

“THE HATER BECOMES THE HATED.”

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Scripture Texts: Acts 9:19-31

Introduction.

There is a new bad word in our culture. It has actually been around for a while, but you may not be aware that it's now a bad word. I'm going to say it out loud. The bad word is conversion.

Conversion or the act of attempting to convert someone is now considered scandalous in our secular and pluralistic culture where tolerance is the name of the new god.

Conversion is called arrogance, disrespect, thinking our way is right and their way is wrong. How dare we look with condescension on the religious views and opinions of others. Tolerance trumps truth.

We can talk our truth as long as we respect their truth and consider them equal and don't try to pull them over to our side of the truth.

Some go so far as to say conversion and attempting to convert people is violence, violence to their views and ideas, their traditions and cultures and perhaps centuries old beliefs. Don't be fooled. This is just another attack on the Gospel and on the glory of Jesus and His cross.

One real example. Counseling those who are entangled in a web of sexual sin or gender confusion with a goal to helping them come to the truth about themselves and sin, is now labeled conversion therapy and actually outlawed in some states. Christian counselors are not allowed to help people who desperately need deliverance from sinful behaviors and soul destroying lies.

The Gospel is a call to turn from what is dangerous and eternally destructive, to repent, to turn away from sin and turn toward truth and life. Conversion is central to the message of the Bible.

Isaiah 55:7 Let the wicked forsake his way and the evil man his thoughts. Let him turn to the Lord, and he will have mercy on him, and to our God, for he will freely pardon.

Paul says that Christ sent him to the Gentiles in order to “open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me” (Acts 26:18).

Conversion may be a dirty word in our culture but what is the alternative, to leave people in their sin and darkness facing eternal judgment? For the sake of love, we must be bold in calling others to repentance and faith, however radical and costly that may be for them or us.

The text before us gives a clear picture of the nature of conversion, need for it and cost of it.

An amazing conversion.

Everyone who heard about Saul’s conversion were amazed, shocked, stunned by the staggering sudden change. No one could believe it, it was so totally outside of the expected.

Saul’s hatred of the Gospel and of Christians and this heresy about this man Jesus is so strong and so widely known, there can be no other explanation but the power of the living God.

How many people do a complete 180 in life, a complete sea change, a complete reversal of course? God is a God of great turn arounds. Not only in the Bible, not only in Saul’s life, but in our lives as well.

Charles Colson is a modern example, Special Counsel to Richard Nixon, known as President Nixon’s hatchet man, indicted in the Watergate scandal and sent to prison. In prison he became a Christian and later he founded Prison Fellowship.

I wonder if it took Christians a while to accept Charles Colson the way it took for Saul.

We all need a Barnabas or two in our lives. Someone who believes in us, who doesn’t hold our past sin and failures against us, who thinks the best about us. And there are those around us who need us to be that way toward them.

Our family was talking yesterday about all the craziness in our culture and how people are digging around in other people’s past to find dirt, to find the stupid things people did when they were younger and then expose it and use it against them.

The world says the past defines us, stays with us, can't be forgotten or forgiven.

Conversion says we can change, we can be redeemed, we can be made new. We are not defined by our sin, we are defined by our Savior, I am in Christ, I am a new person.

Christians have an opportunity to be a witness, a light in this culture, of what it looks like to extend grace and forgiveness. If Paul who was a murderer can be extended grace and forgiveness how much more can we do the same, to give it and receive it.

Christians like Stephen praying for God to forgive those who were stoning him.

Christians like Ananias overcoming fear and going to Saul to pray for him and forgive him.

Christians like Barnabas who have large hearts and generous spirits, who show hospitality.

We believe in a God who is still a God of amazing turn arounds, doing things that stagger the imagination and no one expected. This is true for us individuals and it is true for whole nations.

That's happening in the nation of *Iran* right now. What do you know about Iran? A completely Muslim country, an Islamic Republic, ruled by a strict Islamic government under the Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei (ka-men-na-e).

What you won't hear in the news media is that Iran has one of the fastest growing Christian movements in the world. The people of Iran are very dissatisfied with Islam and there is a mass exodus of Muslims leaving Islam by the thousands to Christianity. The underground church in Iran is exploding. It is the fastest growing church with no buildings.

Efforts by the ayatollahs to destroy Christianity have backfired. Persecution meant to destroy the church has caused it to grow faster than ever.

In 1979 the Iranian revolution took place, all missionaries were kicked out, evangelism was outlawed, Bibles were banned, pastors killed, churches destroyed. There were 500 Christians. Today the estimates are as high as one million.

“God is raising up one of the fastest growing movements of former Muslims that are falling in love not only with the God of Israel, not only Israel's king, not only Israel's Messiah, they are actually falling in love with the Jewish people. As a result of this you have a prayer movement in Iran that is crying out for the salvation of Israel.”

Watch Sheep Among Wolves I and II.

What God did in Acts, He has not stopped doing. He is turning things around out of the blue in astonishing and amazing ways. Jesus is alive and He is the Son of God and He is building His Church and His Kingdom on earth.

A fruitful (real) conversion.

Notice the word immediately. This is the evidence of the Holy Spirit in him, that he is completely submitted to God and whatever God calls him to do.

Why did Paul start in the synagogues where he had letters to find Christians and arrest them? Why not start someplace where it would be much easier to begin his Christian witness?

