

~ 1 Peter 1:3-5 ~

Week three, May 9, 2021

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Sermon Notes

—de-conversion and bad religion—

“De-conversion stories” are common today. People who grew up in Evangelicalism share, often via social media, they are leaving the faith for reasons that have to do with personal discovery, honesty with oneself, or disappointments with the church. These stories are sad and unsettling to hear, but often sincere.

While sincere, G. K. Chesterton’s quip offers a helpful perspective:

*The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting.
It has been found difficult; and left untried.*

As de-conversion stories become more common, we must understand the growing ease with which people de-convert, as well as the warm public reception such people receive. Two points bubble to the surface:

- (1) Given the ease with which people de-convert, it’s clear the church has largely missed the mark in discipleship. Where have we gone wrong in teaching about conversion?

In his book *Bad Religion*, writer Ross Douthat argues that America has been beset by “bad religion” that has led to many kinds of pseudo-Christianity. As a result, people think they’re following Jesus when they’re actually following some version of the American dream.

- (2) The warm reception people who de-convert receive shows that there is an alternative, secular creed today which promises moral goodness without the cost of discipleship.

People aren't de-converting to become worse sinners but (in their minds) to become better saints.

So, how should the church respond? We should examine the nature of true conversion by turning afresh to the Bible and asking: *What does conversion mean? What does it entail?*

—new, *not* nice—

v. 3. Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again...

Recall the story of Nicodemus in John 3. Jesus said that to see the Kingdom of God, one needed to be born again. (This is where Peter gets his idea of conversion.)

To be “born again” is far more than a moral makeover or renewed adherence to a popular creed. It involves being made radically new.

In John 3, we meet a moral, curious, and *nice* man—Nicodemus! Such niceness is appealing because it is within a person's reach to achieve or cultivate; we can work hard and become nice. And so in the church we have made Christianity about being nice.

Yet being nice tends to be ‘all about me.’ It's about being liked and perceived as good. But nice just won't cut it when it comes to the world's needs and God's moral requirements.

Compared to the tenor of love that's required of us, nice is like the meow of a domestic cat when the world needs—and God demands—the roar of a lion. Nice doesn't cause a person to forgive deeply, or sacrifice himself, or lift up worship to God.

Most importantly, nice misunderstands the human condition, for we're not in need of moral coaching. We are *dead* in our trespasses and sins (see Eph. 2:1).

The fact that our hearts aren't constantly moved to love God and others is the spiritual equivalent to a body without blood and breath. Our deadness entails being under God's just judgement. So conversion must be about becoming new, and it requires an act of God.

v. 3. According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again...

How does a dead person get brought to life? How is a person made new?

- (1) The **Spirit** comes into a dead heart and makes it alive with spiritual sensibilities.
- (2) The **Word** of God enters into the Spirit-filled heart and transforms (see 1 Pet. 1:23).
- (3) By **faith**, a person, now awakened by God, repents and puts her trust in God.

When you examine your own life, rather than asking about niceness, you look for true signs of life:

- (1) **Esteem of Jesus**—Do you honor and respect the crucified Nazarene?
- (2) **A bent toward godliness and away from sin**—no one is perfect, but newness by the Spirit causes a Christian to desire holiness and to detest sin.
- (3) **Love of God and his people**—“Whoever loves has been born of God” (1 John 4:7).

We must stop analyzing conversion by worldly categories of niceness. We must look for ‘being made new.’

—ultimate hope—

- v. 3. ...to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you...

A result of true conversion is that one's hope is set not on immediate things but on an ultimate reward to come.

Now, it is true there are many immediate blessings we receive upon conversion and becoming new in Christ (peace, answered prayer, the sanctifying work of the Spirit, etc.).

Yet the ultimate hope of God's people is promised by God as a *future hope* not of this world.

Pseudo-Christianity suggests that a converted person ought to experience full happiness and justice *right now*.

Christians must be disciplined to not mistake this earth for heaven. People often de-convert over disappointments, as if we deserve full happiness and satisfaction now. But our ultimate hope is being kept for us.

—salvation from God's moral indignation—

- v. 5. who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.

Conversion is unto salvation from God's moral indignation. *Not* salvation unto *our* moral indignation.

Salvation is commonly referred to as "being saved." But do we fully understand what the Bible means by salvation? What are we saved from?

Modern Western Christianity often makes a subtle switch, tying salvation to our own moral indignation or unhappiness. This reduces salvation to one's subjective experience, dissatisfactions, or frustrations.

But what are we actually saved from? The wrath of God; his righteous moral indignation at our sin. He is good, and he maintains that goodness by acting righteously toward sin.

In fact, Hell is the total presence of the white hot justice of God, unmediated by the forgiveness of the cross.

The Bible teaches we're dead because we're "children of wrath" under the judgement of God (see Eph. 2:3). That's what we need to be saved from. Once we've received God's salvation, *then* the floodgates open for God to work in our lives and help us in our pains, frustrations, habits, and trials.

However, the modern secular creed (and often our churches) preaches a salvation not from God's moral indignation at sins, but unto each of our personal moral indignations toward the sins of others.

How acutely aware of other people's sins are you? Are you properly burdened by your own sins? Have you found relief from them in Jesus? Only when you've been humbled by this reality might God help you find the speck in another's eye.

—not a decision, but a disciple—

You're not a decision; you're a disciple.

We would do well to not focus on altar calls and the sinner's prayer, but on lives being made new in the present. As Piper has said, "You know you're alive not because of your birth certificate, but because you're living and breathing now."

Likewise, you know you're a true convert because of how you live into the truth of the gospel right now. We as a church put

too much assurance on decisions from our past rather than discipleship in the present.

Conversion is always unto a new way of life that won't always be easy. De-conversion is easy for many because the church has done a poor job making strong disciples, who will not be tossed to and fro by every whim and wave (Eph. 4:14).

—guarded—

v. 5. who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.

Notice the word “guarded” in verse 5. This conversation about de-conversion may make you nervous. But remember: he or she who God has called, he will keep. God guards us. Our ultimate hope is in God's first decisive act, his continual act of guarding us, and his character, which is to keep his promises perfectly.

Discussion Questions

Was there something in this sermon that stood out to you?

Have you experienced before the modern church's preoccupation with “nice” rather than a gospel of being made new?

Reflect on your spiritual deadness apart from the work of God. How do the Spirit, the Word, and faith make us alive?

Look back at the signs of life (i.e., true conversion) Sam shared. In what ways have you seen God work these into your heart and life?

Is it difficult to cling to the future, ultimate hope promised by God? What does it look like to hold fast to this ultimate hope in daily life? In what ways do you sometimes settle for immediate hopes?

Reflect on these questions Sam asked in his sermon: Are you properly burdened by your own sins? Have you found relief from them in Jesus?

Pray and reflect about what discipleship might look like (or continue to look like) in your life right now.

When Time Allows

[Here you can find](#) the G. K. Chesterton quip that Sam quoted. It comes from Chesterton's *What's Wrong with the World*. (A great title.) Look at the end of the third paragraph in Chapter V. But for a more robust experience of edification, read the whole book!

[Here](#) is Ross Douthat's *Bad Religion*. You can also find his weekly *New York Times* column [here](#). A Catholic, conservative voice on the *Times*' editorial page leads to interesting places...

[Here](#) is a powerful depiction of John 3 from the TV series *The Chosen*. The actor portraying Nicodemus does a good job of making Nicodemus appear nice, moral, and curious. Of course, it would take an act of Jesus to make him *new*.