

**“CONVERTED TO NEW LIFE”**  
**(Ephesians 4:20-24)**

Today we’re going to talk about a very important topic, and that is conversion. Conversion is a word we don’t use a great deal in everyday conversation, but it basically means to change from one thing to another. For example, when you go to a foreign country you convert your American money into the currency of the country you’re visiting – if you go to Mexico your dollars are converted into pesos. Several years ago we purchased the house next door and we converted the master bedroom and garage into a large youth room – the house was changed from being a home to being a meeting place. We most often associate conversion with religious conversion, where someone goes from being non-religious to religious or converts from one religion to another.

The word conversion itself is not used often in the Bible, but the idea of conversion – of changing from one thing to another – is seen throughout the Bible. In the Old Testament one thinks of Jonah going to the evil city of Nineveh saying, “You have forty days to repent or God will destroy your city.” The whole city believed God and turned from their wicked ways as evidence of their conversion. In the book of Acts, as the gospel was preached throughout the world, many people were converted to Christ – among them was the Apostle Paul went from persecuting Christians to preaching the gospel. In city after city where the gospel was proclaimed people were converted to Christ, left behind their old life, and became part of the Christian community.

The Bible emphasizes that true conversion results in a changed life. Experts who analyze church trends and patterns have noticed for some time an increasing gap between those who profess faith and those who actually practice faith. Polls show that around 70% of Americans claim to be Christians, which is a huge number, but what does that mean? If those who profess to be Christians actively practiced their faith, the state of our country would be far different.

Another poll reveals that 66% of those who identify themselves as Christians admit to being “lax in their beliefs and practices.” In other words, although they identify themselves as being a Christian it does not make much, if any, difference in their daily lives. They do not put into practice what they say they believe. This seems to ring true with what we see in our culture today – we’ve become quite comfortable with calling ourselves Christians with little or no thought of actually changing the way we live.

Yet the Bible says that true conversion results in real change, and this is at the heart of what the Apostle Paul teaches in our passage today from Ephesians 4. Paul began chapter 4 by saying, “I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received.” God has saved you and set you apart to live a new life – you once were spiritually dead in our sins, but you’ve been made alive in Christ – you’ve been made a new person with a new identity – so live according to who you are.

Paul returns to this theme in verses 17-19 Paul where he implores the Ephesian believers to no longer live as they once did... “So I tell you this, and insist on it in the Lord, that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their thinking. They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts. Having lost all sensitivity, they have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, and they are full of greed.”

Now in verses 20-24 Paul says, “That, however, is not the way of life you learned when you heard about Christ and were taught in him in accordance with the truth that is in Jesus. You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.”

These verses draw a stark contrast between the way of life we used to live before Christ, and the life we now are to live after Christ. We usually think of conversion as a single-event moment when we were saved... “I was converted in the summer of 1988 when I walked forward to receive Christ at a Billy Graham crusade.” We think of conversion as being a single, life-changing event. But according to the Bible conversion begins with salvation but continues throughout life. In other words, we are daily and progressively changed from our old way of life to a new way of life, and that process of change will not be complete until the day Christ returns and our life is completely conformed to His.

Today we’re going to focus on verses 20-24, which we read a moment ago. The main idea of these verses is that we are to live according to who we are – if you’re saved and born-again, then live like it. The passage is divided into two parts. In verses 20-21 Paul reminds the Ephesian believers the new way of life they were taught, and then in verses 22-24 he reviews with them how that new way of life is accomplished – namely by three things: putting off your old self, renewing your mind, and putting on your new self.

Paul begins in verses 20-21 by reminding the Ephesians of what they were taught... “That, however, is not the way of life you learned when you heard about Christ and were taught in him in accordance with the truth that is in Jesus.” When Paul first came to the city of Ephesus eight or nine years earlier, he came to an extremely wicked and pagan city, but he was determined to preach the gospel, and every day he went and taught in a well-known lecture hall. His message was opposed and denounced by many, but there were also several who heard his message and believed. Like the parable of the soil, some seeds fell on hard soil and bounced off, while some fell on soft soil and took root.

