as we consider this idea of conversion, why would we need to consider this?

In this place in Ephesians, Paul is talking to Christian converts. These are Christian converts in Ephesus, church that exists in this largely pagan culture.

[3 : 32] And when he refers to Gentiles, he's talking about non-Christians. These are a way he's talking about unbelievers. He says this, Now I say and testify in the Lord that you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do, meaning unbelievers, in the futility of their minds.

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. Now this may sound harsh to our ears, but it's one of the most accurate diagnoses of the human condition you will find anywhere.

To put it plainly, the apostle is saying this. He's saying that on our own, human beings are completely out of touch with reality. That's what he's saying. Now we're a room full of smart people.

We're not accustomed to people saying that we're totally out of touch with reality. But he's saying we're totally out of touch with reality on our own as human beings because we are cut off from the source of truth in life.

If we're alienated from the source of truth in life, we can't possibly accurately apprehend reality. The thing is, though, we don't even know this about ourselves.

[4 : 48] In other words, we can live our entire lives assuming that we perceive reality correctly, having no idea that there is any issue. Think of the character Neo in The Matrix.

He lives his life believing that he accurately perceives the world as it is, that he lives in the real world, only to discover that he is actually living in a simulated reality designed to keep him docile.

So that he does not realize the truth about his life, which is that he is, in fact, a slave to evil forces. In the case of The Matrix, to machines.

And there are many, many, many people in our society who live their entire lives thinking that they know what life is all about, thinking that they know why we're here.

Life is about being happy. Life is about being successful. Here's the roadmap to follow. Go to school. Find a career. Buy a house. Start a family.

[5 : 50] Build up a good retirement account. And hopefully make a bit of a difference along the way. That concept of life is a simulated reality designed to keep us docile.

In chapter 6, Paul says there are, in fact, spiritual forces of evil intent on keeping us that way. When we hear about spiritual evil forces, we tend to think of scary movies we've seen about demonic possession and the like, and certainly, actually, we believe that that kind of thing does happen.

But the truth is, is that Satan has found a much more effective way to control people, and that is simply to convince us that there's nothing more to this life.

It's simply to convince us that there is no transcendent reality, that there is no greater purpose or meaning to any of this.

He can control us precisely by convincing us that the most important things in life are our comfort, our status, and the size of our 401k.

[7 : 02] But just like Neo in The Matrix, many people live their lives following that script, but they have a nagging suspicion that there has to be more to life than this.

And they ask themselves in the late watch of the night, is this really all there is? As they sit behind their computer at their desk, they ask themselves, is this really all there is?

And the gospel then speaks into that and says, you're right. You're right. The gospel is a massive reality check.

It wakes us up to the truth that we have been living in an illusion, in a simulated reality designed to keep us docile, and that in fact we are slaves.

We're slaves to sin. We're slaves to the evil forces that hold sway in this world. And the gospel helps us to realize the truth of our condition, that we don't just need a better version of ourselves, that we need a new self.

[8 : 09] We need an entirely new, ground-up identity as free men and women. And that comes through conversion. Now let's talk about conversion.

If that's why we need it, that's the problem it's trying to solve, then what is conversion? See, a lot of people think of conversion as simply adopting a new set of beliefs, a new set of practices, you convert to this lifestyle, you convert to this worldview, and you're adopting certain beliefs and assumptions and practices.

Certainly that's part of it, but the real meaning of the word conversion is more about transformation, transforming from one thing to another thing. And when we look at how the Apostle Paul talks about Christian conversion, we see that it's a little more complicated than that, that it is two things at the same time, that on the one hand, Christian conversion is a completed action.

It can happen all at once. But right along with that, conversion also has an aspect that is a continual process. So it is both a completed action and a continual process.

And it is absolutely essential that we understand how both of those need to be held together. So first let's talk about conversion as a completed action.

[9 : 30] Christian conversion is something that happens as soon as we turn to Jesus and as soon as we put our faith in Him. In verses 20 through 23, Paul says that these Christians to whom he is speaking are Christians because they have, as he says, learned Christ.

In other words, they've heard the gospel and they've believed it. They've learned Christ. They've learned that human beings are cut off from God because of sin and rebellion.

They've learned that Jesus Christ died and rose again to save us and set us free. And then when these Christians, when they repented, when they turned from their sin, when they embraced grace and forgiveness that comes through Jesus, when they were baptized, through all of that, they experienced their own death and resurrection.

They went through their own death and resurrection. The language Paul uses is they put off the old self. That self died. And they put on a new self. This new self was created after the likeness of Jesus.

They put on the identity of Jesus. And when they put on that new self, they took on His righteousness. They became children of God.

