

Converting Sinners and Converting Christians

by Gary Wilkerson

The sermon emphasizes the importance of conversion experiences, both for those who are not yet Christians and for those who are already Christians but need to deepen their faith.

Duration: 34:15

Scripture: Luke 15:11

Topics: "Conversion", "Authentic Faith"

Description

Gary Wilkerson emphasizes the dual nature of conversion in his sermon, addressing both the need for non-believers to come to Christ and the necessity for many Christians to experience a deeper, more authentic faith. He uses the parable of the prodigal son to illustrate how individuals can stray from true fulfillment and how Christians can become complacent, missing the joy of a vibrant relationship with Jesus. Wilkerson encourages listeners to seek a radical transformation that reflects Christ's love and to live out their faith in a way that draws others to Him. He invites those who feel distant from God or dissatisfied with their Christian walk to embrace a new beginning in their relationship with Christ.

Transcript

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We're thankful Jesus that you make good things happen. Bless this word in Jesus' name. Amen.

Amen. If you have a Bible with you, you can turn with me to Luke the 15th chapter. I want to talk about a couple different kind of conversion experiences.

We have been talking somewhat tonight about people who are not yet into the family of God, who don't have a living relationship with Christ, and praying for these Sunday nights to become an event where people can come to know the Father. That's a conversion experience you could call it. And we want to talk about that a little bit tonight.

But also I want to talk about a second kind of conversion is converting Christians into real Christians. Because a lot of Christians need to get saved. So when I say Christians, I'm talking more of the jargon Christian.

I'm a Christian like 90% of Americans are Christians. So we're going to talk about two different kinds of conversions. They're both found in Luke chapter 15 in what's called the parable of the prodigal son or the lost son.

In verse 11 of 15th chapter, Jesus continued, there was a young man who had two sons. The young one said to his father, father give me a share of my estate. So he divided his property between them.

Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had and set off for a distant country. And there squandered his wealth and wild living. And after he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country.

And he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. He longed to fill his stomach with the pods of the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.

He wore out his welcome. He was no longer in the in crowd. He had emptied his pockets of all his resources.

The fame of coming from a rich family no longer held any weight with his friends and the crowd around him. He had lived fast, lived hard and ran out of steam. It's happening today, isn't it? If you watch the news, you can turn it on and see any number of young movie stars, seemingly, particularly a lot of the female type, the Paris Hilton's and the Lindsay Lohan's.

If you're familiar with those, that crowd, they live fast and they do a lot of things. And some of them are like 18, 19, 20 years old. And they started off having all kinds of resources, all kinds of money.

I don't know how much money Paris Hilton has or how much her family has, but I think she spent a lot of it already traveling, renting out whole hotels for parties, ballrooms, paying for a band to fly across the country to be at their birthday parties. And at first it seems like they're having lots of fun and lots of young teenage girls, particularly, will get on the internet and type in their name and see what they're wearing. And you see in the malls, the shopping malls all across America, these Britney Spears types.

And they're like 12 and 13 years old. It looks bad. It just doesn't look right.

They're dressing like they're 22-year-old hookers. It's just not right. So you have these girls and they're getting out there and they're living these crazy lives, but it doesn't satisfy them, so they live a little bit harder.

And then they get arrested and they don't seem to care. They go to rehab and shave their head and stay for a day and feel like, oh, I'm better now. Something's really wrong.

Sometimes we've read the story of the prodigal son and it becomes sort of religious, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. But in this day, this would have been probably a well-known young man and he came from a wealthy family and he was the party guy and all the friends gathered around him and now he's burned out. He has nothing left.

A lot of you that are coming to this auditorium tonight are on a slippery slope. You have some resources and you have friends and you have the party scene and you're enjoying every single minute of it. Sometimes Christians try to portray an idea that if you're not saved like we're saved, you can't have any fun.

I think some of you guys are having fun. Seriously, I think I have met some guys. I've met some guys, some of my friends, particularly when I was younger, who didn't know Jesus and I kept trying to convince them how unhappy they were because they didn't know Jesus.

