

## Part 8: Learning to Walk

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I'm sure we have all been places where we ourselves, or someone else has acted in a way which wasn't fitting to the occasion. We've all felt the pain of trying to hold back laughter in a moment where we shouldn't be laughing.

And it is understood that there are places where someone can rightfully say to you: "You can't do that here." For instance, one of the most somber places I have been was the Holocaust Museum in New York City. And there it would have been completely right and good for an employee to come up on a group of teenagers running around and laughing at pictures and say: "You can't do that here, it is inappropriate."

In Missoula, police are starting to crack down on people jumping off the McClay Bridge into the river. It's not uncommon to be see young men being stopped by a police officer who says, "You can't do that here, it is dangerous."

You'll also notice that the outdoor art exhibits at the Missoula Art Museum have signs indicating that no skateboarding is allowed. If you were to try and do that someone would stop you and say, "You can't do that here, this isn't what this was made for."

It's fairly straight forward to understand that the context you are in might deem certain actions inappropriate, dangerous or improper. And in the book of Ephesians, Paul is writing to the church to tell them this very thing. But according to Paul our actions aren't as conditional upon where we are, but upon who we are.

Paul has taught us in this book that Christians now share an identity with Jesus. All throughout the book Paul helps locate believers in Christ by reminding us that in Christ we are blessed, adopted, untied, predestined, granted an inheritance, and sealed with the certainty of salvation.

And because of what Jesus has done, those who believe in Jesus now have a new identity which says in certain places: You can't do that now. In fact our passage today opens with Paul saying something like this: "Now I say this, and insist on it with the Lord, that you must live differently." In other words salvation is a divine work that only God can give, but when it is given, salvation changes people. This is why the biblical writers refer to people as converts. Conversion implies that something is different. It looks differently, acts differently, and is used differently.

This is not just a religious idea. In fact I think our secular society today understands the significance of conversion more than we would think. We know that in order for there to be integrity there has to be not only the decision of the mind, but a new dedication in all of life.

For instance there was one secular scholar who was verbally outspoken against homosexual marriage, but he eventually changed his mind on the subject. However it was to his surprise that he still found himself villainized by those inside the movement. Why? Because he changed his opinion based off of the economic impact the debate, not because he believed in the freedom of love. Even though he affirmed it, he wasn't fully converted.

I know another family who was turned down adoption because when asked if they would love their child if it came out that their child was homosexual, they said, "Absolutely." But the social worker asked a clarifying question, "Would you celebrate their sexual orientation?" The family said no because of the biblical stance on marriage and sexuality, and their request was denied. They weren't fully converted.

Our world understands that if you claim to be concerned about climate change but are unwilling to change your consumer habits or lifestyle then you don't really believe it is a problem. You are not converted.

You see it's a true and recognized reality that if your cause fails to change your actions, then your cause isn't compelling enough.

But this is where the cultural narrative and the biblical narrative split. Culturally every new generation will demand greater and newer pledges which ultimately earn you the name of convert. But biblically speaking, it is Jesus, not us who did everything required to give us the name "convert." We simply believe in what he has done. But when we believe in Jesus we are also changed by Jesus, and that change enables us to live out our salvation in ways we never deemed possible.

What Paul is fighting for is gospel-centered conversion which recognizes what Jesus has done and empowers us to live in a way consistent with who you now are in Jesus. And what we are going to see today in Ephesians 4 are three aspects of conversion: **The Need for Conversion, The Hope of Conversion and The Life of Conversion.**

In the next two weeks we are going to hear a lot of imperatives (commands) from Paul. But we must remember that these commands fall in the middle of Paul's book and we cannot just jump into biblical commands without understanding the significance of the gospel and the need that goes far deeper than our actions.

So let's start this week by seeing **The Need for Conversion**, let's read together **Ephesians 4:17-19**.

So in short Paul says this: Why do you need to change, why do you need to walk differently, why do you need to be converted not only in mind but also in action? Because the way in which you lived prior to Jesus saving you was never able to give you anything good.

We need to change because God wants us to be changed, but we also need to change because we don't want the fruit of who we once were before Jesus saved us.

That's the case Paul is making when he says you shouldn't walk as the Gentiles do. Now, if you've been with us, this theme of Gentiles has been very present in the book of Ephesians because not only are Gentiles any nationality which is not Jewish, but also it stood for those who are separated from God.

