

# Converted by the Spirit

by Tim Keller

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*Real Christian conversion comes through God's initiative, the challenge to religion, and the transformation of the Holy Spirit.*

**Duration:** 45:52

**Scripture:** Luke 9:54-56, Luke 12:49-50, Acts 10:27-28, Acts 10:34-36, Acts 10:44-46

**Topics:** "Conversion"

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## Description

In this sermon, the preacher discusses the concept of real conversion and spiritual transformation. He emphasizes that true conversion is initiated by God and not by human effort. The preacher also highlights the challenge to religious beliefs and practices as a part of the conversion process. He further explains that conversion is brought about through the words of the gospel and the work of the Holy Spirit. The sermon references the story of Cornelius and Peter from the Bible to illustrate these points.

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## Transcript

The scripture passage is found on page 8 of your bulletin. I'll be reading Acts 10 verses 27 through 47. Talking with him, Peter went inside and found a large gathering of people.

He said to them, you are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with a Gentile or visit him, but God has shown me that I should not call any man impure or unclean. So when I was sent for, I came without raising any objection. May I ask why you sent for me? Cornelius answered, four days ago I was in my house praying at this hour at 3 in the afternoon.

Suddenly a man in shining clothes stood before me and said, Cornelius, God has heard your prayer and remembered your gifts to the poor. Send to Joppa for Simon, who is called Peter. He is a guest in the house of Simon the Tanner, who lives by the sea.

So I sent for you immediately, and it was good of you to come. Now we are all here in the presence of God to listen to everything the Lord has commanded you to tell us. Then Peter began to speak.

I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism, but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right. You know the message God sent to the people of Israel, telling the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all. You know what has happened through Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John preached, how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit

and power, and how he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil because God was with him.

We are witnesses of everything he did in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They killed him by hanging him on a tree, but God raised him from the dead on the third day and caused him to be seen. He was not seen by all the people, but by witnesses whom God had already chosen, by us who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead.

He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead. All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name. While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message.

The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles, for they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God. Then Peter said, can anyone keep these people from being baptized with water? They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have. This is the word of the Lord.

The book of Acts tells us that when Christianity was at its most vital and it's its most potent, it grew through conversion. In other words, Christianity was not originally a set of doctrines or a set of practices that one took up. Instead, it was a converting power, it is a converting power that takes you up.

Now Jesus in Matthew 18 says, unless you're converted, you cannot see the kingdom of heaven. And the word he uses for converted is a pretty simple word, it's a word that simply means to turn completely around and face in a new direction. And that is a perfect metaphor, it's a perfect image of what Christian conversion really is.

On the one hand, Christian conversion is a radical inner transformation. On the other hand, it's not so much a replacing of what you are, but a refacing of what you are. It's not as much, in other words, your temperament doesn't go away, your culture doesn't go away, it's not so much a replacing of what you are, but a refacing.

That is, everything you are is now lived on a whole new basis. Everything you do is done for a different reason, different motivation, toward a different goal. Your entire life has changed.

Now, in the book of Acts, and this is the last week we're going to do this, we've been looking at how conversions happen and what conversions are, and we're looking always at the core common things that all conversions have in common so that we can be informed, so we can know whether we are converted, or how to be converted, or how to help somebody become converted, or how to live deeply converted lives. That's why we're looking at these. Now, this chapter 10 case study of Cornelius the Centurion gives us four very important, teaches us four very important facts about Christian conversion.

The first one is conversion comes through God's initiative. Real conversion always comes through God's initiative. Look at verse 29.

In 29, Peter says, may I ask why you sent for me? Now, what's the answer? Now, Cornelius' answer is, well, an angel came and he spoke to me and he said, Cornelius, we see your prayers, we see your virtue, we see your care for the poor. Now, send for Peter, who's staying in Joppa with Simon the Tanner, send for him and listen to what he has to say. In other words, the answer to Peter's question, why did you send

for me, is this, I sent for you, Peter, because God first sent for me.

Cornelius would never have sent for Peter. Cornelius wasn't searching, he wasn't seeking, he was happy with himself, we'll get to that in a second, but it was God who comes in and intervenes and says, send for Peter. So when Peter says, why did you send for me? The answer is, I sent for you only because God had already been sent for me.