And I kept telling them, you're drinking and you're going to parties and you're smoking dope and you can't be happy. And they say, I am having the time of my life. It's almost like they want to convert me, you know.

But the slippery slope is this, that after a while the money fades and the friends fade and the drugs start taking its toll and doing a number on the mind and you can't remember where your car keys are now to go to the party. And things start slipping and all of a sudden there's a DUI and you think it's nothing. It's just a little one-off event.

I'll be more careful next time until next time it's a possession of narcotics or substance and the next time it's driving without a license and the next time it's not showing up for the court. And then before long, you've become somebody that you didn't think you were. You thought you were the rich hotshot who could party like 1999 and all of a sudden now you are like the person in the picture where the hair is all over the place and there's slobber coming out of the mouth and one eye is like looking over there and one over there.

And that's me. That's me. That's what's happened in this first man who needed conversion.

I don't think the first few days of his getting money from dad and running to the big city, I don't think his first few days when the preacher was on the corner with an old-fashioned, I don't know if they had bullhorns in those days, maybe they just cut their lips, but repent, turn to God. He probably just laughed. What a joke.

I need God. I'm having the time of my life. But soon after things were taking its course, taking its toll as things of that nature do, he began to see his own need.

And all of a sudden the idea of conversion became attractive to him. All of a sudden the idea of I need something and he began to squander all his living. And not only that, the conditions of his environment around him, there was a famine so the people that were providing him with certain things because he was cool or popular could no longer provide those things for him so he had to take a job in a pig pen and the pay was so low that he couldn't, obviously he was just eating some of the food that he was, he was stealing food that he was supposed to be giving to the pigs.

And so here is obviously, right, obviously a young man in need of a conversion experience. You may have walked into this church tonight and you're thinking, I don't think I'll ever come back here. I mean, I feel like when that first Christian with the usher with the gold coat on patted me on the back, they put like a target sign, you know, and it's like, and you guys are out to get me tonight, you know, it's like, you're going to get

me converted before this night's over.

You probably feel really uncomfortable. And I want to allay any fear of a sense that you are a target by any means. If you're here tonight, all's we're doing is saying we have found an experience with a friend.

We call him our Lord, our Savior, our Master, our King. We call him Jesus and we just fell head over heels in love with him and we like to tell other people about him. And sometimes when we tell it, it hits you in a place where you are not open to it.

Pastor William, when he first came here many, many years ago, he told me this. He said, he sat on the balcony and hated it and then said, I'll never come back. And then he was out on the streets living pretty much this kind of lifestyle.

And he said, I'll never come back. And then next Sunday he's like, well, I'll go back one more time. And he came back and said, I hate this place and I'll never come back.

And he came back for 52 Sundays the first year. I'm pretty accurate. Okay.

I don't want to lie. And then finally, like after not coming back for 52 or so times, he finally said, yeah, I'm not only going to come back, but I'm giving my life to Christ. And now he knows Jesus.

So there was this tremendous conversion experience and we would just love and be delighted to participate in allowing you an opportunity to say, yeah, that's the kind of family that I'd like to be along to. That's the kind of faith I'd like to have. That's the kind of freedom from the bondage of addictions and habits that are calling me to experience life this way, but not really finding full life.

Jesus has life for you. And Bible says it's, it's abundant life. We invite you into that life, but maybe, and here's my second point.

Maybe some of you don't want to become Christians because not because you're satisfied with your life or because you're dissatisfied with your life, because you have become troubled. Some of you don't want to become Christians because of Christians. Mahatma Gandhi said, I love your Jesus.

It's just your Christians I can't stand because they're so unlike your Jesus. Wow. I think some of us, sometimes as Christians, we need a turn.

We need to be somewhat converted. And in this story, there's a story of an older brother who, if you read some of his story, it says, he says to himself in verse 24, I believe it is. So he called one of the servants and said, what's going on inside their house? The younger brother who had had this conversion experience to know God, to come back into the family of God, is now rejoicing and he's having like, like they're singing these songs you guys were singing tonight.

