

Conversion: Turning To God

Changing Our Conduct

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The United States is known the world over as a land of immigration, and in fact, many thousands—even millions—come to this country to get a fresh start in this land of opportunity and freedom despite those opportunities and freedoms diminishing over the years. But in fact, we are, by any standard, still the richest nation in the world. China may be up and coming, but its economy is still only about half of what ours is. They have got a billion or more people and try to spread out only half that wealth over double, triple the people and you can tell that they are not a very rich nation.

There are other nations that have higher per capita living standards than we do. The way their money is spread out, they have a higher living standard—a higher per capita income. But America's living standard is the broadest, highest living standard in the world because we have a huge middle class and our poor are not really poor. Most of our poor have good places to live. They have automobiles; they have TVs; they have microwaves; they have computers; they have all of the benefits of the good life. So most of our poor are not really poor. There are poor. I do not want to state that there are not, but overall, this nation is still very wealthy. We have the advantage of that, and so people still want to come here.

Now immigration into America has been separated into four historical periods: the Colonial period, the 19th century, the early 20th century, and the Modern period. These can be separated out by the nations of origin that made up these immigration periods. In the Colonial times, most immigrants were from the British Isles; in the 19th century, most of the immigrants were from Northern Europe—places like Germany, Scandinavian countries (Denmark), the Dutch from the Netherlands, and even places like Poland and Russia.

In the 20th century that changed, though. In that time period most of the people coming to America were from southern Europe—Greeks and Italians—and various others even from what we would call “Eastern Europe” (many of the southern Slavs). In Modern times, the primary countries of origin have been in Asia, and to a far greater extent from Latin America—Mexico, Central America, and South America.

It is also interesting the numbers of people that have come in those various times; we would think that... “Oh, in the Colonial period there were all kinds of people coming over here as immigrants.” Well, in that entire close to 200-year period (it is about 175 years

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between the first colonies and the U.S. becoming a nation—that is basically the 17th and 18th centuries), about one million people came here. That does not seem like a lot. But of course, once they got here, they started having passels of kids and so we had a fairly nice robust population by the time of the Revolutionary War.

Between 1776 and 1836—60 years—there were about 8000 people a year coming into this country, which is not a whole lot. Actually less than 500,000 came in those first 60 years of the republic. In the time period that is mostly the bulk of the 19th century immigration—from 1836 and it overlaps a little bit into the 1900s (1914)—about 30 million Europeans came. So that was really a huge influx of people right there at the last half of the 19th century.

And then, in Modern times, the average number of ‘legal’ (notice that term) immigrants has averaged about 800,000 per year, most of those since World War II because during the depression hardly anybody wanted to come here. Wonder why... But that is a lot of immigrants when we are putting in between 800,000 and a million every year; and then there are (who knows how many) other undocumented aliens that come in over the borders.

Now if these people were coming here to ‘the land of the free and the home of the brave,’ with all this wealth that we have so ostentatiously shown to the rest of the world, you might think that most of these immigrants would want to become American citizens. If this nation produces such wealth and such freedom, why do not they get on the bandwagon? We think they love this country so much and appreciate all of its benefits that they would line up around the block to get their citizenship as soon as they were eligible.

But you know, it surprised me when I found this out that the recent average is only about 40 percent; 40 percent of immigrants want to become American citizens and do become American citizens. That is not very many. And I guess, it is just my bias showing, I would think that they would want to be American citizens, but only about two in five actually want to become Americans. Remember I said this is the recent average.

This is the factor as to why America is no longer called a melting pot of ethnicities. The image of American immigration has changed to that of a salad bowl in which all the different kinds of people—all the different ethnicities and races and cultures—are thrown together, but there is little or no change in the immigrants’ traditions, language, loyalties, and lifestyles; basically all they do is change addresses and everything else stays the same, at least for three-fifths of those immigrants who come over here.

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As was recently reported, when the Mexican soccer team came to Los Angeles they had home field advantage. They had all of those people from Mexico there in LA—many of them undocumented immigrants—and they were cheering for Mexico over the American team.

But it was not this way not too long ago. Most immigrants to this country (we will say ‘about a generation or so ago’) came to this country and desired to take full advantage of what this nation had to offer. In doing so, they assimilated all things American. They wanted to be Americans; they wanted to take advantage of what America would give, and so they melted like cheese or something like that (whatever it is you want to talk about) into the American pot, the American way of life, until many of them were known to be more American than natural-born Americans. They took it on and wore it on their sleeves. But unfortunately, those days seem to be gone for the most part.

