

THE CONVERSION OF A PHARISEE

ACTS 9:1-20

I hate to admit it, but I actually enjoy romantic comedies. There's just something about that predictable storyline, the idea of love conquering all, the sappy lines, that gets me every time. But there are some romantic comedies that I can't stand. They're those ones that begin by introducing the main guy in the story, and he's just a dirt bag, I mean just a complete jerk. He's a womanizer and selfish and arrogant. And of course, he meets this girl who completely changes him. Suddenly he's showering and changing his underwear daily, he's opening doors, buying dinner, rescuing cats out of trees. And the reason I can't stand it, and probably a lot of you can't, is that they've made this character so bad that you think there is no way that just falling in love could ever remedy who he is. People don't change like that just by coming face to face with love.

We can easily feel the same about the story that we're looking at this morning. The conversion to Christianity of Saul of Tarsus, on the road to Damascus is probably the most famous conversion story in the history of the world. But Saul is such a dirt bag, such an arrogant jerk, such a villain, that there is no way that he could possibly be so transformed by this encounter on the Damascus Road.

Now in the Northwest especially, the word "conversion" usually makes people pretty uncomfortable. If you ever want to end a conversation quickly, start talking about conversion. Over the past several years in China, often, especially if we were in Thailand for vacation, we'd run into others vacationing, (people that vacation in Thailand a lot like Northwesterners) and inevitably it would come up that we lived in China, which of course would beg the question of what we were doing there... And sometimes, if weren't in the frame of mind to just avoid an awkward conversation (which sometimes we were) we'd say that we were missionaries there with the Tibetan people. And most of the time the person would sort of scrunch up their face and say, "So you're trying to convert them?" The whole idea of conversion makes a lot of people uncomfortable... nervous. It goes against what it means to coexist. It's intolerant and narrow minded.

But often, even for people inside the church conversion brings up questions. What does it mean to be converted? Am I converted? Do I need to be converted? And the answer is yes! The Bible uses a variety of imagery to communicate this, but that unanimous answer is yes!

Matt. 18:3 - "Unless you turn and become like little children you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."

John 3:3 - "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God."

Matthew and John are using different language, but they mean the same thing. Something has to happen to us for us to be brought in to God's family, for us to become a Christian. Whether we call that being born again, the new birth, becoming like children, or conversion, the meaning is the same. And this is what we have in front of us this morning from Paul's life.

Now one of the difficult things about conversion is that in the Bible we see so many different stories of conversion, and they are so diverse. Just last week we looked at the Ethiopian eunuch and his conversion. And that story is completely different than so many other stories that we see throughout Acts. In a couple of weeks we're going to see Cornelius and his family. Some of these stories are sudden and dramatic events with signs and wonders, and others are quiet and simple. And the danger, as Mike mentioned last week, is that we turn to any one of these as "THE standard" of how conversion should happen, what it should be marked by. And this is one of the dangers of Paul's story that we're looking at today. I know there were times for me, as a young believer, where I looked at stories like Paul's, where I heard dramatic conversion stories from others, and I thought, "I wish I had a testimony like that!" Have you ever thought that? Instead of looking for one standard WAY that things happen, it is better to look at Paul's story as a pattern, an example for us of some of the elements of conversion.

Paul himself tells us in 1 Timothy that this is how we ought to look at his story.

1 Tim. 1:15b-16: "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost. But I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, *Christ might display* his perfect patience *as an example* to those who were to believe in him for eternal life."

Paul's story is to be a pattern for those who believe. Every church has people that are unconverted, converted, think they are converted. All need to understand what conversion is.

This morning what I'd like to do is begin with a working definition of conversion and then slowly unpack that. So here it is, this is not a definition that you'll find in any theology books, and it doesn't capture the fullness of conversion, but it's my definition just for our

purposes this morning in looking at Paul's story. Conversion is what happens when God acts to bring us face to face with *who He is* and *who we are*.

1. *God acts.*

It's easy to think of conversion in terms that we've heard around us in our Evangelical culture. That conversion is a matter of "asking Jesus into your heart," or "making a decision for Christ." But it's interesting that in all the conversion stories we see in Acts that we never see this kind of language used. We never see Ananias leading Paul in the sinner's prayer. Peter never makes gives an altar call after his sermons. Becoming a Christian is not simply praying a prayer or making a decision for Christ, or deciding that we want to make a change in our life. Not joining a club or signing a petition. It's not attending church every Sunday, or living a life that always asks what Jesus would do. Conversion isn't something we do, but something that is done to us.

Look at the story. Saul is hell-bent on bringing justice to these Christians, these followers of the way. Saul is there, overseeing the stoning of Stephen, and that leads to the scattering of the disciples from Jerusalem because of persecution. And now he is hunting them down. He's pursuing them to the ends of the earth. Saul is like Javert in *Les Mis*, ruthlessly pursuing Jean val Jean. And suddenly on this path bent on destroying those following the Way, he's knocked to the ground. Jesus intervenes in Paul's story. And during Paul's whole story we see Jesus directing the characters in Saul's story in a way the accomplishes his purposes in Saul's life. What does Paul contribute to these process? His brokenness, his sin...