But the mystery of the gospel, Paul says in 3:6, is that these Gentiles, these people who were apart from God have been brought near to God by faith in Jesus Christ.

And Paul's point is that those who have been brought near and adopted by Jesus stand as a new type of person. George Whitfield was an evangelist in the 1700's and he frequently told a story of a man dying and going to heaven and being met at heaven's gate by Saint Peter. The man asked, "Have you got any

Anglicans in there?" St. Peter said, "No, no Anglicans." "What about Presbyterians?" "No, we haven't got any of those." "So heaven must be full only of Baptists?" "No, we haven't got any of those either." The exasperated man says, "Well, what do you have in there?" And Saint Peter said, "Christians, only Christians here in heaven."

Paul says something similar in Galatians 3 where he says, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Jesus Christ." The point Paul is making is not that conversion eliminates or erases your ethnicity or your gender, but conversion does change your identity. You are now a follower of Jesus Christ.

So if you have been called, commissioned, and made alive in Jesus, why would you go back to living as someone who doesn't have Jesus?

And he points out the reason why this would be foolish: **Ephesians 4:18-19.**

In the 1800's there was a cholera outbreak in London which would wipe out entire city blocks within the span of a day or two. The common mindset towards the treatment of the disease was that because people were ultimately dying of dehydration, the solution was to keep drinking water. However, one scientist eventually discovered that it was the polluted water in the neighborhood that was causing the disease. What people thirsted for as a cure only produced more death.

This scientist used to drink the water in the neighborhood, but as he returned to it he refused to drink it. Why? Because his eyes were opened. He saw the danger of what used to be normal. His conversion revealed the danger of his former life. This is Paul's point here. If our greatest problem is that we were once separated from God, then why would we choose to live like we did when we were separated from God?

He says there are three problems with this kind of lifestyle. It is lived by people whose understanding is darkened, who are relationally separated from God, and who as a result have a hardness of heart which manifests itself in all sorts of sinful tendencies.

Do you see the seeming hopelessness of this lifestyle? Have you ever wondered why it is that someone can hear the gospel clearly, and even articulate back to you the doctrine of salvation by grace and still not believe? Well Paul here tells us why. We do not have an information problem, we have a heart problem. Our hearts are turned against God, and because of that we are separated from God, and because of that we are predisposed to a slippery slope of sin.

I want to say two things really quickly here as it pertains to our need for conversion. The first is that those who are in sin have a desperate need of Jesus. If you are in here today and you are in anyway convicted of your life being somehow not up to what it should be, I want you to see God's grace in that.

Paul makes it clear that hearts which are far from God are hearts which can quickly become calloused and unfeeling. Their sin is numb to them. They don't understand the way their sin hurts others or affects God himself. So if you feel conviction, praise God that you are not numb to it. That might be exactly what God is using to draw you to Jesus. We will talk more about this next week, but we have a need for Jesus to pull us out of this blindness and he is in the business of doing just that.

Second, if you are a believer in here you probably understand that such a darkened state would never on its own bring about salvation. We know we needed Jesus to save us. But I think if we are serious don't we often go back to living this way because we think that it can satisfy us? But Paul is showing the silliness of this: a culture which cannot lead you to life is certainly a culture which cannot satisfy you in life. It might be a wise to consider a question at this point: Are you're desires actually subtle grabs at the false promises of sin?

We need to unlearn the promises of the world. And this is what Paul goes to next when he shows us **The Hope of Conversion**. If we are not careful, we as believers, saved by Jesus can begin to take counsel from the world instead of Christ. But Paul holds up a greater teacher, **Ephesians 4:20-24**.

Inside of our conversion there are often two reasons that we don't let our salvation change our actions. The first is that we don't think it needs to, we don't find it necessary. But Paul just showed how hopeless it is to think that. It's to be blinded to how dangerous our sin was and how deep our need for new water is.

The second is that we often feel that we cannot change our lives. And this is where Paul reminds us of the hope we have to change in Jesus Christ. If salvation were about our ability to clean ourselves up, then none of us would be saved. But salvation is about what Jesus has done to clean us up.

That's what Paul says, "If you've heard of Christ, you've heard the truth about how we are to live."