I set this up this way because I want us to consider the assimilation of immigrants into America because it brings up an interesting analogy to our Christian lives. When an immigrant lands on these shores, he knows very little about America. You could say that he has heard by the hearing of his ears and he has been enamored of it; he has been attracted; and he comes over here to take advantage of it. So, in effect, he has experienced almost nothing of what it is to be an American or to live in America. But he is attracted, so he responds, comes here, and begins to understand it.

Now if he wants to be a full-fledged American, he will learn English. He will read and study our founding documents, particularly the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, and he will find out how this country works. Then he will work towards citizenship. He becomes familiar with the nation’s history and he learns about some of its heroes and he also begins to absorb his fundamental values. He must, in some respects, do this if he wants to even become a citizen because this country requires him to take a test and go through an interview, at least once, where he has to answer questions.

The person who interviews him has to see if he is really serious about it and whether he is in fact really wanting to be an American—see where loyalties lie. So ultimately, if this person really wants to be a citizen, he will apply for citizenship, take and pass the test, go through his interviews, and at the end of it all, he will speak the oath of citizenship before a designated official. From that point on, he is reckoned as a full citizen of this country.

Now this is a true thing: He is a full-fledged citizen of the United States, but he is still an immigrant, and unless he has a chameleon-like ability or he is very young, he will

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always be marked as an immigrant. Not that anybody will take his rights away as a citizen; they would just recognize that he is an immigrant too. For one thing, depending on where he comes from (even in the case with English-speaking countries), he will not be able to get rid of his “foreign” accent. It is just the way it is. He learned how to speak as a child and he probably will not ever be able to get rid of whatever it is—the lilt or whatever—of his particular way of speaking. That is just the way it is.

So he will never sound American. But what do Americans sound like? We have such a big nation; we got those people who hardly speak English up in the North-East; and then we have twangs and accents in other parts of the country; so we all, kind of, just fit in. But I am just giving you an understanding that that one little thing—an accent—will mark them as somebody who is new to this country, new to this way of life.

Most likely, his cultural tastes will remain with his native land even though he may add some of the American ways of doing things. Usually, first-generation immigrants tend to live as if they are still in the old country. The food that they eat will resemble what they used to eat in their old nation; the traditions that they follow are the same; the sports and the music. Like I mentioned with the Mexicans in LA, they will still harken back to the way things were back in their old other country; the holidays that they keep; and usually they will not change their religion either.

So if they come here and they were Russian Orthodox, they will remain Russian Orthodox and just find a Russian Orthodox Church here in America. So it is easier to see that even though their citizenship has changed from whatever it was to American citizenship, the way they present themselves still reflects what they were, and it will take a long long lifetime for those things to change over.

Do you remember *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*? It was about a second-generation Greek woman. But most of the situations in the movie (all of them are very funny) had to do with the fact that her parents and seemingly most of her relatives were first-generation Greek immigrants, and they all acted Greek. Everything was Greek. The father in the movie says, “Every word in the English language, every word in the world actually, goes back to Greek.” He was very proud of his Greek heritage, his Greek ancestry.

They did things the Greek way. When she got married, they went in to the Greek Church and her husband-to-be had to be baptized in the Greek Orthodox Church. And everything was still Greek, and they were very proud of it. But Toula herself was thoroughly American. She had grown up here; she had gone to school; she had gotten work; her friends were not just Greeks, but others; and of course, the man she was marrying was American as Americans get. So she, by the second generation, was

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American in the way she lived whereas her parents were still very Greek even though they were U.S. citizens. It is just kind of a way for you to get an impression of what I am talking about here.

In some areas, however, new citizens—immigrants though they are—can transform into thorough-going Americans very quickly; and these things do not have to do with things you might be able to see on the outside, although they can manifest themselves on these outside things, the exterior things. Many of them, once they become citizens and acquire the right to vote, do it very seriously and religiously. They want to make their voice heard because in many cases the countries that they came from did not allow them to give their voice. This is true in a lot of the Cuban-Americans that are around now. They are really into politics because Castro denied them that ability.