Conversion is not a process that we control, that we get ultimate determination in. It isn't something that we make happen, but something that happens to us. If we still feel like we are the main actor in our story we're not getting the nature of true conversion. In conversion we are acted upon. Conversion involves a realization that it is no longer us acting to investigate the claims of Christianity, to proactively search out truth, but the claims of Christianity are forcing themselves upon us. We realize that in our story we are no longer the subject, but the object. The reality of Jesus confronts us in such a way that we don't feel like something is happening because of us, but in spite of us.

C.S. Lewis described his own conversion in this language of feeling compelled, of being acted upon by something outside himself:

"Before God closed in on me I became aware that I was holding something at bay or shutting something out. I felt myself being there and then given a free choice. I could open the door

or keep it shut, but I chose to open it. I say I chose, but it did not really seem possible to do the opposite."

Lewis is saying that even though his choice was free, he felt constrained against choosing otherwise. God had acted in such a way that from outside of himself he felt like he could go no other way. This is the heart of what happens in conversion - it is God acting!

A number of times in his letters Paul refers back to his conversion experience and gives us deeper insight into what was happening. Turn to Galatians 1 with me:

Galatians 1:13-16: *"For you have heard of my former life in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it. And I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people, so extremely zealous was I for the traditions of my fathers. But when he who had set me apart before I was born, and who called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me..."*

Scripture says that we aren't just drowning and trying to stay afloat, we are "dead" in our sins and trespasses. God must intervene and breathe life into us.

Implications: If I was saved by my works, there's a limit to what God can ask. But if it is by grace alone, there is nothing that he can't ask of me.

And no one recognized this more than Paul did. We're going to get to it again in a little bit, but Paul went through incredibly suffering for the sake of the gospel. He recognized that there was no limit he could put on what God could ask of him, or what he would be obedient to.

2. God brings us face to face with who He is.

Look back at the story. When God intervenes on the road to Damascus he knocks Saul to the ground. Saul is immediately confronted with the reality of the risen Jesus. Every paradigm that Paul has had for who God is and how he operates, in that moment, is shattered. Look at Paul's initial response to Jesus... *"Who are you, Lord?"* He doesn't understand what he's seeing.

He comes face to face with the historic reality that Jesus Christ is risen....

He's comes face to face with God in a way he hasn't recognized him before. You see, Saul had thought that he knew God, that he had God figured out, and he realizes along the road that all along the God that he has been serving has been a God that he has made up himself. The God that he's been worshipping, that he's been pouring his life out for, that he's been spending his energies on, has all along just been his own creation.

We usually think of Saul's conversion as sudden, but it wasn't as sudden as you might think. Look at the text. After coming face to face with the risen Christ, Saul goes into Damascus

and spend three days in darkness, three days fasting and struck blind. I'm sure he had a lot of time to think. And during that time I'm sure he was going back over the Scriptures in his mind, these Scriptures that Acts 22 tells us he had studied since he was a boy under Gamaliel.

Memorizing. Saul was a Pharisee, and he knew the Bible inside and out, but he was like what Jesus said of the Pharisees -

John 5:39 - *"You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me..."*

Saul knew the very Scriptures that testified about Jesus, but he had missed Jesus! But as he comes to grips with the reality that Jesus is alive, that he rose from the grave, everything starts to look different. He had always seen the story of Scripture as that of a strong God, who would one day send a strong conquering Messiah to save strong people who obey. But suddenly he realizes that this strong God actually sends a Messiah who becomes weak to save weak and needy people - that he is one of them.

Maybe some of you, like Saul, have been spending your energy on becoming strong people that God can save. You hope to curry god's favor, to earn merit with him, to get in his good book. In your own strength you've tried to be the best people you could be, thinking that god would bring reward into your life. You've thought that if you go to church on sundays, if we don't swear too often, if we don't.... (christian idiom...don't with people who do) our lives will go smoothly. We've served a god who must owe us something.

Conversion is a collision between the true God and every false perception of God we have. When we come face to face the true God all of our previous paradigms are shattered. All of the gods of our own creation seem worthless compared with the glory of Jesus.

3. God brings us face to face with who we are.

Where do I get this from? Paul two other times in the book of Acts shares the story of his conversion, in Acts chapter 22 before a crowd in Jerusalem and in Acts 26 when he is brought before King Agrippa. Throughout the epistles we also see bits and pieces of Paul's testimony in Galatians, Philippians and 1 Timothy. Every time Paul shares his story, at its heart is who Paul was before this encounter on the Damascus road. We see this especially in Philippians 3:

Phil. 3:5-6: *"circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee, as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness, under the law blameless."*

Before his conversion Paul's identity is completely wrapped up in who he is as a Pharisee. Forget Michael Jordan and Lebron James, Saul won several consecutive MVP awards. There was no one that excelled more, there was no one that understood the law and followed the law the way that Saul did. And at the point of this trip to Damascus, he is in his prime. His stock is only going up.

