

Conversion to Jesus Christ: (1) Are We Converted?

Today we begin a new series that I have been considering doing for quite some time. It is a very important matter. Perhaps it is the most important subject that we could possibly address. What does the Bible teach about becoming a true Christian? What does God's Word teach about coming to experience salvation from sin? What is a true Christian and how does one become one? I do not know how long this study will last. At this time I am not sure of the direction the Lord will take our study or where and how we will conclude the subject. But I have a few ideas on how we may begin, and that is all we need to know at this time.

Let us begin today by reading an account in Matthew's Gospel in which the Lord Jesus taught His disciples of the great need to be converted in order to enter the kingdom of God, that is, in order to be a recipient of God's salvation from sin. **Matthew 18:1-14** reads:

¹At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, "Who then is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?"

²Then Jesus called a little child to Him, set him in the midst of them, ³and 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. ⁴Therefore whoever humbles himself as this little child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

⁵Whoever receives one little child like this in My name receives Me.

⁶"Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to sin, it would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck, and he were drowned in the depth of the sea. ⁷Woe to the world because of offenses! For offenses must come, but woe to that man by whom the offense comes!

⁸"If your hand or foot causes you to sin, cut it off and cast it from you. It is better for you to enter into life lame or maimed, rather than having two hands or two feet, to be cast into the everlasting fire. ⁹And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and cast it from you. It is better for you to enter into life with one eye, rather than having two eyes, to be cast into hell fire.

¹⁰"Take heed that you do not despise one of these little ones, for I say to you that in heaven their angels always see the face of My Father who is in heaven. [¹¹For the Son of Man has come to save that which was lost.] ¹²"What do you think? If a man has a hundred sheep, and one of them goes astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine and go to the mountains to seek the one that is straying? ¹³And if he should find it, assuredly, I say to you, he rejoices more over that *sheep* than over the ninety-nine that did not go astray. ¹⁴Even so it is not the will of your Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish.

Matthew's Gospel contains five major teachings sessions of our Lord Jesus. Before us in Matthew 18 is the fourth of these five discourses, or sermons. The subject of the larger discourse that continues through Matthew 18 is the church, of which our Lord sets forth its character and its authority.

Before we begin, we may say a word about the text itself. If you are using the English Standard Version (ESV), you may note that there is no verse 11. It is in the KJV and the NKJV, in which it reads, "***For the Son of Man has come to save that which was lost.***" It was probably not penned by Matthew, but was included by a later scribe. The reasons that this can be deduced are because the variant reading is found in later manuscripts and its inclusion can best be explained as having been added by a scribe who desired to harmonize Matthew's account with that of Luke 19:10.¹ The point is that verse 11 is a true and actual statement spoken by our Lord, but He gave it on another occasion than the one before us.

¹ "There can be little doubt that the words... are spurious here, being omitted by the earliest witnesses representing several textual types (Alexandrian, pre-Caesarean, Egyptian, and Antiochian), and manifestly borrowed by copyists from Luke 19:10. The reason for the interpolation was apparently to provide a connection between verse 10 and verses 12-14." Bruce Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (United Bible Societies, 1975), pp. 44f.

In the verses we read, our Lord set before His disciples three different themes. First, the disciples ask the question of Jesus who is the greatest in the kingdom (18:1-5). Second, our Lord warns His disciples of the necessity of offenses, but of great judgment for the offender (18:6-9). Third, the Lord gives the parable of the lost sheep (18:10-14).²

I. The disciples ask the question of Jesus who is the greatest in the kingdom (18:1-5).

¹At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, “Who then is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?”

²Then Jesus called a little child to Him, set him in the midst of them, ³and 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. ⁴Therefore whoever humbles himself as this little child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

⁵Whoever receives one little child like this in My name receives Me.

At this time of our Lord’s ministry He had been repeatedly teaching His disciples that they would travel to Jerusalem where He would suffer and die and then rise again on the third day. The disciples expected this event would inaugurate the kingdom of heaven, or the kingdom of God. They desired of themselves and probably viewed themselves to have an important place and role in this kingdom. And so they asked the Lord, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” It would seem that they were more concerned about themselves and their role in the kingdom than what the Lord was to face in Jerusalem. Whereas He spoke to them of His own suffering and humiliation, they would ask of Him of their own glory and privilege.

There may have been an additional reason for asking this question. It would seem that Peter had been singled out to stand above the rest. Was he to be their leader, the most prominent in the kingdom? Matthew had given a great deal of attention to Peter in his Gospel record. No, he did not do so in the earlier chapters of the Gospel, but in the last several chapters Peter had been referenced a number of times; actually, his name is mentioned a dozen times in Matthew 14-18.³ Peter had walked upon the water. It was Peter who asked the question on behalf of the disciples regarding ceremonial washings and defilement. Our Lord had singled out Peter when He had said to him, “You are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church.” And then it was on the Mount of Transfiguration in which Peter’s words are recorded of the three disciples who were with Jesus. And then it would appear hear in Matthew 17, that Peter seemed to be singled out by the locals and questioned about the payment of the temple tax. It is understandable, then, that they might want to know whether Peter was to be their leader and have the greatest position in the kingdom. But on the other hand, our Lord had seemed to humble Peter on occasion, perhaps creating some doubt as to whether or not he would be “greatest” among them. Jesus had rebuked Peter openly (Matt. 16:23). Peter was but one among three, which included James and John, who had been closest to Jesus. Peter had seemed to be impulsive and unwise, as indicated by his expressed desire to build three tents on the Mount to house Jesus, Moses, and Elijah. So, maybe Peter would not be the greatest among them.