Some of these people when they come...they just love Independence Day; they love dressing in red, white and blue, and they do it to the hilt. Oftentimes, new immigrants are motivated to join the armed forces or to have their children join the armed forces, as a show of their citizenship. And as we know, immigrants have a tendency to take full advantage of the free enterprise system and many of them become entrepreneurs. They open businesses and they do very well oftentimes because they are very willing to do the work. Lots of these people do their very best to buy big American houses once they get the chance, or drive big American cars, and we know that immigrants have the reputation of knowing the value of a buck and taking every opportunity to make as many of them as they can because they recognize that this is truly a land of opportunity.

The analogy that we are working with here is to our conversion. You probably already figured that out. When we are called, we are new immigrants in the Kingdom of God. Our baptism, we could say, is a lot like taking the oath of citizenship. At that point we pledge our allegiance to our new homeland ruled by Christ as King, and at that point—once we come out of the waters of baptism, have hands laid on us—we are considered citizens of heaven. You can see that in Philippians 3:20 that we are citizens of God's Kingdom already, right at that point. We are screaming babies, as it were, in what we know and how we have conformed to God's way of life, but we are still citizens.

But, you know, like those immigrants that we talked about, we still look like those in the old country. We still have the accent; we still do things the old way, and it takes a lifetime of change to take on the traits of the godly to inhabit the Kingdom of God—certainly the traits of the One that we are supposed to be copying or transforming into the image of: Jesus Christ.

So, today, we will look at conversion from this particular perspective—what I said about

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transforming or changing over time. And I hope maybe even my conclusion will help you to understand that if we have this perspective of conversion, it will help us in our relationships with one another. We will get to that, like I said, in the conclusion.

Now for some etymology and words so we get everything straight and we are all thinking along the same lines. Now the word *conversion* is an English word. It is not derived from Greek; it is not derived from Hebrew in any way. It is a Latin word. It came to us through French and then before that from the Latin word *conversus*, and it means to turn around. Now, amazingly, this Latin word is a near synonym of the Greek and Hebrew terms used in the Bible for the same idea. So even though we are using an English term with Latin roots, it is exactly the same or pretty much exactly the same as the Greek word and the Hebrew word that the Bible writers used for this idea of conversion.

So it is a good word. All I am saying in this is that when you say “conversion” and you use it to mean what we are talking about here—of turning around. It is a good word to use in place of the Greek and Hebrew words.

The Greek word that is used in the New Testament is *strefo* and the Hebrew word is *shub*. Both of these words—*strefo* and *shub*—have the base meaning of turn, just like *versus* means turn. They have other implications; all of them having to do with turning. They could have the implication of twisting, which is a rather violent turning, a very tight turning; there is bending, which is a slight turning, not quite as violent as twisting; and then you have the word change, which is also a turning. It is a change from one thing to another; it is a transformation.

Now when you combine *strefo*—the Greek term—with various prepositions, *strefo* takes on various implications that have to do with turning. So if you put on one preposition, it means to turn to, but if you put another one on, it means to turn aside; or if you put a different one on, it is to turn against; and then another one means turn back. And then there is still another one that means to twist, meaning to turn violently; and most of the time when this one is used, it is translated as something like twist or pervert or skew (even in some Bibles). So you get the idea that something has been taken and turned into something that is bad. There is also one, *metastrefo*. If you add *meta* to *strefo*, it means to turn into or to transform; so you could change *transform* from one thing into another. *Shub*, the Hebrew, does not work with prepositions so much; it changes forms, but *shub* more specifically implies not just turning but turning around or turning back.

So we can see that all four of these terms—*conversion*, the Latin *conversus*, *strefo*, and *shub* (all four different words in these four different languages)—essentially mean to

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turn, and more specifically to turn around or to turn back. So that is what you need to know about these words. We will be pooling from these as we go through this because what we are going to do with the rest of the sermon is we are going to the places where *converted*, *converting* and *conversion* are found.

In thinking about these four terms—*conversion*, *conversus*, *strefo* and *shub*—it does not take a great deal of scholarship to recognize that these words have a close association with repentance, because repentance has to do with changing and turning as well. In fact, we could say that conversion, as a subject, is a subset of the much more frequently mentioned term *repentance*. Conversion and repentance are very closely linked; they are not the same. They may sound the same, but I think you will see, as we go through the Bible's usage of the term *conversion* (the Greek and the Hebrew words that are used), that it actually has a very specific meaning, more specific than the overall term of *repentance*. This is especially true in the New Testament.