You know, they're in the house and they're doing the, they're doing the Times Square Church kind of shuffle thing. It's really, they're having fun. And it's like, I wish I could do like Mama Mae.

She does, she has this like chopping thing that's really kind of cool. I like that. And then just when you think she's quit, she's going to go back to her seat.

She's doing this. And then she goes, Jesus. She comes all back out again.

So that's what they're doing, man. They're in the house and they're going, Jesus. And the brother's outside and he's going like, I really don't think they should be dancing in church.

I really don't, I really don't like, you know, the electric guitar. It's really, I really like the organ. But, you know, there's just this kind of stuffiness.

There's a, what are they doing in the house? And the Bible says, and the older brother became angry and he refused to go in. Now he was, he was part of the household. He was a servant.

He even says to his father in a conversation he has with him, I've been slaving for you all my life and I have never disobeyed you. He's kind of like a Christian in a sense. He's obeyed God.

He's done the things he's supposed to do. He's in the house sometimes and he's being obedient and he's obeying the rules and he's reading the regulations and he studies them at night and then he tries to keep them in the day, but he's really miserable. There's a joy lacking in his heart and in his life.

And so the elder brother represents, in a sense, to make Christians who need to be converted to really find out what it's like to live for Jesus. Christians who find out what, you know what? This thing was meant to be joyful. This thing was meant to be freedom and life and victory.

This thing was meant to help me overcome, not get me into slavery, into bondage. This thing was, God's intention was for me to live life to the fullest in my relationship with Christ. It's a good thing, but it's become, sometimes Christians make it hard for non-Christians to want to be a Christian.

I was in the Middle East last year and I was with a Christian friend and we were talking to a young Middle Eastern young man, he's probably in his early twenties. And the guy who was with me immediately went into this barrage, this boom. I know you don't know God and you have a false religion and I think if you were wise, why don't you give your life to Christ? You should become a Christian.

And I'm thinking to myself, okay, here's this young Arab guy and he has just been told by a Western man who is very different than him and here's how he portrays him. This is an American who is in one of these three religions here in the Middle East, Judaism, Christianity, and the Muslim faith. And these three are at war with each other and we're bombing them and they're bombing us and they're shooting us and we're shooting them and we're throwing rocks at them and they're throwing rocks at us.

And there's this escalating war and Christians and Muslims and Jews and Muslims and Christians and Jews and they're all fighting with each other. And then there's this Western Christian who, from the Arab point of view, that you're a Palestinian and you're living in poverty and here's a Christian who lives in this very affluent West and who has all these resources and drives the Mercedes and he's from that place that sends over all the movies. This Christian nation that sends movies all over the world that talk about pornography and adultery and fornication and all these things that they are, as Muslims, opposed to.

So he is seeing somebody who is not sacrificing anything, materialism is going into his own pockets and he's seeing somebody who is from the West, he's seeing somebody who is, in his point of world view, there's Muslim against Christian, Christian against Muslim, Jew against all this and now all of a sudden the enemy has come to him and said, why don't you become one of us? If there was a Jew in here tonight and he walked up to you and said, hey after the service I want to talk to you because I think you're a great candidate to become a Jew tonight. Or why don't you become a Muslim? You probably, it would be hard to convert an American to become a Muslim because Americans perceive Muslims as terrorists. So most of

them say, I don't want to join a Jihad and wrap a bomb around myself, I don't want to do that.

So my perspective would be, no, even if I was a nominal Christian I wouldn't want to change because I have this, well do you understand they have this world view of, it's getting quiet in here, some of you are looking at me like, where is he going with this? I'm not saying it's right or wrong with their world view that they have, what I'm saying is that's their perception. And so just to walk up and say, become a Christian, it doesn't really make any sense to them to become a Christian. But what if Christianity looked different to them? What if there were more of the things that looked like Jesus and less like Hollywood Christianity? Or what if there were things that had less to do with making sure we're the winners and they're the losers? I read a book about two years ago and it was talking about the growth of Islam in the world today and it was just opposing it against the growth of Christianity.