There certainly was a sinful competition among the disciples as to which one of them would be regarded by others as the greatest of Jesus’ followers. We read of the parallel account of this event in **Mark 9:33-37**.

³³And they came to Capernaum. And when He was in the house He asked them, “What were you discussing on the way?” ³⁴But they kept silent, for on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest. ³⁵And He sat down and called the twelve. And He said to them, “If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all.” ³⁶And He took a child and put him in the midst of them, and taking him in His arms, He said to them, ³⁷“Whoever receives one such child in My name receives Me, and whoever receives Me, receives not Me but Him who sent Me.”

And so, they pose the question to Jesus, perhaps implying, “If it will not be Peter, who then?”

² We are using this paragraph division which is in the ESV. However, I think that a better division would be the paragraphs of verses 1-4, vs. 5-9, and vs. 10-14.

³ Cf. Matthew 14:28f; 15:15; 16:16-18, 22f; 17:4, 24-27.

The Lord called a child to them and set him in the middle of them all. Children seemed to be found frequently in His presence. Here he calls a child to come to Him even as He is among 12 grown men. The child seems to have come readily, come immediately. Children felt comfortable with Jesus and desired to be with Him.

He then told His disciples not who would be the greatest in the kingdom, but that they would do well even to enter the kingdom! To do so they must become as this child. In using this analogy, our Lord is not saying that children are innocent and pure, for the Bible does not teach this. Children are not pure and innocent and righteous; they are born sinners and guilty and condemned. Jesus was speaking to His disciples about the need for their conversion, which involved their repentance from sin, to abandon their pride and their self-absorption. A child is one who is generally humble, unpretentious, unassuming, teachable and compliant. Disciples of Jesus are to be to their Master as children, humble before one another, not characterized by sinful pride.

Our Lord told the disciples they needed converted. In one sense, they were already converted men; they were disciples of Jesus. But they needed to be converted further; they needed to become as children. Spurgeon wrote of this:

They needed to be converted from self-seeking to humbleness and content. A little child has no ambitious dreams; he is satisfied with little things; he trusts; he aims not at greatness; he yields to command. There is no entering into the kingdom of heaven but by descending from fancied greatness to real lowliness of mind, and becoming as little children. Too rise to the greatness of grace, we must go down to the littleness, the simplicity, and the trustfulness of childhood. Since this was the rule for the apostles, we may depend upon it we cannot enter the kingdom in any less humbling manner.⁴

Only those who become as children have any place in the Kingdom of God. Those who humble themselves as little children, they are the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. “In the kingdom of heaven the least is the greatest” (Spurgeon).

The disciples were “to turn”, that is repent and be converted. We recognize, of course, that although men are commanded to do such things that only through the grace of God are they capable of performing His Word. We may take to heart the words of Jeremiah, when He appealed to the Lord, “Turn thou me, and I shall be turned; for Thou art the LORD my God” (Jer. 31:18).

II. Our Lord then warned His disciples about the importance and their accountability to treat believers righteously (8:6-9).

⁶“Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to sin, it would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck, and he were drowned in the depth of the sea. ⁷Woe to the world because of offenses! For offenses must come, but woe to that man by whom the offense comes!

⁸“If your hand or foot causes you to sin, cut it off and cast it from you. It is better for you to enter into life lame or maimed, rather than having two hands or two feet, to be cast into the everlasting fire. ⁹And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and cast it from you. It is better for you to enter into life with one eye, rather than having two eyes, to be cast into hell fire.

When our Lord speaks of “one such child” and “one of these little ones”, we should understand Him as not only speaking of children in general, but of *His disciples particularly*. He regards His people as His “little ones.” They are ones for whom He cares greatly. *The one who leads one of His disciples into sin, will receive great condemnation by the Lord when he stands in judgment.* To be drowned in this fashion would be a horrible way to die. But it would be preferred than to face God for having lead His people to sin.

Our Lord promised blessing on the one who “receives one such child”; that is, a humble disciple of Jesus. To receive a disciple is to receive Jesus. He views favor shown to one of His own as favor done unto Him. On the other hand, our Lord pronounces great condemnation upon one who would cause one of His disciples to sin against Him. “Woe” is the word the Old Testament prophets used when announcing

⁴ Charles Spurgeon, *Spurgeon’s Popular Exposition of Matthew* (Zondervan Publishing Company, 1962), p. 148.

impending death and destruction due to God's judgment upon a people. He speaks of *the necessity that temptations come* (18:7b), but He holds responsible those who bring it about.

When one considers how our Lord declared that He will bless those who bless His people and essentially curse those who curse His own, we are reminded of the promise of God to Abraham. God had told Abraham, "I will bless those who bless you, and I will curse him who curses you" (Gen. 12:3). Often you will hear people say that this promise extends to ethnic Jewish people, or some say that it applies to the nation of Israel as it is constituted today. But our Lord makes it clear that the promise of blessing and cursing is contingent on how people treat His disciples, those who are in covenant relationship with God through faith in Him.

The Lord then warned His disciples about their need to repent of sin. He spoke in very graphic and hyperbolic terms in order to press upon His disciples the absolute necessity to be converted:

⁸And if your hand or your foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life crippled or lame than with two hands or two feet to be thrown into the eternal fire. ⁹And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into the hell of fire.

True conversion is absolutely necessary. It should be our foremost priority. Nothing should cause us to delay action or to diminish or lessen the steps to turn from sin and to turn toward the Lord Jesus Christ, becoming one of His true disciples.