[10 : 50] So he's saying on the one hand, when you repent and when you put your faith in Jesus, at that very moment, you are spiritually transformed. And the New Testament uses different phrases to describe this.

We have been crucified with Christ and are therefore a new creation. We have been saved by grace through faith. We have been transferred from the domain of darkness into the kingdom of God's beloved Son.

These are once for all completed action descriptions. You were transferred. You're no longer here. You're here. Your identity is new. The old self has died.

The new has risen. All of it happens once and for all. But there is another aspect of conversion that is ongoing. It's a continual process.

If you notice, right between where Paul says, putting off the old self and putting on the new self, we see this phrase, be renewed to be renewed in the spirit of your minds.

[11 : 51] And the verb tense here implies a continual process that happens over the course of our lives. So at the same time as we have put off and put on, we are being renewed continually in the spirit of our minds.

The Puritan John Owens gets at this in his book, *The Mortification of Sin*. That even though we are saved from the penalty of sin, we still live under the power of sin, the influence of sin.

In either, he says, either we are fighting against it and putting it to death, or it is gradually taking over. It's either losing ground in our lives or it's gaining ground in our lives.

And that has everything to do with our level of commitment to putting sin to death wherever we find it, to mortifying sin. You know, I grew up in North Carolina. And in North Carolina, as well as many places in the southeastern United States, kudzu is a major problem.

Kudzu, if you've never seen it, it's an ugly vine. It can climb anything, and it grows very, very, very quickly. And if kudzu starts growing in the corner of your property, you have to root it out and get rid of it immediately.

[13 : 07] If you neglect it, if you pretend like it's not there, it will take over. It can completely take over your yard. It can cover trees. It can cover power lines. It can cover entire houses.

I used to drive by properties kind of near my house where I grew up, and you could tell at one time it was a beautiful property completely taken over by kudzu. All you can see are these fuzzy, ugly leaves and vines just covering everything like a blanket.

And kudzu is such a problem because it kills everything it consumes. It suffocates trees by cutting them off from light and from life. And they suffocate and they die.

And I think this is a powerful picture of the way sin works in our lives. It takes root in the corner of our yard, right, in the corner of our heart. And we notice it, and it's not a big deal.

That was just a one-time thing. You know, I just... And we kind of downplay it. We got more important things to think about. But over time, it starts to take over, and it can do so a lot more quickly than we think.

[14 : 13] And it begins to take over, and it begins to cut us off from the source of life and light. It begins to create distance between us and God. We start to feel an increasing apathy in our hearts.

We don't want to pray. We don't want to worship. We don't want to go to church. Now, we may make other kinds of excuses about why that's happening, but the reality is sin, like kudzu, is covering our hearts over more and more and more.

And the more we suffocate, the less we care. To use Paul's language, when we don't fight against sin in our lives, it results in, as he says, hardness of heart, apathy.

Every time we give in to sin, our hearts get a little bit harder because we become desensitized. We get better and better and better at justifying and explaining away the sin in our lives.

If you love God, that's a good sign. If you hate God, you can't hate God without passion. And there's something in there that God can use.

[15 : 18] The most dangerous state of your heart is the state of apathy. And apathy is the result of ongoing sin that is in no way resisted in our lives.

Now, St. Benedict also recognized this. The second vow taken by Benedictine monks is the vow of the conversion of life. The conversion of life.

According to Paul Wilkes, conversion of life is a continuing and unsparing assessment and reassessment of oneself. Continuously and rigorously asking, where has sin taken root in my life?

And then setting about killing that sin. This is what Paul is talking about from verse 25 through the very end of our passage. And it's really worth looking at the specific examples that Paul gives us because they give us a very practical way to think about daily conversion and what it actually requires.

To think about rooting out sin wherever we see it in our lives. Because it would be very easy for this to remain a kind of esoteric, sort of 30,000 foot concept.

- [16 : 32] Paul really wants to push this into the lives of his people. Here's what it actually means. So here's the example he gives. Number one, you've put off the old self, you've put on the new self, you're seeking to be renewed in the spirit of your mind, therefore put off falsehood and speak truth.

Put off all falsehood in your life and speak truth. You know, going back to the matrix example for just a second, if you've seen the movie, you know that there are people who once they're set free from the matrix, they actually want to go back.

Because living in reality is hard. And they much prefer the simulated reality of the matrix. Life is much better. There are people who very much think that the most comforting way to deal with their problems, the most comforting way to deal with the stress, is to simply slip back into the illusion that everything's okay.

But the Christian life is about clinging to the truth, no matter how hard or uncomfortable it may be. Esther DeWalt says it well.

Now, being committed to God is not about being nice. It is about being real. I want to say that one more time. Being committed to God is not about being nice.