In Hebrew, the word *shub* also can be translated *repent*. So we can see that it is very close. But Hebrew is not an exact language as Greek. So the Hebrews use the same term, *shub*, for both repent and for be converted, whereas in the Greek, in the New Testament, the writers there separated it into two different words to give a more specific meaning to each; and it is very interesting to see.

In the Greek New Testament, the word that is most often translated as repent/repentance is *metanoia*. *Meta* has this meaning of change, of transformation, of turning; it is like *trans*. It is moving into something else. Anyway, *metanoia* literally is change mind. So *repentance* (just by the word that Paul and the others chose to use) means changing of the mind.

Now both conversion and repentance—*strefo* and *metanoia*—deal with change. That is a given. They both deal with turning away from one thing and instead doing another. Like I said, translators most often use *repentance* and even many times they will use *strefo* in terms of repentance, but we will look through where it specifically mentioned about conversion and we will see that there is this difference, and it is very interesting.

Let us go and look at these five uses of conversion in our English Bible one by one. We are going to go from the front of the book to the back. First we will start in Psalm 19 where we will see *shub* used, and the translators translated it as converting. You know this section very well. Psalm 19 is where David looks and sees the heavens, and he compares it to what God has done. Then he goes to the law of God and draws a comparison. Well, verse 7 is the beginning of the section that goes down through verse 11, speaking about God's law.

Psalm 19:7 The Law of the Lord is perfect, converting the soul.

As he goes down through there, he picks up other terms and gives them a description. We know (as we saw several months ago in my sermons on Psalm 119) that Psalm 19, verses 7 through 11 are actually a companion passage to the first stanza of Psalm 119, verses 1 through 8. So they are very similar; or, as a matter of fact, you could even say that Psalm 19:7-11 is just a very truncated version of the whole of Psalm 119, talking about God's law, God's instruction.

We also learned in those sermons that *the Law of Lord*, and all those other terms that were used to talk about the instruction and the word that God has given us do not mean just what Moses gave; they do not just mean the Ten Commandments. They do not just mean the ritual laws, not any one of those particular things.

What is being written about here is the totality of God's instruction to us, and that is why all these various terms are used because these writers. David, most likely, and Jeremiah (if he is the one that wrote Psalm 119) are trying to get across that it is not just law. It is the testimony. It is not just the law and the testimony. It is the statutes, and not just these three things; it is the commandments. It is not just these; it is also the fear of the Lord and it is also the judgments. We went through all those various terms that are used in Psalm 119 to show that it encapsulates everything that God has revealed to us about Himself, about His way of life, and the instructions that He gives us for living our lives. So that is what we are talking about here. We are not just talking about the Law as we think of it.

So, if we want to, we can paraphrase what is said here in the first half of the verse as "God's instructions are perfect (we can say that they are complete or exhaustive), turning back (using this definition of *shub*) one's life." That is what he says here.

Psalm 19:7 The law of the Lord is perfect, converting the soul [the soul is a person's life and this word actually is a form of *nephesh*; so he is talking about the life of a person].

What he means is that God's instructions in their totality will help turn around a life. A life that is going in one particular direction—whoever's life that happens to be—if he is exposed to God's law, God's instruction, God's way of life, then he can be turned totally around to go the other direction and go God's way. He will then have a much better life than he would have if he continued on that other way.

So if you will look in your margin (if you have a New King James with margins), you will see that on *converting* they changed the word to *restoring*; and this is actually a fairly good alternative translation because restoring has to do with making something whole once again or making it better—making it what it used to be. The idea is a very *long* idea, meaning something over a person's life. That a person will be totally restored to what God wants them to be. We have what happened in the Garden of Eden and how it affected all the rest of mankind, and so we live in a world in which men are perverted, twisted in some way, because of all the sin that is about. So God exposes us to His instruction and it does turn us; it restores us to what He wants us to be, but it takes a long time.

So David is showing here that if a person seriously learns and applies God's way of life, it will be so good and so positive, so meaningful, and so abundant that he will be thoroughly convinced that it is the only way to live. As we can paraphrase it, "God's instruction will turn his life around." Now this is why the translators did not choose to render *shub* as *repent*, here. It is a very interesting point.