The consequences of refusal or failure are horrendous. He speaks of those who are not His true disciples as being "thrown into the fire of hell." You might have seen the reading distributed earlier this week by the website, "Grace Gems." It contained the words of the Puritan, **Thomas Brooks**, regarding the reality and nature of hell as the eternal punishment of the wicked. He wrote these words about hell in the context of London having burned in the great fire of 1670. He first quoted Scripture, then provided several comments:

Rev. 20:10, "The devil, who deceived them, was cast into the lake of fire and brimstone where the beast and the false prophet are. And they will be tormented day and night forever and ever."

Rev. 21:8, "But the cowardly, unbelieving, abominable, murderers, sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars shall have their part in the lake which burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death."

As the *mercy* of God is infinite towards the elect--so **the justice of God is infinite towards the reprobate in Hell**. The reprobate shall have...

punishment without pity,
misery without mercy,
sorrow without support,
crying without compassion,
mischief without measure,
and *torment* without end!

All men in misery comfort themselves with *the hope of an ending to their misery*.
The *prisoner* comforts himself with hope of a deliverance.
The *mariner* comforts himself with hope of a safe harbor.
The *soldier* comforts himself with hope of victory.
The *slave* comforts himself with hope of liberty.

But the impenitent sinner has **no hope in Hell!** He shall have...
death without death,

night without day,
mourning without mirth,
sorrow without solace,
bondage without liberty!

The damned shall live as long in Hell--as God Himself shall live in Heaven!

Suppose, say some--that the whole world were turned to a mountain of sand, and that *a little bird* should come every thousandth year and carry away one grain of sand from that heap. What an infinite number of years--not to be numbered by all finite beings--would be spent before this supposed mountain would be fetched away!

Now if a man should lie in everlasting burnings so long a time as this--and then have an end of his woe--it would administer some ease, refreshment, and comfort to him. But when that immortal bird shall have carried away this supposed mountain of sand a thousand times over and over; alas! alas! man shall be as far from the end of his anguish and torment as ever he was! He shall be no nearer coming out of Hell, than he was the very first moment that he entered into Hell.

If the fire of Hell were *terminable*, it might then be *tolerable*. But being **endless**, it must needs be **easeless** and **remediless!**⁵

Our Lord gave great encouragement for sinners to repent of sin. He spoke in terms that would arrest the attention of His hearers and to press upon them the vital importance to respond to His instruction, even the urgency to take action. The outcome of compliance is the eternal blessing of God. The result of failure or refusal is everlasting misery. Our Lord not only encouraged repentance by warning of the consequence of failure or refusal, but He encouraged repentance by showing how much God desires and welcomes the one who repents of sin and comes to Him through faith in Jesus Christ. The result will be either everlasting "life" or "everlasting fire."

Natural man would push these thoughts far from him. We might shrink from bringing the matter up before us. But our Lord Jesus was forthright about the reality and degree of the matter. Again, He declared the need for full, absolute, continuous faith and commitment to Him as the great Savior of sinners. There is no action too great. We must not fail to take to repent of sin and be converted wholly unto Him.

⁸And if your hand or your foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life crippled or lame than with two hands or two feet to be thrown into the eternal fire. ⁹And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into the hell of fire. (Matt. 8:8-9)

III. The Lord then warned His disciples about their need to repent of sin and then tells them the parable of the lost sheep (18:10-14).

¹⁰Take heed that you do not despise one of these little ones, for I say to you that in heaven their angels always see the face of My Father who is in heaven. [¹¹For the Son of Man has come to save that which was lost.] ¹²What do you think? If a man has a hundred sheep, and one of them goes astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine and go to the mountains to seek the one that is straying? ¹³And if he should find it, assuredly, I say to you, he rejoices more over that sheep than over the ninety-nine that did not go astray. ¹⁴Even so it is not the will of your Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish.

The Lord then warned His disciples not to despise "one of these little ones." He is still referring to the child before Him, but more specifically to the "little ones who believe." The reason that He gives is that "their

⁵ Thomas Brooks, "London's Lamentations", 1670.

angels” are before God in heaven. The implication is that God has angels ready and on call to help His disciples. These ones, who have angels as friends, helpers, and guardians, should not these “children”, that is, disciples, be highly regarded and treated with concern and care?

Our Lord gave the parable of 100 sheep. The point of this parable is one of contrast. If a shepherd would go so far to reclaim one sheep, how much more will God rejoice to reclaim one sinner who repents! The Lord Jesus declared that it is not the will of His Father “that one of these little ones perish.” *Perish* speaks of physical death and eternal damnation that follows. It is not the Father’s will that *these* perish-- His “little ones”, in other words, our Lord’s disciples. Because it is not the Father’s will that they perish, they will not perish, but will receive and enjoy have everlasting life. They were chosen by the Father, redeemed by the Son, sealed by the Holy Spirit, unto their full and final glory.

And so, here our Lord pressed upon His disciples *the absolute necessity of personal conversion in order to be granted everlasting life and to escape everlasting damnation*. He 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.” The character of the Lord Jesus, the authority of the Lord Jesus, the credibility of the Lord Jesus, is at stake. He asserts without qualification and without equivocation this scriptural truth: *unless one is soundly converted, he will most certainly be excluded from those whom God will grant everlasting life*.