In old navy parlance, Paul has *nailed his colors to the mast*. In a sea battle a ship would display their colors to show their loyalty and they would strike their colors if they surrendered. To nail a ship's colors to the mast meant a fight to the death, no surrender. Paul has nailed his colors to the mast. And so, should we.

This is a test of his loyalty. He was a Jew, a Pharisee, an important man in his circles. Would he try to straddle the fence, keep a foot in both camps, compromise to get along, or would he declare his allegiance to his new Master, Savior and Lord, Jesus Christ and His church?

He preached and proclaimed Jesus and the more he did, the stronger he became. Stronger in the strength of his convictions and in the force of his defense and in the power of his persuasion.

He had been trained by Gamaliel, one of the best teachers of the day. He also had legal training as a scribe and lawyer. He had a brilliant mind. God took all these natural gifts and talents and put them to use for a supernatural purpose, for the sake of the Gospel.

God can take our brokenness, our annoying traits and sanctify them.

God can take a stubborn, willful, argumentative child and use that for His glory.

Declare your allegiance to Christ every opportunity you have, use every gift and ability you have for Christ. Live and act and speak in a way that shows your conversion is real.

A Christ-centered conversion.

Saul may not have been up to speed on all of Christian theology, but one thing he knew now, Jesus is not just a man, Jesus is the Son of God.

The Jesus he thought was dead and was so adamantly opposed to, he now knows to be living, and not only that but is the living God of the universe.

In short time Paul went from “Who are you, Lord” to “Jesus is Lord, the Son of God.”

I Corinthians 2:1-5 And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. 2 For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. ... 4 and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, 5 so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.

From the very beginning Paul demonstrated that he was not ashamed of the Gospel.

Romans 1:16 For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.

He is a changed man and Jesus is the one who changed him. Are we changed and can others tell who did it? Is Jesus Lord of your life? Live so people know Jesus is Lord of your life.

A humbling, even life-threatening conversion.

Saul grew quickly in strength, in power and force of argument, in being able to refute the Jews, his reasoning and understanding became very influential. So much so when people were not able to win with words, they turned to violence. See Stephen. See today's college campuses.

No one persecutes someone who is ineffective or harmless or easy to answer or dismiss. Violent actions are often driven by convicted consciences that are trying to silence any voice that pricks their conscience. Those who are friends with darkness hate the light.

An author once said the biggest compliment you can pay to an author is to burn his books.

Someone else said, “A wolf will never attack a painted sheep.”

Counterfeit Christianity is always safe, it is no threat to anyone or anyone's conscience.

“To suffer persecution is to be paid the greatest of compliments because it is the certain proof that men think we really matter” (Barclay).

Paul proved his conversion by what he was willing to suffer, by his sacrifice, by his good works.

Why would Paul who was fearless in the face of so much terrible persecution and beatings, sneak out of town in this manner? He knew it was not his time to be captured.

Paul later refers to this incident as a humbling experience, a sign of weakness, having to sneak away with the help of others.

II Corinthians 11:30-33 If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness. ... 32 At Damascus, the governor under King Aretas was guarding the city of Damascus in order to seize me, 33 but I was let down in a basket through a window in the wall and escaped his hands.

Hated by all his old Jewish friends. Unwelcome by all his new Christian friends. A man without a home, lonely, on the outside looking in, wishing he could get in.

Everyone feared him. It was thought utterly impossible that Saul would now be one of them. Was this a ruse, a trojan horse kind of thing, was Paul a spy deceiving them?

This is humbling, humiliating. A man used to open his own doors, now has to have them opened for him. He is learning an invaluable lesson, that apart from God we can do nothing.

His suffering began immediately. What should we do when the church rejects us or hurts us? Reject the church? No, it is the body of Christ, we should exercise patience and wait on God. Be understanding that there is fear and hurt all the way around.

Hurt people hurt people, so if someone hurts you, rise above it, and look not to your own hurt but to theirs.

Paul accepts the persecution he receive from the hands of enemies and from friends. He waits patiently on the Lord, he waits for a reconciliation to come.

If you are being pushed away, don't let it turn to bitterness and anger and hate. And examine your own heart to be sure you are not one who is pushing someone away who wants peace, reconciliation, fellowship.

Notice what Paul desires, fellowship with God's people, to be counted among the disciples of Jesus. This is quite a change for a man who once held the seat of high power in the Sanhedrin.

This is Christ path for his disciples, they must be humble and willing and able to submit before they can teach in His Church.

Paul gets a dose of reality from the very beginning. In the work of the Gospel there is not constant success. There is a cross. Paul's experiences in ministry kept him grounded, kept him humble, kept him real, kept him dependent on the Lord.

Implications and application.

Our conversion is pure grace, amazing grace that God would transform sinners like us. We were dead and now we are alive. Grow in this grace strengthened by a clear vision of Jesus as the Son of God. Trust the power of God to change you and those you pray for.

What do we expect from God? What do we ask of God? What does this say to us about our prayer lives? What does this say to our anxieties and fears and doubts?

The most radical and fanatical opponents of Jesus are vulnerable to God's sovereign grace. If He could change Paul, He can change anyone and any nation. What encouragement to pray bold, courageous prayers. No matter what the threat or danger, God is greater.