The idea in the context is more than just a change of mind. Remember, *metanoia* means changing the mind, whereas the whole Hebrew language tends to be a lot more physical, having to do with actual deeds. It tends to be more settled on the ground with both feet firmly planted. But it is a very concrete language.

What David is describing here by using *shub* in this context is a process of turning around one's whole life in every facet; he is not talking about a particular sin and changing one's mind about that particular sin and deciding to go another way. He is talking about the total transformation and turnaround of a person's entire life—from a very sinful, perverse person under the sway of Satan to completely turning around his life to becoming godly. That is the soul; that is the life that will be converted. That is what he is talking about here.

Now, remember, that I used the word *exhaustive*' just a while ago to describe *perfect*, here, when I said that "the law of the Lord is perfect." It could also be translated as *complete* or *exhaustive*, meaning there is so much to God's instruction that there is something there for every situation, every sin that we might have, every circumstance we might find ourselves in. There is something there for everyone and every situation. So if we just look into it and seek God's help, then there will be instruction there to help us to turn it around. It is not just that we need to overcome a single sin, but we need to totally transform our entire lives. So God's way has to be exhaustive.

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Last time when I spoke, we saw this in the conversion of the apostle Paul. Remember, I was emphasizing there how quick it was; Christ says, “Why do you kick against the goads?” and he says, “What do You want me to do, Lord?” It was that quick; it was mere seconds when he was transformed. But we could see from his life, from what he did, not just immediately but what he had done over his entire life...it did not change just one thing in him; it transformed his entire way of thinking and the entire conduct of his life. Whereas before he had been hauling men and women off to prison; and the people had put the cloaks at his feet when they killed Stephen, but after that he was a totally different person, and he never did those things again. He was transformed, not just in mind but in conduct; it was not just his mind that was changed, but his entire way of life. So we are getting to an understanding here of the difference between *repentance*, which the Greek New Testament talks about the changing of the mind, and *conversion* which has to do more with one’s way of life.

Just a few pages over in Psalm 51 is another one which I am sure you will recognize. The one in particular that we want is verse 13, but we will read verse 12 as well. Really, this verse does not tell us a great deal more than what Psalm 19, verse 7, showed us, but it is very interesting to look at.

Psalm 51:12 Restore to me the joy of Your salvation...

We realize, of course, this is David’s psalm of repentance and it is showing how his mind had changed about what had gone on between him and Bathsheba and the dirty deed he had done to Uriah. His mind was changing. This entire Psalm is a plea to God for mercy and forgiveness, and he asks Him to make him whiter than snow, to purge him of these sins, because he realized how horrific they were and he wanted to be back in God’s presence. So he says:

Psalm 51:12 Restore to me the joy of Your salvation, and uphold me by Your generous Spirit.

Now notice that the word *restore* is in here because that was part of the idea that was coming out of Psalm 19 verse 7 as well; it is the marginal alternative.

Psalm 51:12-13 Restore to me the joy of Your salvation, and uphold me by Your generous Spirit. Then I will teach transgressors Your ways, and sinners shall be converted to You.

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The entire psalm is about restoring David to God's presence, to God's favor, to being allowed once again to have this relationship with Him, to be forgiven, to be made white as snow; in other words, to come under the blood of Christ once again and have God there to help him.

It seems that *converted* here would be talking about how David, once he was restored, would go out and preach, and sinners out there who had never heard of God would come to Christ. They would be converted. But that is not what the context is about. Certain commentators like John Gill suggests that *restored* should also be used here. Let us read it that way. He says:

Psalm 51:12 Restore to me the joy of Your salvation...

Verse 13:

Psalm 51:13 Then I will teach transgressors Your ways, and sinners shall be [restored] to You.

He was being restored; he was seeing God's grace and forgiveness, and he is saying that "Then I will be able to go out and teach, because of my own experience, those people who have fallen away from God, and I will restore them to You." It gives a kind of an interesting twist to this, in a good way.

So what David is talking about is someone like himself who was already converted; he had been converted years before. David had had God's Spirit from the time that Samuel had anointed him, but he had fallen away by his heinous sin. It was months before he actually was taken to task by Nathan. He had fallen away from God for a good long time, and he needed to be restored to salvation. So he is talking about someone who was already converted, but had fallen away through sin and needed to be restored—reconverted, if you will. He had to go again, seek forgiveness from God, and then turn his life around.