We may conclude from our passage that there is no more important question to ask ourselves, “*Are we converted to Jesus Christ?*” There is a sense of urgency in our Lord’s words. There is a pressing of individual responsibility and accountability. This is the most important matter that a human being can give his attention and effort. And so, we should ask ourselves, “Are we converted to Jesus Christ?” We must use all means available to us to make sure that we are numbered among His “little ones” for whom He has great concern and great care. He will rescue them from all threat and danger that they had brought upon themselves through sin.

Now to help us at this beginning point on our study, let us provide a definition and description of true conversion:

Conversion is the process whereby we turn from our sin in repentance and turn to God through faith in the finished work of Christ upon the cross for us... conversion always means turning to Christ from unfaithfulness and sin to receive God’s grace. After his resurrection, conversion occurs through God’s Son, Jesus Christ. For Jew and Gentile, insider and outsider, the same salvation is offered, received, celebrated, and proclaimed. The salvation results in the same responsibilities and demands, the same obedience. Its beginning, center, and end is Christ.⁶

We will later show in our study, probably early on, that conversion involves first a work of God’s grace in His people that then results in their response. Conversion involves both God’s action as well as our action. Conversion to a work of God’s grace in us, but conversion is also a response to God’s grace in our faith and practice.

Now, this subject is not only a most important matter and therefore warrants our utmost attention because of our Lord’s emphasis in His teaching. But the importance of the question of our individual conversion is magnified when we consider other matters that impinge upon the subject. I would like to consider some of these in order that we better appreciate the importance of our study.

First, the importance of our study regarding conversion to Jesus Christ is magnified *because of the prevalent ignorance concerning true conversion to Jesus Christ*. Much of evangelicalism, that is, those who claim to believe and to be governed by the Bible as the Word of God, has distorted the meaning of conversion. There are a number of forms of this error, but one common error is the belief that conversion is a single event

⁶ David Wells, *Turning to God; Biblical Conversion in the Modern World* (Baker Book House, 1989), p. 39.

in one's life irrespective of the kind of life that follows one's conversion. Here is a further description of this *process* of conversion and of the common error regarding it:

However this relationship is initiated--quietly or dramatically, over a long or over a short period of time--it inaugurates a life devoted to serving God. Conversion is not an isolated event but is related to the entire life of faith that follows from it. It is the moment of birth into new life. It is like a doorway into a room. A person is born to live, not to linger on the edge of the womb in a time limbo. A person opens a door not for the pleasure of standing forever on the threshold but to enter the room. The evangelical world has strangely perverted this truth. Evangelicals often make the test of spiritual life one's willingness to testify about the moment of birth. Describing one's sensations in passing through the doorway is proof that one is in the room! This shifts the focus from where it ought to be--the evidence of the Spirit's renewing work in producing a God-centered life, a God-fearing heart, and God-honoring character and witness--and places it on a person's autobiographical account of the conversion crisis. The only real proof of our conversion is an obedient and fruitful life.⁷

Most regard conversion as an experience in which one is greatly impressed and moved, which results in a change of how they view themselves and their relationship with Jesus Christ. Because of their experience and after the experience, the person believes himself to have been "converted." This experience can be quite remarkable in nature and degree. A person's belief and behavior have perhaps undergone a degree of change, maybe moral renovation resulted. But this can occur and does occur frequently in people when true conversion has not occurred. There is much error and ignorance about the conversion experience.

Second, the importance of our study regarding conversion to Jesus Christ is magnified *because many look to slim or wrong evidence to support their belief that they are converted to Christ*. Our Lord Jesus pressed upon His disciples their responsibility to wholly commit their hearts and lives to Him. Jesus declared, "Whoever of you does not forsake all that he has cannot be My disciple" (Luke 14:33). He also said this, "If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple" (Luke 14:26). But many think that all they must do in order to be converted, to become a disciple of Jesus Christ is to believe certain basic truths, irrespective of one's response to those truths in how he lives his life. Our Lord Jesus told His disciples,

"If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. ²⁵For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it. ²⁶For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul? ²⁷For the Son of Man will come in the glory of His Father with His angels, and then He will reward each according to his works. (Matt. 16:24ff)

But many presume that what they have believed and what they have done is proof to them that they converted. A puritan by the name of **Matthew Mead** published a book in 1661. It was entitled, *The Almost Christian Discovered; or, The False Professor Tried and Cast*. His book addressed four overarching questions, which include the following:

- Question I. How far a man may go in the way to heaven—and yet be but *almost* a Christian?
- Question II. Why is it that many go so far and yet no farther?
- Question III. Why is it that many are but *almost* Christians, when they have gone thus far?
- Question IV. What is the reason that many go no farther in the profession of religion, than to be *almost* Christians?

In answer to question 1 Mead listed 20 ways in which an "almost Christian" may "go in the way of heaven." In other words, he described the beliefs and experiences of those who think they are Christians, but who may yet be in their sins. Here are his chapter titles:

⁷ Ibid, pp. 39f.

1. A man may have much *knowledge*—and yet be but almost a Christian.
2. A man may have *great and eminent spiritual gifts*—and yet be but almost a Christian.
3. A man may have a *high profession* of religion, be much in external duties of godliness—and yet be but almost a Christian.
4. A man may go far in *opposing his sin*—and yet be but almost a Christian.
5. A man may *hate sin*—and yet be but almost a Christian.
6. A man may make great vows and promises, *strong purposes and resolutions against sin*—and yet be but an almost Christian.
7. A man may maintain a strife and *combat against sin*—and yet be but almost a Christian.
8. A man may be a *member of a Christian church*—and yet be but almost a Christian.
9. A man may have *great hopes of heaven*—and yet be but almost a Christian.
10. A man may be under *visible changes*—and yet be but almost a Christian.
11. A man may be very *zealous in matters of religion*—and yet be but almost a Christian.
12. A man may be *much in prayer*—and yet be but almost a Christian.
13. A man may *suffer for Christ*—and yet be but almost a Christian.
14. A man may be *called by God* and embrace his call—and yet be but an almost Christian.
15. A man may *have the Spirit of God*—and yet be but almost a Christian.
16. A man may have *faith*—and yet be but almost a Christian.
17. A man may have a *love to the people of God*—and yet be but almost a Christian.
18. A man may *obey the commands of God*—and yet be but almost a Christian.
19. A man may be *sanctified*—and yet be but almost a Christian.
20. A man may do *all the external duties and worship* which a true Christian can—and yet be but almost a Christian.