And in some parts of the world if it weren't for the African church growing so rapidly, the Muslims would be outnumbering us in amount of growth. And I was thinking, come on Christians, you can do better, we can get more Christians so that the Muslims don't outdo us. We want to have a bigger population so we can say, we're number one.

And I'm thinking to myself, how stupid can you get? Like Jesus is like a cheerleader saying, come on Christians, let's rally around. I didn't go through all this trouble just to become the second world's largest religion. See, the reality is, Jesus did not come to start a religion.

He didn't come to say, Judaism is good but it's missing a little something, Hinduism is off, Muslims haven't invented themselves yet. So, let me start something here. What's a good name? Jesusism.

No, that's not catchy. How about Christianity? Not at all. And so, Jesus is as interested in seeing the life's change of a Muslim, of a Buddhist, of a Jew and of a Christian.

He wants all of them to come to know himself. At a prayer breakfast in Washington, D.C. a number of years ago, a friend of mine was asked to say the opening prayer and he said, he got kind of bold because it's a multi-faith prayer breakfast and there's Buddhists, priests there and there's Muslims and he got up there and he said, Jesus, it's my prayer that all the Muslims in this room get saved today. And Jesus, it's my prayer that all the Buddhists in this room get saved today.

And Jesus, it's my prayer that all the Christians in this room get saved today. He wanted them all to come to know Jesus Christ. Yes, we have a Christian faith.

It's a name that was selected particularly for a group of young Christians in a city called Antioch and they were followers of Christ. In the Greek, it's probably better translated as little Christs, but we don't really call ourselves like that. Would you like to become a little Christ? But in a sense, it's like Christ is the big picture and we are small parts of following in this family to become like him.

And so Christians who become, and I'm going to probably get in trouble for this, but Christians who, because I love America. I think it's the best country in the world. I've been to about 50 or 60 countries and I don't think anybody can hold a stick to America, a candle.

It's just, this is a brilliant place, isn't it? I mean, I just love living here. I love being born here. When I sing the national anthem, I get tears in my eyes.

It's just, I mean, it's like, I mean, I'll even watch NASCAR just because it feels American even though I don't like it. I just absolutely love America. But if, as Christians, we become too, you hear what I'm saying? We become too American.

Like, you know, I'm going to die in the wool and it's America first and we'll bomb you out of the water if you give us any problems at all. And we hate you if you're not just like us. Then it can become difficult to say, here's this Christian nation and we want to do this to you, but we also want to witness to you.

And so, for us as Christians, to the little Christ, it's maybe a little bit more like what this church is doing in wonderful ways. When it goes to places like Burundi in the last few weeks. And just saturates the area with the love of Christ.

And it shows this is what Christ is like. And it's not just soul-saving. But it's touching the heart and the life and it's a comprehensive love for all that that man or woman or child or boy is.

And then they're saying, you didn't come here just to fill out a decision card. You see, because that's one of the things that sometimes we need converted from. When we have a Christianity that's all about, all we want people to do is say these four spiritual laws.

And pray this sinner's prayer. And we can name you now as a new Christian. And then you don't change at all, or I don't change at all, then that's not really following Christ.

And as a result of that, you have things like, here's just a short history lesson. In about the early 1800s, white missionaries went to Africa. And they started, and there was this big movement, we want to get as many souls saved as we can.

And when they went back to England, the report was, I led a thousand people to Christ in this country. And then somebody else would come back and say, well I need support for my endeavor. So let me say, I did this big rally and 5,000 converts came to my meeting and signed a decision card.

And so countries like Rwanda had, by the early 1900s, after about 50, 60 years of missionary work, had about 80% of the people that lived in Rwanda considered themselves to be born again Christians. The only problem was, some of them weren't changing. And the problem became, when you saw, not too many years ago, 10, 15 years ago, when some people who called themselves Christians, in the middle of, I think it was about an eight month period, the demonic got so heavy and the chaos so full that there are actual reports of congregations meeting in their church on Sunday morning.