So this *shub*, which is used here means turn back (that is its base meaning), and it can just as easily be employed to mean return to the right way, as it can mean to turn from going the wrong way. So it can be used as conversion of someone who has never heard of God before or who has never converted, but it can just as well be used for someone who has been converted but has fallen away and needs to come back and turn back to God.

So it is not just used for the initial conversion. But what it tells us is that we need to be reconverted frequently throughout our converted lives, if you understand what I mean, because we fall away, and we do things the wrong way. We have to be turned back around to doing it the right way. That does not mean we have totally fallen from conversion. It just means that in these particular areas (with David, it was his adultery and his murder). David was unconverted as the day is long at this particular time. But because of what God did through Nathan and His Spirit, in turning David's mind around, it changed his lifestyle; he changed his way of living; he changed the way of doing things. He became converted again.

So this verse seems to add the idea of episodes of conversion; that there is a general conversion that we go through in the beginning, but there are episodes throughout our Christian lives where we have to be converted more, or we have to be—as I mentioned before—reconverted because we fall away. It is a process that never seems to end because we merrily go down the road thinking that we are doing God's will. Then we find out, who knows how long after the fact, that we have been actually going down the wrong way for quite a while, through our own pride or sin or what have you, and we need to be converted again. We need to be put back on the right path so we can walk the way God wants us to. I am sure I am not telling you anything absolutely new, but it is interesting where it is being shown here in Psalm 51.

Let us go to the New Testament and see what Jesus says about conversion in Matthew 18. We are all very familiar with this. We come to these scriptures at least once a year because these are the scriptures that we go to at feast time on the Last Great Day when we do the blessing of the little children; we come to Matthew 18 and we read verses 1 through 5. We are going to read verses 1 through 4. I want you to see the context here because context is very important.

Matthew 18:1-4 At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, "Who then is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" Then Jesus called a little child to Him, set him in the midst of them, and said, "Assuredly, I say to you, unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore whoever humbles himself as this little child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven."

Very interesting passage. This may be the use of *conversion* or *converted* that we are most familiar with because we usually learn the Gospels pretty well when we study. Now the context here clues us into the main subject. The disciples come and ask Jesus

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who is going to be the greatest. The subject here is greatness; the subject here is superiority; the subject is rank—how things will divide in the hierarchy of things. It is about glory. Who is going to get the glory? So they are asking him, *“Okay, who is going to be the greatest in the Kingdom? Think may be us? We are Your first disciples. We are the ones who have been following You around.”*

Now it is very clear, Jesus being who He is, that He knows exactly what they are talking about. Even though they ask a rather “innocent” question, He knows what they are talking about. He perceives that the disciples’ intention is that they are actually seeking after personal glory. They are like the mother of the two sons of thunder who asked Him, “Let one sit on Your right hand and one on Your left hand.” This is just another form of that.

So He understands, Jesus does, that they are seeking after their personal glory. This is selfish ambition coming to the fore. They wanted to be on the top of the heap when the Kingdom came. They were probably thinking a physical kingdom at this time as well. They were thinking that Christ is going to have an army, they were going to conquer the whole world, and they would be the chief of the nations once again. They would be His top advisors, His dukes, His generals, or however. They wanted to know where they were going to fit in His future plan.

So He answers them in terms of the opposite—the exact opposite—of what they were seeking. He answers them in terms of humility, dependence, submission, deference—all those attitudes that children have because they have not been corrupted by sin. Little children do not seek to be the best, the top, unless they are playing a game (king of the mountain or something). Then they all roll down the hill and they have fun. It does not mean anything to them. They are awfully dependent on their parents; they trust adults; and kids are humble. As they become older, they become less humble. That is because sin corrupts them and they become proud just like adults.

So what He answers them here in verse 3—“Assuredly, I say to you, unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven”—his answer is actually a stinging rebuke. It is a very sternly said thing. It was not necessarily said in terms of instruction; it was said in terms of rebuke. You could almost see Christ pointing His finger at them, looking at them squarely and saying something like, “I tell you plainly, unless you turn your attitudes around and humble yourselves, you will not even be in the Kingdom at all.” He was calling them down. He was saying, “Do you understand that your attitude will keep you out of the Kingdom altogether unless you are converted?” And those I said in my little paraphrase “unless you turn your attitudes around.” That is what He is talking about—turning their attitudes

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around, turning their self-seeking around. So Jesus is telling them to turn completely around from their attitude.