Most of these new believers had lived fully immersed in the pagan culture of Ephesus, and as new converts needed to be taught a new way to live – a new way in keeping with their new identity in Christ. Paul stayed in Ephesus another two years, discipling and teaching these new believers in the ways of the Lord.

Verse 21 says that they were taught “in accordance with the truth that is in Jesus.” Every person, whether they’re aware of it or not, has a worldview or philosophy that determines how they live. A secular worldview puts mankind at the center of the universe and lives as though God doesn’t exist. The natural result of this worldview is self-centered ambition, where you live by our own rules. Since there is no ultimate goal or purpose in this worldview, since there is no afterlife or judgment, then one should seek to experience as much pleasure and comfort as they can in life.

But a Christian convert adopts a new worldview – one that is guided the truth that is in Jesus. Truth is what aligns with reality. Truth is not subjective – it’s not based on personal feelings or opinions – truth by nature is objective – it’s based on what is real and factual. To say that George Washington was the first president of the United States is not an opinion, it’s true, historical fact. Two plus two equals three is not true – even if you want it to be true, it doesn’t square with mathematical reality.

God is true and wants us to live according to truth, and He reveals His truth in two primary ways – one is the written Word – the Bible – and the other is the living Word – the Son of God who came to earth as God in the flesh. Jesus is embodiment of truth. In John 14:6 Jesus said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life.” Find Jesus and you find truth. Because we have the written Word and the living Word, we don’t have to guess how we are to live.

Through the teaching of Paul the Ephesians learned a new way of life. As Christians we are called to a lifetime of learning, and we are to be continually in the process of learning. In the Great Commission Jesus said, “Go into all the world and make disciples.” The Greek word for disciples is *mathetes*, which means “to learn.”

In Jesus' day Jewish rabbis would take young men on as pupils and their pupils literally followed them around and imitated them. They would leave everything they owned to live with the rabbi, serve him, sit at his feet, watch him intently, and follow His example. They became so identified with their master that His life became their life. In the same way when we come to faith in Christ we become lifelong disciples of Christ, learning who He is and how He wants us to live.

In verse 20 Paul says, "That is not the way of life you learned," meaning the old life they lived before Christ. Now in verses 22-24 he says, "Here is the new way of life you were taught to live"... "You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness."

Paul describes what they were taught by using three phases – you were taught to put off your old self, to be renewed in your mind, and put on your new self. There is a lot of debate as to whether these three things happen to us the moment we're saved, or if these are things we are to do now that we are saved. The simple answer is both. At the moment you're saved you die to your old self, your mind is made new, and you put on your new self... and we'll talk about each of these in a moment. This is your new position in Christ – your new identity – it's the new you – you're not the same person you used to be. Since this is true, be who you are – stop living the way you used to live and start living a new way.

When Abraham Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863 millions of slaves in the south were set free, but some slaves went on living as though they were still slaves – it was the only life they knew. Positionally they were free, but practically they were still living as they were before. In the same way Paul is saying, "Once you're saved, you're set free from your old life of sin and made a new person in Christ – so live like it!"

The first phrase Paul uses is **put off your old self**... "*You were taught in regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self.*" Your old self (or "old man" as some translations say), is the person you were before salvation – when you were ruled by evil desires and practices. This takes us back to the beginning chapters of the Bible where God created a perfect world, but when Adam rebelled against God and ate of the forbidden fruit, the world fell under the curse of sin and death.

The Bible tells us that Adam's sin nature was passed on to everyone born after him. Given the choice to do God's will or our own, we naturally choose to do our own thing. No one has to teach a child to lie or be selfish – instead we go to great lengths to teach them to tell the truth and put others first. Sinful behavior comes naturally, and the news is filled with daily examples of people acting badly.

Paul says, "Now that you are saved, put off you old self." The word for "put off" was used in Paul' day as a reference to changing clothes – not just changing clothes, but throwing them off. It's a word that conveys urgency. Anyone ever been sprayed by a skunk? What do you do? Do you take your clothes off, or do you throw them off? You throw them off as quickly as possible and then you throw those clothes away – you want nothing to do with them. That's the idea – since you've been made a new person in Christ, get rid of everything having to do with your old life of sin.