Many people think themselves to be true Christians because they are reassured of *feelings of affection or emotion* they experience regarding “Christian” things. They might be encouraged or delighted in events or happenings in a church setting. They may be moved by Christian music or sentimental sermon illustrations. They may be attracted and moved by friendships enjoyed among people in the church. They may feel to be a part of the body, presuming this is sufficient evidence of their conversion.

The other evening I read a paper written in the 19th century by a leading Presbyterian theologian, **Robert Lewis Dabney**. The title was “*Spurious Religious Excitements.*” He wrote of people who were influenced by emotion and experience within Christian settings, but those experiences have nothing to do with a true work of God’s grace of salvation in the soul. They were the manifestations of feelings that are common to all people, unconverted and converted persons alike. But because these feelings of the unconverted in the context of religious or Christian settings, those feelings are wrongly believed to be evidence of true conversion. Here are a few of his words:

People are ever prone to think that they are feeling religiously because they have feelings round about religion. Their sensibilities have been aroused in connection with death and eternity, for instance; so, as these are religious topics, they suppose they are growing quite religious. The simplest way to clear away these perilous illusions is, to ask what emotions, connected with religious topics as their occasions, are natural to the carnal man? These may be said to be, first, the emotions of taste, or the mental-aesthetic; second, the involuntary moral emotion of self-blame, or remorse; third, the natural self-interested emotions of fear and hope, and desire of future security and enjoyment; and fourth, the emotion of instinctive sympathy. The following conclusions concerning these feelings need only to be stated, in order to be admitted.

The aesthetic feeling may be as naturally stimulated by the features of sublimity and beauty of God’s natural attributes, and of the gospel-story, as by a cataract, an ocean, a starlit sky, or a Shakespearean hero. Now it is most obvious that the movements of taste, in these latter cases, carry no moral imperative whatever. They have no more power to reform the will than strains of music or odors of flowers. Yet how

many souls are deluded into supposing that they love God, duty, and gospel-truth, because these aesthetic sensibilities are stimulated in connection with such topics!

When the ethical reason pronounces its judgment of wrongfulness upon any action or principle, this may be attended by the feeling of moral reprehension. If it is one's own action which must be condemned, the feeling takes on the more pungent form of remorse. But this feeling is no function of the soul's spontaneity. Its rise is purely involuntary; its natural effect is to be the penal retribution, and not the restrainer of sin.

How completely this feeling is disconnected with the correct regulation or reformation of the will, appears from this: that the transgressor's will is usually striving with all his might not to feel the remorse, or to forget it, while conscience makes him feel it in spite of himself. A Judas felt it most keenly while he rushed to self-destruction. It is the most prevalent emotion of hell, which gives us the crowning proof that it has no power to purify the heart. But many transgressors are persuaded that they exercise repentance because they feel remorse for conscious sins. Man's native selfishness is all-sufficient to make him desire the pleasurable, or natural good, and fear and shun the painful, or natural evil. Those desires and aversions, with the fears and hopes which expectation suggests, and the corresponding terrors and joys of anticipation, may be stimulated by any natural good or evil, more or less remote, the conception of which occupies the mental attention distinctly. Just as the thoughtless child dreads the lash that is expected in the next moment, and the more thoughtful person dreads the lash of next week or next month, just so naturally a carnal man, who is intellectually convinced of his immortality and identity, may dread the pains, or rejoice in the fancied pleasures, of another life. He may fear death, not only with the unreasoning instinct of the brute, but also with the rational dread (rational, though purely selfish) of its penal consequences. Selfishness, with awakened attention and mental conviction, suffices fully for all this. In all these feelings there is nothing one whit more characteristic of a new heart, or more controlling of the evil will, than in the wicked sensualist's dread of the colic which may follow his excess, or the determined outlaw's fear of the sheriff. Yet how many deluded souls fancy that, because they feel these selfish fears or joys in connection with death and judgment, they are becoming strongly religious. And unfortunately they are encouraged by multitudes of preachers of the gospel to make this fatal mistake.⁸

Dabney wrote about the manipulation of people toward these emotional ends typified the revivalist campaigns of the day. As a result many falsely believed themselves to have been converted to Christ.