This is the word *strefo*, straight up and down; it means turn around, does it not, in Greek? It has no prepositions to alter its meaning, so it just means turn around. So they had to change their entire outlook and way of life. They had to go from their pretentious ambition, to be on top of the heap, to humble submission—a complete 180 in their outlook and in their lives. They had to turn around.

But, you know, *turn around* is not a good translation, and that is why it is not in there as turn around. If you translate it as *turn around*, you ignore the fact that the Greek here is in the passive. It is *be turned around* and that is why it is rendered here in the New King James “unless you are converted;” not “convert yourself,” but you have to be converted. And this idea that comes out, using the passive, is a parallel in many respects to what Jesus says in John 3 about being born again. You must be born again; you cannot born-again yourself. It has to be something that happens from the outside to you.

So our main takeaway from this particular verse (Matthew 18:3) is that conversion is a complete turnaround initiated and maintained by the grace of God. It is a total 180 orchestrated by God. We cannot, in any way, convert ourselves because we are under thrall to Satan the devil and his evil lifestyle of sin. Only God has the power to save us from destruction and wrath. Only God can clean us up. Only God can turn us around and set us on the right path. That is the way to the Kingdom of God.

So, as Jesus says here, conversion is the way of humility and the childlike attitudes of trust in God, deference to Him, submission, love, and all those other traits of Jesus Christ that we have to inculcate into our own character.

Let us go to Acts 3:19. This is another well-known scripture. We often come to this at the feast.

Acts 3:19 Repent therefore and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord...

Now what makes this particular verse really interesting is that it uses *strefo* and *metanoia* in the same breath. Repent and be converted—repent is *metanoia* and be converted is *epistrefo*. I do not really know what *epi* adds to the meaning because *epistrefo* means turn around as well.

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So what we have here is that both of these terms are used in the same breath to show the distinction between them, and to show that there is a two-fold process of what we are talking about here. A Christian has to do two different things; one, he has to do this *metanoia* part—repent, and repent is changing his mind, changing his whole perspective, changing the way he thinks, and all those other things that have to do with the internal orientation of a person; and then he also has to *strefo* or *epistrefo*—be converted, also used in the passive.

And what this tell us, in using these two together (*metanoia* means the mind, *epistrefo* has to do with conduct), is that there is a clear distinction here. We have to change the mind (*metanoia*) and we have to change our conduct, our way of life (*epistrefo*). So we have to change our mind and turn around.

It is like we were going one way and suddenly we are hit with this knowledge that something is not right, and we are persuaded that we are on the wrong way. And so what do we do? We turn around and we go the other direction. We go the right direction this time. So there is a process here—a process of changing the mind first and coming to the realization that we have been going the wrong way, and we need to go the right way. Then we actually do it by our conduct, by the way we live. So there is the major distinction between the two terms; one is internal, the other is external. But they both talk about basically the same thing. It is just where they are concentrated.

Let us see this in I Thessalonians 1 verses 8 and 9. We will see it in action here in Paul's description of what the Thessalonians did. Paul says to these people:

I Thessalonians 1:8-9 For from you the word of the Lord has sounded forth [so they were preaching, they were sending people out, they were preaching the Gospel], not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place. Your faith toward God has gone out, so that we do not need to say anything. For they themselves declare concerning us what manner of entry we had to you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God.

He is saying they changed. You could see that they had a change of mind. They not only had faith in God, which is an internal thing in most respects, but they trusted God in everything. So that is the *metanoia* part—they turned from faith in other things: in themselves, in this world—to faith in God. And then it says, “they turned to God,” and that is the word *epistrefo* (same word is used in Acts 3 verse 19. They turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God. So it made them do something. They turned from idolatry, and then they served the true God. It is not just that they worshipped the

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true God, but it also implies they obeyed the true God; they obeyed through the way they lived. So they not only had faith in God, believed God, wanted to understand the way of God, and preached it, but they also turned their lives around so that they were not longer living sinfully.