This is illustrated in the story of Lazarus, who had been dead for four days when Jesus arrived at his tomb and said, "Lazarus, come out!" Immediately Lazarus emerged from the tomb – looking like a mummy still wrapped in his graveclothes. Jesus said, "Take off his graveclothes and let him go." Graveclothes are associated with death and decay and corruption – now that you've been brought back to life, get rid of those death clothes that are part of your old life.

It's a life, verse 22 says, that *"is being corrupted by its deceitful desires."* The old life of sin offers pleasure and fun and fulfillment, but it's an empty promise. The book of Hebrews says that sin is fun – no one denies that – but it's fun for a season. After the fun is over comes the inevitable consequences of sin. Sin deceives us into thinking that it will satisfy our desires, but it only leads to more misery. Ask Samson, ask Solomon, ask the prodigal son – each were enticed by the momentary pleasures of the world, and each discovered it was a mirage. The point is that it's stupid – it's dumb – to continue following the ways of the world because it's headed nowhere. The world is in a state of corruption – it has skunk smell all over it – and it's headed for judgment. So put off the old life.

The second thing they were taught, in verse 23 is to **renew your mind**... *"to be made new in the attitude of your minds."* The key to change begins in our mind. In the Bible the mind refers to a person's understanding, what they think, and what they decide. The mind is sometimes used interchangeably with the heart – the emotional center of our being that determines what we think. Our mind and our heart make up our inner being – the part of us that no one else sees – the place where our desires and attitudes are formed.

They say that on average we have around 10,000 separate thoughts a day, which means that our mind is constantly thinking and processing. Scientists liken the mind to an air traffic controller who sits in a tower managing the arrivals and departures of dozens of airplanes on multiple runways. The mind is the inner control center of your life that determines what you choose and how you act.

Centuries ago the book of Proverbs said, *"As a man thinks, so is he"* (Proverbs 23:7). Just as we are what we eat, we are what we think. Mark Twain wrote, "What a wee little part of a person's life are his acts and his words! His real life is led in his head, and is known to none but himself. All day long, the mill of his brain is grinding, and his thoughts are his history."

Once we're saved our minds need to be renewed because its been programmed to think according to the world. Paul described this back in verse 17 where he said that before conversion our thinking was futile, our understanding was darkened, and we were ignorant as to God and His ways. Now that we're saved and the Holy Spirit of God lives in us, our minds have been enlightened and illuminated so that we can think and process life from God's point of view. But our old way of thinking doesn't automatically change – our mind has to be renewed.

Romans 12:2 says, *"Do not conform to the pattern of the world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind."* The world wants to mold everyone into the same form, and when someone does not conform to that mold intense pressure is applied to get them back in line. Secular thinking has become like a religion where everyone must bow down to the godless norms and standards of the day or else. Our minds are constantly bombarded with worldly thinking, and without realizing it many Christians adopt the world's way of thinking instead of thinking biblically.

When I was growing up nearly every Christian everyone in church, as well as most people in culture, believed that living together before marriage was a sin. Even those who did so knew it was wrong. But as culture moved further away from God, things that we once unacceptable became acceptable. We've become so conformed to the world that there is often very little difference between the way Christians live and the way unbelievers live.

Instead of conforming to the world's way of thinking, we are to be transformed by the renewing of our minds. To do this we must learn the truth of how God wants us to live, and as we come to learn the truth, we will be able to discern and discard the lies we are told by the world. We learn the truth by walking closely with Christ and listening carefully to what God tells us in His Word.

Just as we eat food and drink water every day to stay alive physically, we need a steady diet of God's Word every day to stay alive spiritually. We need to saturate, to marinate, to immerse our minds in God's truth. Christianity 101 starts with reading the Bible every day – not just reading the Bible, but mediating on what it says so that the Word of God lives in you and changes the way you think. Transforming your mind also takes place when you meet together with like-minded believers and you speak truth to one another. There is strength in numbers – having others who think the same way spurs you on to live in God's truth. I find it very helpful to listen to sermons and Christian podcasts online that helps me think biblically and not worldly.