And the pastor's saying, okay, church is over. And they leave the church and they get their machetes and go to other churches to kill other, quote unquote, Christians. That's not Christianity.

That is just somebody who, at one point or another, decided, okay, yeah, I have some tribal religions, I trust in my witch doctor, this Jesus thing sounds kind of interesting too. So I'll add that element. But that's not what Jesus is asking for.

He's not there to start a religion and he's not here to mix with other religions. He's there to say, I want your whole life. I want everything.

I want you to give yourself wholeheartedly to me. This is what he said to the rich young ruler who came to him and said, Jesus, what must I do to have eternal life? And he said, you have to just give up everything.

And now we hear that saying, well, that's not, you know, sell everything you have and give away to the poor and just come and follow me, be a radical follower of Christ.

And we say, well, Jesus didn't really mean for us to live that way. He was just talking to one particular young man, the rich young ruler. But that's not a rule for us to live by.

That kind of radical Christianity, no way. Well then, why are we born again then? Because he was just talking to Nicodemus, right? He said, Nicodemus, you must be born again. But for somehow we have taken these two different stories of translation and say, oh, this one's good for all of us.

All of us be born again. But not all of us live radical Christian lives. And it doesn't match.

And Jesus has called us to live radical lives of disciples of Jesus Christ, selling all, giving our whole heart away, pouring out everything to him. That's what he has invited us into. It's radical Christianity, if it's anything at all.

And I tell you what, there's a host of number, and I'm meeting them all across the world, and particularly here in America, of young people who are saying, you know what, I'm kind of tired of Christianity, the way it's portrayed, the way it's lived out. I want something more. I want the stuff that I read about in here.

I want the stuff that is bigger than my life. There's a group of young students, and I'll close. There's a group of young students in Washington, D.C. area, and they were going to Bible school.

And they just started having a little Bible study, and they said, you know what, the leader said, I don't think I'm a Christian. I was born in a Christian home, and I was raised in a church, and I've been to the altar, and I've taken discipleship classes, but when I read this, and I put it up against my lifestyle, it's two different things. And so these guys started studying what it is to be a real true Christian, a real true follower of Christ.

And they realized that their whole lifestyle, even though they were in a Bible school, studying the Bible, academics, learning theology, singing Christian songs, praying Christian prayers, but they realized they weren't giving their lives fully, wholeheartedly to Jesus. And so they just started, they heard about some people that were about to be kicked out of their tenement home, and they went, and they helped them move some of their stuff out, and they found an abandoned church, and they set up some mattresses on the floor, and they brought food to these people that were living there. And then after a while, they started spending the weekends with them, and then after a while, when they graduated from Bible school, they moved in with them, and now in Washington, D.C., they have this old converted church that's turned into a shelter for drug addicts, and alcoholics, and the street people, and children who are being abused.

And these young people are just living their life out for Jesus. And the people around them are saying, that person, that lifestyle looks like Jesus to me. That's the kind of faith, when people really live their all for Jesus, then the people that don't know Jesus now say, that's the kind of Jesus I want to live for.

And so, I would recommend that we as Christians, and I am still, I don't think conversion is totally a one-time thing. I think there's an initial state where we're brought into the kingdom by grace, but I think conversion is a lifetime process. Can you say amen with me on that? And if you don't feel it's a lifetime process, you've got more problems than the rest of us, and the process is going to be a lot harder for you, because you're in the wrong state of mind.

And the conversion experience is still going on in my life, where I'm saying, Jesus, I want to be converted to look more like you. I want to be converted so that other people see my life and say, I want to be like that. I want to live more like the way, I want to follow you as you follow Christ.

So I'm finished, that's my ramblings for tonight. If any of you are interested in being converted, if you're not a part of the family of God, and you would like to become a part of the family of God, if you've had a born-again experience, but your life doesn't look at all like Jesus, and you want that kind of conversion, why don't you stand with me if you would, please. And we're just going to very simply and respectfully ask you if you would like to have this conversion.