Now, we said we have to look at the commonality. Here's the principle. The principle is not that if you're going to be converted, you have a vision.

In fact, if we've been looking through all of these conversion stories and in the book of Acts, we see that usually there's nothing like that. Usually you don't have a great vision. It didn't happen to the Ethiopian finance minister, didn't happen to Lydia, and that sort of thing.

But what we do see in all conversions, in all places and times, is while there might not be a, you know, something spectacular like that, something like a vision or something like that, always the conversion, the convert person realizes that their search for God was a result and the product of God's first searching for them. Always. You might not see it right away, you might not see it till later, but eventually every person who has experienced conversion looks back and says, I thought I was searching, but when I look back I realize I was searching because he was first searching for me.

So for example, everybody who really has gone through Christian conversion says something like what C.S. Lewis says in his spiritual autobiography. He puts it like this, quote, amiable agnostics will talk cheerfully about, quote, man's search for God. To me, they might as well have talked about the mouse's search for the cat.

The mouse doesn't search for the cat, is his implication. The cat searches for the mouse. He looks back and he said, was I on a search for God? We don't search for God unless God first comes and does something in our heart and and pulls us toward him.

There's a hymn from the Reformation era that says it perfectly, and this is the language of a heart of anybody who's really been converted, and one of the stanzas of the hymn goes like this, "Tis not that I did choose thee, for Lord that could not be. This heart would still refuse thee, hadst thou not chosen me. My heart owns none before thee, for thy rich grace I thirst.

This knowing, if I love thee, thou must have loved me first." And anyone who's ever experienced real conversion, in one way or another, knows that that's true. Now, what does that mean? It's good news, by the way. It's very good news.

Here's what the good news is. It means that if you're really on a search, if you're really trying to find God, trying to know God, if you really want him, don't search with anxiety. Search with confidence.

Why? Because if somebody comes to me and says, oh I'm afraid, I'm not gonna find him, I'm trying to find him, I'm not sure I'm gonna find him. The only reason you're discouraged is because you're giving yourself too much credit. You're not capable of missing God.

You're not capable of aching for God, you're not capable of longing for God, unless he was already helping you. Or, put it another way, a sense of his absence is the sign of his presence. Because you're not capable of feeling his absence, you're not capable of missing him.

A sense of his absence is a sign of his presence. That's good news. So the first thing we learn here is that real conversion, the first mark of real Christian conversion, real life change, real spiritual transformation, is God comes, conversion comes through God's initiative.

Secondly, the second thing we learn here is that conversion comes through the challenge to religion. The challenge to religion. Now what do I mean by that? Well, let's keep on going with the story.

Cornelius says, four days ago I was in my house praying, an angel came. And the angel says, Cornelius, God has heard your prayer and remembered your gifts to the poor. Therefore, what? Now let's let's stop for a minute.

Let me just show you how striking and how odd and how actually stunning, what a non sequitur the angel statement really is. Realize what he's saying. The angel says, Cornelius, we've been up in heaven and we've been looking over the human race and you are one of the best ones there are.

You pray, you know, you're very powerful and you're wealthy, but you haven't let it go to your head, you haven't let it corrupt you like so many other people. Care for the poor. You pray.

You're a man of virtue. Therefore, what does he say? Does he say, and because you're so good, we just wanted you to know that if you just, if you just keep on the way you're going and we're sure you're gonna make it to heaven, we're just sure you can do it. That's not what he says.

In fact, it's stunning. To the world's way of thinking, it's a non sequitur. He says, you are really one of the good ones.

You are a really great person. Therefore, you need to be converted. You need to send for Peter.

You need to hear the message. You need to be converted. That's stunning.

It's the same thing that happened with Nicodemus. In John chapter 3, Jesus talks to Nicodemus. Nicodemus is a lot like Cornelius.

Nicodemus sits down and he says, Master, Rabbi, we know you're sent from God. Now, Nicodemus is, like Cornelius, an accomplished man, a man of wealth, a powerful man. Secondly, a man of impeccable credentials.

Thirdly, not a proud, self-righteous man. Nicodemus says he doesn't have the attitude to Jesus that the other religious leaders do. Nicodemus says, Rabbi, we know you're sent from God.

So what does Jesus say? Hmm? Does Jesus say, well, now, Nicodemus, you're a great person. You know the Bible. You're moral.