The more you feed your mind truth the less influence the world's thinking will have on your mind. I remember a camp speaker illustrated this by taking a glass of dirty water and pouring a pitcher of fresh water into the glass. As the fresh water continued flowing into the glass, the dirty water poured over the sides of the glass until it eventually disappeared. As we saturate our minds with God's Word we renew our minds, and as our minds are renewed our lives are changed.

As believers saved by God's grace we are to put off the old self, be renewed in our minds, and third, verse 24 says, we are to **put on the new self**... "**and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.**" It's not enough to put off the old self, we must also put on the new self. The new self is who we are after we're born again. 2 Corinthians 5:17 says, "**Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!**" If you are in Christ, you are not the same person you used to be – you have been made a new creation. The main difference is that the Holy Spirit lives in you – before Christ you lived purely by fleshly desires, but now the Spirit who lives in you gives you a new desire to please God. You have a new orientation – you look at the world from a new perspective – and you have an identity – you belong to a new kingdom – and you are called to live a new way.

You are a new creation. When God created Adam, He created Him in His own image. Every person is created to be like God and bears His resemblance. When Adam sinned, the image of God in him was marred, and that damaged image was passed on to every person. But what Adam lost in the fall was regained by Christ on the cross. When we're saved by God's grace, He begins a work of sanctification in our lives where we progressively grow to look more like Christ, until the day we see Christ and are fully made like Him. But until then we are a work in progress.

Because we have been made a new creation in Christ, we are to put off the old self and put on the new self. We not only need to take off the graveclothes of our old way of life, but we need to replace them with clothes that are in keeping with our new way of life. Colossians 3:12 says, "**Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.**"

As we put off our former way of living, we put on the virtues and qualities that are in keeping with our new way of living. Verse 24 says, "**and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.**" Righteousness and holiness are words that describe moral excellence. Righteousness is being proven or declared morally excellent – where somebody looks at your life and says, "That person lives righteously – they live a morally excellent life." Righteousness is the outward life you display to others. Holiness is being consecrated or dedicated to moral excellence – it's the attitude and disposition of your heart to be as holy as God is holy.

When we're saved, God declares us positionally righteous and holy. Where we once were unrighteous and unholy, God now sees us as perfect through the blood of Jesus. Practically speaking we will not be completely righteous or holy until we're in heaven, but God calls us to live according to who He has made us to be – to live righteous and holy lives and continue the work He began in us on the day of our salvation.

One of my favorite podcasts to listen to is Jason Whitlock, a sportswriter who went to church as a child and was converted to Christ, but by his own admission lived a pagan life until just a few years ago. Now he is one of the most outspoken Christians in media who breaks down what is happening in culture from a biblical worldview. What I love about Jason Whitlock is watching his transformation in Christ. Coming straight out of the world he still is working on putting off his old self. He still lets swear words slip out of his mouth, but he catches himself and says he'll do better. He occasionally talks about his past lifestyle – how he went to strip clubs and paid for an abortion – but now fully sees the darkness and depravity of his former life. He's still rough around the edges, but he desires to live a righteous and holy life – and that's the point. Putting on the new self does not mean that we're perfect, but that we're headed in that direction – and by the power of the Holy Spirit we grow more to be like Christ every day.

Some of you may not yet be converted – you're still living a worldly life – and we're glad you're here because the Christian life begins where you are, admitting your need for salvation, and turning to Christ for salvation. What you need is new life – you need to be born again in order to live a life pleasing to God.

Some of you have been converted – maybe as a child or more recently – but you identify with two-thirds of Christians who admit to being lax in your beliefs and practices. God's message for you is: Be who I made you to be – you were once dead in your sins and living according to the impulses of the flesh, but by my grace the light came on – you heard the gospel, you repented of your sins, and you received Christ as your Savior. Through Christ you have been made a new person – you have a new identity, a new desire to please God, and a new purpose to serve God. If you've truly been converted, your life will change. That change may be slow, it may be up and down at times – but as you put off the old self, as you saturate your mind in truth, as you put on the new self – your life will transform.

As one old preacher put it, "I'm not what I want to be and I'm not what I'm going to be, but praise God, I'm not what I used to be!"