We believe that if you feel timid about making a public declaration of a desire for new faith in a church setting, it's going to be really difficult for you to do it, to live like Jesus outside of a church setting. So we always believe in a public invitation to declare out loud, if you will, even though you might not say anything, to declare out loud, yeah, I want Jesus. And so my invitation tonight, even as I'm speaking, in the balcony now, you're saying, I want Jesus.

I'm not a follower of Christ, but I want to become one, or I am a person who has experienced this born-again. I've had this walk with Christ, but I'm not living like Jesus, and I want to be converted. I want to be a Christian who really looks like Jesus.

Come now, and I'm going to pray for you in just a moment. It might just be a handful, it might be hundreds of you. Wherever you are in this place of this conversion experience where you need, I want you to step out of your seat now and come.

Jesus, we invite you to come and minister to people right now who have walked into this building, they have hungry hearts. They're hungry either as the prodigal son who have, through living a lifestyle away from you, that they're far from God, and they want to know you, Jesus. And I also pray for Christians in this church.

There might be a number of Christians who, just honest enough to say, I'm not really satisfied in my Christian life, because I don't think it really looks like or feels like or tastes like or is lived out like Jesus would have me to do it. And I need to make some bold changes in my life through the grace of God, I need to change. And if that's you, step out of your seat and come.

Thank you, Jesus. Thank you, Jesus. There are some of you that have come to this front of this building here tonight because you want to have this new walk with God, an introduction into a relationship with Christ.

And we're here to pray for you tonight and pray with you and believe that God will launch you into a whole new way of living to cause you to escape from being far from God and being introduced into His family and loving Him with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength. And for those of you who would join me in saying, Pastor Gary, I'm just like you, and I need this conversion experience. I want my life to be a testimony, and I don't want it to interrupt.

I don't want to have to say to my non-Christian friends, come to Jesus, and they hesitate because they see the way I live, if it's not like you. And I know it's not totally up to us, it's up to the wooing of Christ. It's not dependent on us, thankfully, but yet we are testimonies.

We speak in a way and live in a way that reflects that, and we need transformation. Some of you have come to this front of this building tonight because you sense, God, I need things to be shaken up. I don't think the Christianity that I'm living is the kind of Christianity that you've called me to.

And Father, we pray now in the name of Jesus. First, for those who might identify tonight with the story of the prodigal son, the one who drifted away and tried to find life through sources that were unlike you. And I ask you tonight, Lord, would you touch their heart? And I remember the night where I prayed a prayer similar to this, and I said, Jesus, I'm a sinner, and I've turned from you, and I'm lost, and I've searched world religions to try to find something else and found no joy.

So I'm coming to you, Jesus. Not to religion, I'm coming to you. And I pray for my friends here tonight that would just be, maybe for the first time, saying, Jesus, forgive my sin.

Cleanse me. Make me a new person. Save me from myself and from a lifestyle that just is headed nowhere.

And draw me to you. Change me. Make me new.

Help me to love like you love. And be powerful like you're powerful. And be a servant like you're a servant.

And to have Christ radiate in my life. And for those who are following Christ, but they're doing it in a way, Lord, that we might say has some elements of reproach to it. It has this anger that we talk about when we read about the older son and this unwillingness to go in and live life to the fullest.

Surrendering all, Jesus, surrendering all. And we pray for our Christian friends here tonight who are looking for more. They're just not satisfied.

They're saying there's something missing. And, Lord, I believe that that is total abandonment and all surrendered life to Jesus. We give you thanks, Jesus, because you're doing this tonight.

You're doing a good thing here tonight. And I thank you for it. In Jesus' name.

In Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.

Do you know what? God, hold on just a second. God is doing a wonderful thing here tonight. He really is.

There's some real changes going on here tonight. I would be shocked if we weren't able to hear some reports back from the number of you that are up at the front here saying, You know what? I remember this night. Something really changed.

Something new came into my life or something transformed that I'm a radically new creation in Christ. And my testimony, my lifestyle has changed because of this new power of Christ. Do you believe that? Amen.

Tell the Lord we thank you, Jesus. Thank you, Jesus. Bless you, God.

This is the conclusion of the message.

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