We are going to go back to Acts 3 because I do need that. I just want to quickly explain this “times of refreshing” because he says that if we change our minds and if we change the direction of our lives, then our sins will be blotted out, and we will have times of refreshing come to us. So these are two results of this dual turning—turning of the mind and turning of the way of life. The latter phrase, *times of refreshing*, is a hapax legomenon. Many of you may understand what that term means. It actually means it only occurs once in the Bible—times of refreshing—and it could be translated as seasons of coolness, if we are to do it literally; it can also be translated as breathing spaces. It implies a time of respite, a time of rest. Not only when we turn to God and change our way of life do we have our sins blotted out and are forgiven of our sins, but also we get a rest. We have a season that is given to us of a good feeling, a good feeling like a cool breeze. It is a time of relaxation and rest. And it may be a reference, in a little way, to that *new-walk rest* that I talked about a couple of years ago; it is the rest of God, this Sabbath rest, that I talked about sometime back.

Some think that this time of refreshing refers to the presence of God’s Spirit in our lives, and that refreshes us; it gives us a feeling of rest. Or even it can mean the refreshing feeling of being clean and right with God. If nothing else, it means the indescribable sense of joy and relief that comes to God’s elect as a result of being one with Him. And, of course, it could refer to God’s Kingdom.

So this comes to us, not only when we change our mind but when we change the way we live. It makes us realize that not only are we covered by the blood of Christ, but we have a relationship with God, and it gives us great comfort and joy. So this verse adds two details: Conversion is confirmed as a change in the way we live; and God considers repentance and conversion to be prerequisites to forgiveness and His presence in our lives. We have to be doing these things.

Finally, in Acts 15 verse 3—this is the only use of the noun *conversion* in Scripture. He says:

Acts 15:3 So, being sent on their way by the church, [Paul and Barnabas] passed through Phoenicia and Samaria, describing the conversion of the Gentiles; and they caused great joy to all the brethren.

I only come here because it is the use of *conversion*. And instead of a singular person's conversion, it speaks of an entire group of people changing their lives; it gave a great deal of joy to these people because what it shows is that the Gentiles not only agreed with the apostles' teaching, but it had so affected them. They responded by transforming their lives. Their conversion was not just that they agreed, but then they took what they learned and they turned their whole lives around. This conversion, then, was visual proof of their repentance.

In I Corinthians 5, verses 1 through 5 and II Corinthians 2, verses 3 through 8 the story there is of the man who was having incest with his father's wife. He was disfellowshipped. Paul said "Get that man out of here." But, you know, in chapter 2 of II Corinthians, he says, "Invite the man back and greet him with love." It was a man who had gone astray. He had fallen away and he needed to be turned back. And the disfellowshippment that he underwent did its job; it worked because it made him consider his way, and he then was converted on that point. He turned around; he stopped sinning in that way, and he was welcomed back into the church. So this should be a lesson for us all.

We are all not converted to the same extent and in the same areas. Some have problems with sexual sins, like this man did; some have problems with money; some have problems with gossip; some with hatred; some with lying; some with addiction; some with filthy language. You name the sin, and there is probably a church member who has that problem. Some of us have problems in a few of these areas; some of us have problems in several of these areas. It is just the way we are. We have been cleaned up but we still have this nature in us, and we need to learn to be converted in these particular areas.

Overall, we have repented and have been converted, but we need a little work or maybe a lot of work in these specific areas. So if someone stumbles in one thing, do not condemn him as being unconverted because Jesus warns us in Matthew 7, verse 2 that the way we judge, we will be judged. So we do not want to pull the trigger too early and say that somebody is not converted because he may just be unconverted in a particular area, but otherwise he may be fine. And if he has stumbled, he needs to be pulled back like this man in Corinth was. So our best course of action is to be patient, to forbear with our brethren, and give God time to turn the person back to Godly living.

So let us finish in Galatians 6 and see Paul's advice in a matter like this. He says:

Galatians 6:1-2 Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness, considering yourself lest

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you also be tempted. Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.

Galatians 1:4 But let each one examine his own work, and then he will have rejoicing in himself alone, and not in another.

Indeed we all have enough work of our own to do in being transformed—converted, we could say—into the image of Christ. And so, in bearing each other's burdens, we will all then be prepared for the Kingdom of God.