These plain facts and principles condemn nearly every feature of the modern new measure "revival." The preaching and other religious instructions are shaped with a main view to excite the carnal emotions and the instinctive sympathies, while no due care is taken to present saving, didactic truth to the understanding thus temporarily stimulated. As soon as some persons, professed Christians, or awakened "mourners," are infected with any lively passion, let it be however carnal and fleeting, a spectacular display is made of it, with confident laudations of it as unquestionably precious and saving, with the design of exciting the remainder of the crowd with the sympathetic contagion. Every adjunct of fiery declamation, animated singing⁹, groans, tears, exclamations, noisy prayers, is added so as to shake the nerves and add the tumult of a hysterical animal excitement to the sympathetic wave. Every youth or impressible girl who is seen to tremble, or grow pale, or shed tears, is assured that he or she is under the workings of the Holy Spirit, and is driven by threats of vexing that awful and essential Agent of salvation to join the spectacular show, and add himself to the exciting pantomime. Meanwhile, most probably their minds are blank of every intelligent or conscientious view of the truth; they had been tittering or whispering a little while before, during the pretended didactic part of the exercises; they could give no intelligent account now of their own sudden excitement, and, in fact, it is no more akin to any spiritual,

⁸ Robert Lewis Dabney, *Spurious Religious Excitements* (in *The Puritan Harddrive*), pp. 4-6.

⁹ How many today believe themselves to be Christians because, after all, they love and listen to "Christian" music? But it may be a manifestation of "natural" desires and delights that have no connection to true conversion. Elvis Presley lived and died an unconverted man, but it has been said of him that when his long-time musician friends came to visit him, he always wanted and insisted that they play and sing the old gospel songs and hymns with which he had grown up in churches.

rational, or sanctifying cause, than the quiver of the nostrils of a horse at the sound of the bugle and the fox-hounds.¹⁰

Third, the importance of our study regarding conversion to Jesus Christ is magnified *because of the many preachers and teachers who affirm professing Christians that they are true Christians, when there is little evidence to support their claims.*

Dabney had written of spurious religious feelings that are wrongly interpreted by those who experience them that they are converted persons. He went on to write of preachers who manipulate their hearers and mislead their hearers in believing these spurious religious feelings are solid evidence they are converted. Dabney first stated that the use of emotion is an important aspect of preaching, but it is only to gain a hearing for the truth that is to accompany that attention that was gained. He argued, however, that the preacher who fails to impart truth during this temporary experience of emotion, but conveys the thought that people are converted because they experience these feelings, are actually abusing their hearers. Dabney wrote:

The whole use, then, of the sympathetic excitement is to catch the attention and warm it. But it is the truth thus lodged in the attention that must do the whole work of sanctification. Here is the all-important discrimination. Attention, sympathetic warmth, are merely a preparation for casting in the seed of the Word. The preacher who satisfies himself with exciting the sympathies, and neglects to throw in at once the vital truth, is like the husbandman who digs and rakes the soil, and then idly expects the crop, though he has put in no living seed. The only result is a more rampant growth of weeds. How often do we see this mistake committed! The preacher either displays, in his own person, a high-wrought religious emotion, or stirs the natural sensibilities by painting in exciting and pictorial words and gestures, some natural feeling connected by its occasion with a religious topic, as a touching death or other bereavement; or he stimulates the selfish fears by painting the agonies of a lost soul, or the selfish desires and hopes by a sensuous description of the pleasures of heaven. Then, if sympathetic feeling is awakened, or the carnal passions of hope, fear and desire are moved, he acts as though his work were done. He permits and encourages the hearers to flatter themselves that they are religious, because they are feeling something round about religion. I repeat: if this stimulation of carnal and sympathetic feeling is not at once and wisely used, and used solely as a secondary means of fixing a warmed attention on didactic truth, which is the sole instrument of conversion and sanctification, then the preacher has mischievously abused the souls of his hearers. The first and most obvious mischief is the encouragement of a fatal deception and self-flattery. Unrenewed men are tacitly invited to regard themselves as either born again, or at least in a most encouraging progress towards that blessing; while in fact they have not felt a single feeling or principle which may not be the mere natural product of a dead heart. This delusion has slain its “tens of thousands.”¹¹

False prophets were in great number in ancient Israel; false teachers are in great number in evangelical churches today. The constant theme of their preaching and teaching is to bolster the delusions of their hearers that they are beloved of God, have escaped God’s wrath, and have Jesus Christ as their Savior, when there is little evidence in their lives that this is so. Because of the great number of false teachers in these matters, it accentuates to us the importance of this matter, “Are We Converted?”

Fourth, the importance of our study regarding conversion to Jesus Christ is magnified *because of the many preachers and teachers who have been used of God to teach the biblical truth of this most important matter.*

The history of Protestantism has had its high points and low points with respect to the doctrine of biblical conversion. The early decades of the Protestant Reformation was the result of the great recovery of **Martin Luther** of the biblical doctrine of justification through faith alone in Jesus Christ alone. The message proclaimed far and wide across Europe. All had been Roman Catholic. They had been taught by Rome that salvation was distributed to them through the authority of the church through its administration of the

¹⁰ Ibid, pp. 11f.

¹¹ Ibid, pp. 8f.

sacraments. In those lands where Luther's message was understood and embraced, the people were "converted" in mass from Catholicism to Lutheranism and this is because they had become convinced that they were justified through faith alone. But apparently there were vast numbers of people in the churches that had never undergone true conversion. For 100 years the Protestant churches struggled with the problem of licentiousness among the professing Christians. Since they were justified through faith alone, or so they thought, then they could live as they pleased. They saw themselves as true "Christians", ones who had been converted to Jesus Christ, but they were unconverted. Their lives showed forth that this was so.

But a generation later the Lord raised up the Puritans, who had first attempted to purify the Church of England after it had split from Rome. Many of them later became separatists, separating from the formal, dead state church, as they became, Presbyterians, Congregationalists, and Baptists. They were moved in part to separate from denominations and churches because of their views on what was true, biblical, conversion. Although believing and proclaiming the doctrine of the early reformers--justification by grace through faith alone, they showed that true conversion was to be seen in God's work of sanctification of His people. They believed and taught that conversion not only involved faith in what God had done in Christ on behalf of His people on the cross, but true conversion involved what the Holy Spirit wrought in the hearts and lives of His people.