- [17 : 54] It is about being real. And that is extremely important to remember because it is so much easier to be nice than it is to be real. There are many Christians who learn how to be nice.

We learn how to talk and we learn how to act in ways that seem Christian. And there are people who can do this our entire lives. We learn how to be around church people, how to say things that make us seem spiritually mature, how to act in ways that convey spiritual wisdom.

And yet, all the while, sin has taken root and is running rampant in our lives. But it is so much easier to be nice than to recognize that hard reality.

But conversion of life calls us to rigorous self-honesty, which involves humility, it involves openness. Openness to God teaching us about the parts of ourselves that need to be changed.

Openness to God speaking through other people into our lives, helping us see parts of our lives that need to be changed. So this is the first thing. Put off falsehood and cling to the truth, number two.

- [19 : 09] Second example Paul gives us. Put off sinful anger and put on kindness and forgiveness. Put off sinful anger and put on kindness and forgiveness.

Why sinful anger? Because anger itself is not necessarily sin. There is such a thing as righteous anger. There is a time and a place where it is appropriate for God's people to get angry. But anger can very easily lead us into sin.

And Paul gives us a description of what that might look like. Out of anger we can practice corrupting talk, which is we use harmful or abusive language.

Right? We say things that are demeaning or offensive or hurtful to other people out of our anger. It can lead to anger. It can lead to bitterness, which is a resentful spirit that refuses to forgive or reconcile, that just holds on to anger.

It can lead to contempt, a kind of devaluing and dehumanizing other people, maybe sometimes only in your mind. It can lead to slander, which is speaking ill of people behind their backs in order to destroy their reputation.

- [20 : 23] It's a way of harming them indirectly. Paul says when we get angry, it's very easy for that anger to take the next step, which is to lead into various forms of sinful behavior.

And going back to the larger point, the more we give into that, the more we indulge in that, the more sin takes root. And Paul uses a different image.

He says, you're giving the devil a foothold. That's another way of talking about that kudzu in the corner. You're creating an opening. And we're going to talk about this more in a couple of weeks on Labor Day weekend.

We're going to talk about the spiritual forces of evil, the powers and principalities, and how they work in our lives. But this kind of sin can create an opening. And then evil comes in and amplifies it, amplifies the harm it does.

If you want to know whether or not you have given the devil a foothold through anger in your life, how do you respond when people raise concerns about it in your life?

[21 : 30] How do you respond when people close to you say, hey, I think there might be an anger issue here? People who struggle with sinful anger will often respond to confrontation with, not surprisingly, more anger.

Right? They will flip the script. They will accuse you of things. They will play the victim. They will do anything and everything to get the focus off of the real issue.

Why? Because they're ignoring the kudzu. They don't want to see it. And they don't want you to see it either. So their family and friends tend to steer clear of them.

They tend to look the other way just to keep the peace because it's way too hard to actually go there. Right? So anger, Paul is very clear about this. Anger needs to be resolved very quickly.

He says, don't let the sun go down on your anger. That's what he's talking about here. Now, you often hear this applied to marriage. People say, it should be a rule in your marriage that if you're having an argument, you don't go to bed before you resolve the argument.

[22 : 33] Okay, I'm a father of three. I'll just tell you that's a really nice idea in principle. It's not always practically possible. Okay? And I'll tell you this. As somebody who's had a lot of arguments in my marriage over 17 years, I will say that there are some arguments that benefit from a good night's sleep.

Might actually shift your perspective. What Paul's really talking about here is that we should never simply allow anger to remain unaddressed.

We should never just say, well, I'm just that kind of person. That's just how I act. I just tend to, this is how I handle conflict. No, if you're using harsh and abusive language, if you're hurting the people around you, it needs to be addressed because anger is corrosive.

It needs to be rooted out as quickly as possible. So that's number two. Put off sinful anger. Put on kindness, gentleness, forgiveness. The third example he gives, put off selfish gratification and seek to love generously.

Seek to love sacrificially. And he uses a fantastic image of transformation. Imagine a thief who is so radically transformed that they become a philanthropist.

[23 : 49] That's the image that he uses. I love it. It's a 180 degree change in orientation. Instead of being someone who takes what doesn't belong to you from someone else, you become the kind of person who gives what does belong to you to someone else.

Right? It's a complete change in orientation toward yourself, toward your stuff, toward other people. And by the way, this isn't just talking about money, although it has that in mind.

It could really be applied to our entire approach to relationships. Do we tend to focus what we can get from people? Or do we tend to focus on what we can give, what we can offer?

How can we serve and bless? You know, this is one of the issues with the hookup culture, is that it builds relationships entirely based around what I can get in this moment from this person with little to no regard for the long-term impact on that person.