But when he encounters Jesus two things happen. One, he realizes that his sin is far worse than he ever could have imagined. Look at Jesus words to Paul. Jesus appears to him and he says "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute *me*?" This must have struck Paul as rather odd, because who was it Paul was persecuting? Who was it Paul was headed to Damascus to arrest? It was the followers of the Way. What Jesus is saying to Paul is that Paul is sinning not against these believers, but ultimately against God himself.

What makes our sin so horrible is that it is ultimately rebellion against the one who created us. David said in Ps. 51 as he was confessing his sin in sleeping with Bathsheba and getting her pregnant, "*Against YOU and YOU ONLY have I sinned.*" We may think our sin stays in a closet, that it doesn't effect anyone around us, that no one even knows about it. But ultimately what makes our sin so terrible is that in our sin we are committing treason against the King.

But not only does Saul see that his sin is so atrocious in God's sight, he sees that he is more loved than he ever could have imagined. Look at how Jesus addresses Saul. "Saul, Saul," he says. This double repetition of a name in Hebrew (and Luke actually records Jesus using the Hebrew form of Saul's name here rather than the Greek that the rest of Acts is written in) is an indication of longing after someone. Just think of the other ways Jesus used this repetition. "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, how often I would have gathered your children together." (Matthew 23:37) Jesus is addressing Saul with a heart that, in spite of the immensity of Saul's sin, longs after him, loves him.

Where else do we see this? Look at verse 17: "*So Ananias departed and entered the house. And laying his hands on him he said, 'Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus has sent me....'*" Commentators are fairly unanimous that this act of laying on of hands, was a sign of incredible welcome. Ananias is physically expressing the welcome God is granting Saul. "Brother Saul." he says. This is God's embrace.

In Saul's conversion story we see what we've said many times before, that we are more sinful than we ever dared believe, yet we are more loved than we ever dared hope. And it's this reality that transforms Saul's identity. The name Saul means, "asked for," and that is just what

Jesus does in calling for Saul. Do you know what Paul means? Humble, humble. Paul went identifying himself as the foremost of Pharisees to seeing himself as the foremost of sinners. He says in Phil. 3 that all these accomplishments in Judaism are rubbish, that they mean nothing compared with the greatness of Christ and union with him.

For each one of us there is an identity we call our own. Maybe we find our identity in our work, what we do becomes who we are. For others that identity is in social status or economic prosperity or what they see as their sexual identity. Paul's conversion shows us that each one of those things that we can place our identity in is garbage compared with Christ. The amazing truth that transforms our identities from the fickleness of what we place our value in is our union with Christ. Look at Jesus words once more. "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" Jesus is saying that individual believers are so identified with him that to persecute individual believers is to persecute him. Can you believe that? That is the depth of our union with Christ. Paul says that being found in Christ makes anything he previously held as his identity feel like dung in comparison.

Well, I want to end with this, because I know many of us wonder, "How do I know if I'm really converted?" There's a book that recently came out that we may get on our shelf at some point, it's called, "Stop asking Jesus into your heart." And the guy who wrote it talks about how he was baptized four different times and make "recommitment prayers" dozens of other times, always unsure of his standing with God. And maybe some of you have been or are in that place. I want to assure you that our standing with God is not based on the fickleness of our emotions or our own holiness, but purely on the accomplished work of Jesus, the object of our faith.

But, there are a couple of things that this passage shows begin to grow in us when we are converted. And that is that we love Jesus' community and we love Jesus's mission.

There are two things Paul does immediately after his conversion. Look at v. 19. "*For some days he was with the disciples at Damascus.*" The first thing Paul did after his conversion was to meet with the other believers. There was a delight in being with God's people. Is that delight there for you? Is meeting together just another event tacked on the schedule in your busy week or is it life to you?

Jesus Mission - v. 20 - Synagogues as public places. Gossiping Jesus wherever we go. Serving and saturating our community, workplaces/networks with the gospel through incarnation and proclamation. Scattering gospel seed.

An encounter with love does change us. Not that love that is an ten miles wide and an inch deep that we see in the movies. As much as romantic comedies want us to believe it, human love doesn't have the power to change our hearts. What changes us, what transforms us is when we come face to face with the love that Paul did. That love didn't just come face to face with Paul on a road outside Jerussalem, it walked a road outside Jerusalem carrying a Roman cross. That love that encountered Saul while he was breathing out murderous threats, was himself murdered. And though Paul spent three days in the darkness of blindness, the love he came face to face with was 3 days in the grave. A love that would do that for rebels and traitors, for those who persecute him, for Pharisees and for eunuchs, that kind of love changes us. And that love is a person - that love is Jesus, who is no longer dead but alive. And he continues to work, calling rebels to himself.

Gracious God and Heavenly Father, like Paul we are utterly undeserving of your love and grace. You loved, received, purchased, washed, favored, clothed and adorned us while we were yet worthless, vile, soiled and polluted. We were dead in our sin, having no eyes to see you, no ears to hear you, no taste to relish your joys and no intelligence to know you. But your Spirit made us alive and gave us new birth and spiritual perception. Help us to walk worthy of your love. Help us lay aside every counterfeit god, every false identity, every sin that hinders that we may be salt and light where you have placed us. Amen.