Arthur Pink wrote of the great blessing that God brought to His church through the ministry of the Puritans:

At the close of that lengthy period known as the "dark ages" (though throughout it God never left Himself without a clear witness), when the Lord caused a flood of light to break forth upon Christendom, the Reformers were faced by the hoary errors of Romanism, among which was her insistence that none could be positively assured of his salvation till the hour of death was reached. This caused Luther and his contemporaries to deliver a positive message, seeking to stimulate confidence toward God and the laying hold of His sure promises. Yet it has to be acknowledged there were times when their zeal carried them too far, leading to a position which could not be successfully defended from the Scriptures. Many of the Reformers insisted that assurance was an essential element in saving faith itself, and that unless a person *knew* he was "accepted in the Beloved" he was yet in his sins. Thus, in the revolt from Romanism, the Protestant pendulum swung too far to the opposite side.

In the great mercy of God the *balance* of Truth was restored in the days of the Puritans. The principal doctrine which Luther and his fellows had emphasized so forcibly was justification by faith alone, but at the close of the sixteenth century and in the early part of the seventeenth such men as Perkins, Gattaker, Rollock, etc., made prominent the collateral doctrine of sanctification by the Spirit. For the next fifty years the Church on earth was blest with many men "mighty in the Scriptures," deeply taught of God, enabled by Him to maintain a well-rounded ministry. Such men as Goodwin, Owen, Charnock, Flavel, Sibbs, etc., though living in troublous times and suffering fierce persecution, taught the Word more helpfully (in our judgment) and were more used of God than any since the days of the apostles to the present hour.

The ministry of the Puritans was an exceedingly searching one. While magnifying the free grace of God in no uncertain terms, while teaching plainly that the satisfaction of Christ alone gave *title* to Heaven, while emphatically repudiating all creature-merits, they nevertheless insisted that a supernatural and transforming work of the Spirit in the heart and life of the believer was indispensable to *fit* him for Heaven. Professors were rigidly tested, and the results and fruits of faith were demanded before its presence was admitted. Self-examination was frequently insisted upon, and full details given as to how one might ascertain that he was a "new creature in Christ Jesus." Christians were constantly urged to "make their calling and election sure" by ascertaining that they had clear evidence of the same. While conditions were far from being perfect, yet there is good reason to conclude that more deluded souls were undeceived and more hypocrites exposed than at any other period since the first century A.D.¹²

These Puritans have left us a great deposit of written instruction about the subject of true conversion. What they have written accentuates the importance of our subject to us, for in reading what they have left for

¹² Arthur Pink, *Studies on Saving Faith*.

us, we can see clearly how far the evangelical world has departed from the truth of the Scriptures in both what it teaches and how true Christians live. Many books were written by their pastors to address the deep concerns of the professing people of God. There were those books designed to *comfort struggling Christians with assurance*:

- "A Treatise on Comforting Afflicted Consciences" by Robert Bolton
- "The Poor Doubting Christian Drawn to Christ" by Thomas Hooker
- "The Doubting Believer" by Obadiah Sedgwick
- "Precious Remedies Against Satan's Devices" by Thomas Brooks
- "Come and Welcome to Jesus Christ" by John Bunyan

The Puritans wrote books to teach about *a true work of grace in the soul*:

- "The Rise and Progress of Religion in the Soul", by Philip Doddridge
- "The Method of Grace" by John Flavel
- "The Soul's Preparation for Christ" by Thomas Hooker
- "Gospel Fear" by Jeremiah Burroughs
- "The Christian's Great Interest" by William Guthrie

They wrote books *to unsettle those who had false assurance*:

- "The Almost Christian Discovered" by Matthew Mead
- "The Carnal Professor", by Robert Bolton
- "The Carnal Professor and Christ Set Forth" by Robert Bolton

They wrote books about *the nature of true conversion*:

- "The Nature of Saving Conversion" by Solomon Stoddard
- "Alarm to the Unconverted" by Joseph Alleine
- "Spiritual refining: The Anatomy of True and False Conversion" by Anthony Burgess
- "A Narrative of Surprising Conversions" by Jonathan Edwards

They wrote books instructing professing Christians as to *their responsibility to strive to live for Christ*.

- "Keeping the Heart" by John Flavel
- "Pressing into the Kingdom" by Jonathan Edwards

They wrote many books on *the nature of true saving faith*:

- "The Roots of True Faith" by William Guthrie
- "The Breast Plate of Faith and Love" by John Preston

Fifth, the importance of our study regarding conversion to Jesus Christ is magnified *because of the many warnings we have in Scripture of "many" who will think that they are converted when Jesus Christ returns, only then to discover they are still in their sins.*

The Holy Scriptures press upon all who claim to be converted to be watchful and prepared for the Second Coming of Jesus Christ and the great Day of Judgment that will then take place. When the Lord Jesus returns a second time, He will find His professing church comprised of professing believers, some of which are true Christians, some of which are not. All profess to have faith in Him. All claim to be His disciples. All are anticipating the return of the Lord. All are assuming that they will receive their full and final salvation when He comes.