It's also a way of thinking about marriage in a nutshell. Right? Marriage, most of the decisions that we make in marriage from one day to another boil down to this. Am I going to prioritize my needs in this moment over yours?

[25 : 02] Or am I going to put my needs aside for the moment and focus on yours? Most decisions in marriage can kind of be distilled down to that fundamental posture, that fundamental orientation.

Is my role here to serve you and see you built up, or is it to take what I think I'm owed from you? Right? So these are some of the examples that Paul gives that help us get a concrete picture.

What does it mean to put off the old self, put on the new self, and be renewed in the spirit of our minds? These are the kinds of things he has in mind. These are not the only examples. There are a million examples we could give, but this begins to give us an idea of what it looks like in daily life.

So this is how Christian conversion works. It's both a completed action and it is a continual process. And friends, it is crucial that we hold those two things together.

As just a final thought experiment, what happens if we think conversion is just a one-time event and we forget that it's a continual process?

[26 : 12] What happens? You know, I came to faith when I was 10. I came to faith when I was 5. I never remember coming to faith. I've always been a Christian. I came to faith radically when I was 18. And it happened back then.

And it was a completed event. Now I'm a Christian. Right? If that's how we think about conversion, well, it results in people who may call ourselves Christians, but our lives really don't look that different than anyone else's.

You know, maybe we came to faith when we were in our teens. Maybe we think that's all there is to it. But we've never really realized the importance of discipleship, of formation, of spiritual disciplines, of ongoing obedience.

Our faith doesn't really shape the way we spend our money. It doesn't shape the way we spend our time. It doesn't shape the way we approach conflict or politics. In fact, it tends to be the opposite. You know, we tend to be people whose faith is far more influenced by money, by politics, than the other way around.

It kind of leads to people who call themselves Christians, but live as functional atheists. Call themselves Christians, but live as functional atheists. On the flip side, what happens if we only think of conversion as a continual process, but we forget that it's also a completed action?

[27 : 33] Well, that, friends, can lead to an enormous amount of discouragement. Because living lives of obedience to Christ can be difficult. It can be costly. It can put us at odds with family and friends.

Because in some cases, we make very, very, very different choices based on a different set of priorities. I mean, thinking about the examples that we just talked about, seeking to put off all falsehood and only speak truth to ourselves and to others, seeking to put off all sinful anger, seeking to put off all self-gratification in order to live lives of truth and patience and forgiveness and sacrificial love, the truth is, speaking from a certain amount of experience, we will fail much more often than we succeed.

And that is simply the reality. And when we fail, right, because that's how it works, you seek to obey, and there are some victories, and then there are some failures.

And when we fail, we need to be reminded that our relationship with God does not depend on our obedience. It depends on Christ's obedience.

And Christ's obedience is a completed action, right? Jesus Christ was perfectly obedient to the Father. And because of that, on the cross, Jesus accomplished everything necessary for our salvation.

[29 : 01] And when Jesus on the cross says, it is finished, that's what He means, completed action. Everything necessary to secure our place in God's kingdom has been completed.

It is finished. It cannot be taken away. It cannot be added to. So, knowing that our conversion is a continual process reminds us that change is possible.

It's a continual process. It reminds us that change is possible. We can grow. We can mature. We should be able to look back years ago and see ways that we've grown in faithfulness.

However, knowing that our conversion is also a completed action reminds us that God loves us, He delights in us, and no matter how many times we fail or mess up, He will always love us.

He will always delight in us. And that will never change. It will never change. Let's pray. Lord, our Lord, our Heavenly Father, we here need to hear and be reminded of either one or the other of these true realities, Lord.

[30 : 18] Some of us need to be spurred to action. Lord, we become complacent in our faith. Lord, we may feel Your Holy Spirit stirring us.

Lord, You may be calling attention to areas of our lives where we need Your grace to penetrate, where we need to put sin to death. Lord, You're convicting us, and we need that.

Lord, help us to have eyes to see what is real and true of our own hearts. And then some of us, Lord, we labor under a sense of failure and inadequacy. We feel like You are frustrated with us or angry at us.

Lord, maybe we struggle with despair. Maybe we can't see You in our lives. We need to be reminded of the completeness of our salvation, the security of our salvation, the inheritance that we have in You because of not our obedience, but the obedience of Jesus Christ.

So, Lord, wherever You find us this morning, I pray that You would comfort us. And then if there are people here who don't know You, Lord, who have never thought about this before, we pray that through the power of Your Spirit, You would give them eyes to see reality, to recognize that the most important thing in our life is not our success or our bank account, Lord.

[31 : 38] It is our relationship with You. And I pray that right now, this morning, Your Holy Spirit would go to work bringing those people into Your arms. We pray this, Lord, for Your glory and for our good in the name of Jesus Christ.

Amen.