There is a little bit of word play in this text that we can't quite pick up in English. But when Paul says that Gentiles have become greedy to practice every impurity, the word "greedy," has a root with the Greek word which means fullness. To be greedy is to be desirous, gluttonous for impure gain. It's like an itch that you can't quite scratch and every time you scratch it, the irritation grows worse.

We see this in life don't we? Sin never plateaus. Flirty conversations, lead to affairs. Anger turns to hate. Porn turns to more and more risky behaviors. We know what it's like to be greedy for a fullness that sin can never promise.

But the same root word shows up elsewhere in Ephesians: **Ephesians 3:18-19, 4:10, 4:13**. The world holds out the impossible desire of fullness in sin, but the gospel holds out the wonderfully fulfilling process of being filled by Christ.

As you seek to live out your salvation according to Christ, you get the promise of fullness that sin whispers but never provides. And Paul says this whole process has legs because Jesus and only Jesus is actually able to change our desires. Did you see that: **Ephesians 4:21-24**.

Jesus changes the desires of our hearts. He really does. I was talking with a man the other day who felt trapped because sins that he has wrestled with since he was a teenager seem to have an irreversible effect on his mind and his heart. And the prospect of making any progress against such a pervasive habit seemed crushing.

But I took him here and I said, "Look, Jesus promises that we really can put these things away by grace." Colossians says that Jesus does as he takes our former self and he nails it to the cross right alongside him. It dies with Jesus. There is real hope that Jesus can change your life and your patterns because the gospel is no small cause, it is the very power of God.

And Paul says that the truth is this: That when you are saved by Jesus you don't go back to where you were, instead you put off what was old, put on what is new and true, and you be renewed in your mind.

Meaning it is only in the gospel where we can put off what is old only because we finally are able to put on what we were always looking for. We are able to put on a new self, made in the image of God himself providing for us true righteousness and true holiness. Meaning we not only feel right, but we can act rightly.

Now, there is a pragmatic danger in this simplicity: put off sinful habits, put on good habits and then we are good. But when Paul talks about being renewed in the spirit of your mind, the grammar implies that this will be a continual an ongoing process.

Yes, Jesus and only Jesus finally gives us the power for true conversion, but it doesn't happen overnight. Our old self is dead, but it still needs to be carried away. And this takes time. It is a daily process to go to Jesus and ask him to help you in your desires and in your actions.

Do you have this kind of attitude when you think of your own conversion? Do you see this change as necessary? Are you disappointed at the rate in which Jesus is changing you? Because the truth is, this conversion won't be completed here in this world. This is why Paul's favorite word to describe our conversion in Ephesians is the word: "Walk."

"Walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called," "you must no longer walk as the Gentiles," "walk in love," walk as children of the light," "walk not as unwise but as wise." It's not a sprint. It's not a couch. It's a slow and daily progress in grace.

There is so much hope that we can find true joy and true change in Jesus, but it comes over time and we need to trust that the gospel really is able to give us grace when the walk is difficult.

I've heard stories of people who were saved and immediately their desire to participate in the sins of their past were removed. And I've heard others where it was a burden and a long road to unlearn what sin had taught them. Sin is powerful, that's why it's dangerous. But Jesus is even more powerful, and that's why he's our savior.

And now Paul is going to move into a string of imperatives, or commands that stem from this truth that Jesus really changes us. And this is our third point today: **The Life of Conversion.**

And I'm not going to spend a lot of time breaking down these imperatives because they are relatively clear to understand. But what I want us to see as we look at these are two things. First, I want us to see how following Jesus requires both putting on and putting off.

Think of it in terms of clothes. If all you do is put on new clothes without taking off the old ones, you are limited, uncomfortable and probably really stinky. And if all you do is take off old clothes without putting on new ones, you'll probably be arrested. But a Christian life is not only: don't do this, but also, do this instead.

The conversion that Paul is going to encourage us to live out is one that goes so much further than a superficial conversion, and that will become clear.

Second, I want you to see how these commands get at just about every area of our life: our mind, our heart, our hands, our mouth and our spirit.

So let's look at these in closing: **Ephesians 4:25-5:2**.

Now next week we will see some more commands, but what is distinct about all of these is that they impact the way we live together. This is important in terms of what Paul is doing in this book isn't it? A converted church lives differently because we have been changed by Jesus.