But not all are true Christians who profess to be Christian. Our Lord gave the parable of a wedding procession in the Jewish context of the first century. He referred to five wise and five foolish virgins who were to be ready to join the wedding party which they knew would be soon, but the exact day or time was not known. In this parable our Lord gave a 50% ratio of professing Christians who will have salvation and 50% who will only then become aware that they do not have salvation. I do not think that our Lord was intending to give us a precise ratio of true Christians to false Christians by referring to five wise and five foolish virgins. But do you suppose that He gave an approximate percentage? Can you imagine if the Lord returned today and only 50% of us were found to be ready for His return and 50% of us were not? Half of us would enter into the joy of the Lord but half of us would be denied entrance, but the pronouncement was given to us by the Lord, "Depart from Me; I never know you!" **Charles Spurgeon** wrote of this:

Let us faintly hope that we are not to gather from our Lord's words that one half of the professing Church is composed of those whom He calls "foolish." Yet our Savior would not have spoken of so great a proportion if there were not really a very large admixture of foolish professors with the wise professors of the grace of God.¹³

In another sermon Spurgeon referenced this parable. I have this sermon posted on our website. His comments were addressed to the text of **Luke 13:24**, in which Jesus said, "*Many, I say unto you, will seek to enter in, and shall not be able.*"

So the text teaches us. It does not say "a few may be misled," but "many shall seek to enter in, and shall not be able." That many professors are deceived is clear enough from the language of Christ Himself, both here and in other places. For instance, "Then shall the kingdom of heaven be like unto ten virgins, which took their lamps, and went forth to meet the bridegroom; and five of them were wise, and five were foolish." We hope that in our Churches we have not such a division this, for it were fearful to contemplate only one half as sincere, and the other half graceless, having the lamp of profession, without the secret vessel of spiritual life! Yet, so alarming a proportion as five out of ten should make us search ourselves very carefully, lest we be found among the virgins, and among the virgins having lamps, ay, and among those whose lamps are burning, and yet should be cast away as having no oil in our vessels with our lamps.¹⁴

The number of truly saved people in any given congregation is a common concern of pastors who have any measure of spiritual sense about them. We ask our Lord, "How many in our body truly know You? How many are 'wise' as these five and how many are 'foolish' as these other five?" It would seem that one day I, as a pastor, will need to give testimony to the Lord regarding all those with whom I have had some contact. The writer of Hebrews told his people:

Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you. (Heb. 13:17)

I assume that means that I will need to give an account, give an assessment of each of you. I do hope that I will be able to do this with joy, and not with groaning.

J. C. Ryle (19th c.) voiced concern in his day about professing Christians who were strangers to God's saving grace.

The professing Church is compared to "ten virgins, who took their lamps and went forth to meet the bridegroom:" all of them had lamps, but only five had oil in their vessels to feed the flame; all of them professed to have one object in view, but five only were truly "wise," and the rest were "foolish." The

¹³ Charles Spurgeon, *Spurgeon's Popular Exposition of Matthew* (Zondervan Publishing House, 1962), p. 222.

¹⁴ Sermon by Charles Spurgeon, "Self Delusion", at

http://www.thewordoftruth.net/classic_sermons/Spurgeon_1_Final.html

visible Church of Christ is just in the same condition: all its members are baptized in the name of Christ. But not all really hear His voice and follow Him; all are called Christians, and profess to be of the Christian religion, but not all have the grace of the Spirit in their hearts, and really are what they profess to be. Our own eyes tell us that it is so now: the Lord Jesus tells us that it will be so when He comes again. Let us mark well this description. After all our preaching and praying--after all our visiting and teaching,--after all our missionary exertions abroad, and means of grace at home, many will be found at last dead in trespasses and sins! The wickedness and unbelief of human nature is a subject about which we all have much to learn.¹⁵

It would appear to me that one difference between the true Christian and the deluded professing Christian, is that *the true Christian is moved by God's Word, the Holy Spirit, the command of the Lord, and His own conscience, to be watchful with view to the Second Coming of Jesus Christ.* They are "blessed" for they who are watching will receive the grace of salvation in its finality and fullness. Our Lord told His disciples in **Luke 12:37** and **38**:

"Blessed are those servants whom the master, when he comes, will find watching. Assuredly, I say to you that he will gird himself and have them sit down to eat, and will come and serve them. And if he should come in the second watch, or come in the third watch, and find them so, blessed are those servants."

Let us pray that our Lord will help us and bless us through our study of this most important subject. Let us also pray that the right people be troubled and the right people be comforted. It was said of our Lord that He was very tender and careful not to overthrow the faith of those in whom was but weak or little faith. It is said of Him, "A bruised reed He will not break, and smoking flax He will not quench, until He sends forth justice to victory" (Matt. 12:10).

I wrote to David Birse yesterday and told him of the new series that we were beginning this morning. Here are a few of my words:

I have always been keen on the very deceptive, shallow, and errant evangelicalism that is characteristic of modern America and everywhere it has had influence, or so it seems. The present need is always to "awaken" and "warn", trying to get the people to see the gravity of these matters, holding forth the Lord Jesus Christ before Whom we must give account. Beginning tomorrow, I will preach a series on "True Conversion." Of course the major challenge always is attempting to shake awake the lethargic and stir the careless, but not unsettle the troubled, doubting soul. We want to be as our Lord: "A bruised reed He will not break, and smoking flax He will not quench, until He sends forth justice to victory" (Matt. 12:20). It requires wisdom and grace-- spiritual commodities not all that prevalent, but essential.

Let us pray that our Lord will give us all both these gifts of His grace in our study.

"The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God,
and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen." (2 Cor. 13:14)

¹⁵ J. C. Ryle, **Expository Thoughts on the Gospels. Matthew** (The Banner of Truth Trust, 1986, orig. 1856), pp. 31f.