True conversion rooted in true righteousness and holiness not only doesn't do what is wrong, but actively chooses to do what is right. From the outside eye the first half of all of these would be a wonderful conversion in and of itself: no more lying, no more violent anger, no more theft, no more corruptive language.

But the gospel actually pushes deeper than a superficial conversion. Because it changes our desires, we now desire to participate in a unique way with the work of Jesus. And behind each of these Paul gives a theological motivation.

Paul says that we as a church we should not only put away falsehood and lying to one another, but instead we should also speak truth to one another. Why? Because we are members of one another. That's what we looked at last week wasn't it. That as we grow in Christ we have a responsibility to help others grow in Christ as well.

The truth that Paul has been talking about in this text is the truth that those saved by Jesus should not continue to walk in their sin. As a church we cannot be silent in these areas. To be silent is to be false. It is to be deceitful. It is to heal a wound lightly. But instead we speak the truth of the gospel to one another not to shame them, not to crush them, not to make ourselves feel better about ourselves, but because we love them and we are members of one another. Does your understanding of the gospel lead you to quietly judge those who may be in sin? Or do you immediately weaponize it against others? Paul wants us to speak, and to speak gently to others because we are members of one another.

Paul then moves on to address our hearts and he warns of our anger. He doesn't say don't be angry. It is ok to be angry over sin. Sin angers God and it should anger us too. But we are not God and that means that we can be prone to sin in areas where God cannot. We can sin in our anger. Most visibly we can respond violently or publicly. But that's not what Paul is warning against. Paul is less concerned about the visible outbreak of anger and more concerned about the silent and secret anger which eats away at our heart and makes us bitter and resentful.

Paul sets a great precedent here: don't go to bed angry. Life in the church and life in the world means that you will encounter sin and it will make you angry. But to leave it unresolved is to give the devil a foothold in your life and a bunker in the church. So what do we do, we humbly ask help from God and from other believers and we seek to either overlook the sin and lay it at the cross, or we lovingly confront or seek repentance from the other party.

Next he moves to the hands. The thief not only stops stealing, but he works to share. From greed to generosity. Isn't that a wonderful conversion? Isn't that amazing to think that salvation in Jesus gives

you the ability not only to stop harming those around you, but to actually serve them with the gifts that God has given to you?

Conversion calls us to use our mind to share truth, our hearts to be free from bitterness, our hands to be set to generosity and lastly we see that our words are to be fitted with grace.

Paul says let no corrupting or worthless talk come out of your mouth, but only that which builds up so that those who hear it might receive grace.

Quick survey for you all: When was the last time you were publicly sarcastic? Well, my bet is that most of us don't have to look back to far. But what's the real harm here, it really was not done in bitterness, it didn't cause any harm. But that's not the standard Paul provides is it?

The standard is did it build up someone and provide grace to those who heard it? When was the last time you publicly affirmed someone? You see what's interesting is that our words not only have an effect on the person who is the subject of our message, but it effects those who hear it. We must be careful to have in the church not a culture of empty words, but of words fitted to the occasion, word measured out in grace and liberally spoken in love.

Four clear imperatives which may seem trivial or unimportant to us, but for Paul they are deeply spiritual issues. We know this because of how he ties these very things not only to other people, but to God himself. Look at the Trinitarian nature of our conversion in **Ephesians 4:30-5:2**.

Now let me be clear here. Paul has given real imperatives in this text. Real commands that he assumes believers will follow. Commands which believers have an obligation to follow. But I don't want to lose the point Paul is making in these final verses.

If you have not been forgiven by Jesus, you cannot forgive others. If Jesus' heart of love for you hasn't changed your heart, you cannot be tenderhearted.

Hard hearts don't become tender hearts by moral effort. Hard hearts become tender hearts by Jesus' mercy.

But it is precisely because true believers have experienced this wonderful mercy that we can trust that Jesus is always for our good even when change is hard. It is because we have been forgiven and restored to God that we can realize that everything we wanted in sin has been given to us fully in Jesus.

This is what conversion is, it is realizing that Jesus' power is so incredibly beautiful that it demands my whole life in joy. This is the change you always wanted, but which the world could never provide. It is the freest of all gifts, but the most costly of all lives.