You're spiritual. You're religious. You just need a couple of things just to kind of complete the picture, you know? You just need a little bit of touching up.

Is that what he says? No. What does he say? He says, Nicodemus, you must be born again. Boom! You must be born again.

It's an image for conversion. But what an image. What is he saying? He's not saying, well, you know, Cornelius, you know, Nicodemus, you know, you're really pretty good.

You just need to top it off a little bit. You just need some finishing. No.

Born again means you need to start from scratch. You need to be radically converted. Now, this is not the way we think.

What we think of when we think born again, born again. Well, I can understand born again conversion for people whose lives are a wreck. They're in Skid Row.

Their lives are falling apart. Maybe they need some kind of cathartic experience, but I'm all pulled together. Nicodemus, Cornelius, they're as pulled together as you could be.

They're as good as you could ask for people to be. And what does the angel say? What does Jesus say? You must be converted. You must be absolutely born again.

Now, here's what that means. Here's the second principle. Until this penny drops, you're not going to be converted.

You aren't converted. You're not having that life transformation that God wants for you. The average person hears the call to be born again or to be converted.

The average person says when you hear someone say, you must be born again, what do you think that is? The average person thinks that's a call to be become moral and religious. It's a call to traditional values. It's a call to traditional moral values.

But that can't be what it is. Why? Because look at Cornelius, look at Nicodemus, look at Paul last week, look at Lydia. They had traditional moral values out the wazoo and they still were being called to be converted.

In other words, the Christian call to conversion is not a call to morality and religion. It's a challenge to morality and religion. Do you know that? The call to radical conversion is a challenge to religion and morality.

Not a call to religion and morality. It's especially a call to people who are already incredibly moral and religious. Now, why? Why would that be? Here's the answer.

The Bible says that the problem with the human race, don't we world, is that human beings put themselves in the place of God. Human beings put themselves in the place of God. Now, actually, that makes a lot of sense.

It's almost common sense, even though it's from the Bible. If you went out on the streets, which we aren't very far, we're only about 10 feet from the street. If you went out on the street and you actually did a survey and said, what do you think of this statement that the problem with the human race is that we are, the human beings put themselves in the place of God.

I'll bet you get an awful lot of people out on the street saying, yeah, that makes sense to me. I think there'd be widespread consensus that that makes a lot of sense. But do you know there's two ways to make yourself God? There's two ways to put yourself in the place of God.

There's two very different ways to make yourself your own Savior and Lord. One way is to break all the moral rules and the other way is to keep all the moral rules. One way is to say I'm gonna live the way I

want to live and trample on people and be dishonest and violent and the other way is to be absolutely moral and say because I am so good I have earned my salvation.

One makes you a criminal, the other makes you either a self-righteous stuck-up Pharisee or a person who's always feeling guilty because you never feel good enough. And don't you realize either approach, as different as they look, are both ways of being your own Savior and Lord. They both make the world miserable and they both are ways of soul distorting self-centeredness and pride.

And that's, but look at it this way, therefore the person who's a mess, the person who is breaking all the rules, of course they need to be converted, of course they need to be born again, but so do the most religious, the most moral. In fact, in some ways they got a bigger problem because they don't see the nature of their self-centeredness. They don't see the nature of their spiritual brokenness.

They don't see how they have made themselves their own Savior and Lord. They see how the criminal has. In other words, here's a test.

You go up to somebody and say, you need to be converted, and if they say, me need to be converted? I'm a pulled-together person. I'm as good as I know. I mean, I'm better than most of the people around me.

There's a person whose need for spiritual transformation is the most acute. In other words, the ones who think I'm spiritually okay are not. If the gospel is true, that you're saved not by your works but by God's grace, then the ones who think they're okay are not, and the ones who think they're not okay are on their way.

Huh? So first of all we see conversion happens only through God's initiative. Secondly, conversion only happens when you begin to realize that conversion is a challenge to religion and morality. Now nobody has ever put this better than C.S. Lewis in the book Great Divorce.

The Great Divorce is a fictional piece. It's a parable about a busload of people from hell who are ghosts, and they come to the outskirts of heaven, and the bright people come down out of heaven to try to get the ghosts to come to heaven. Now this is not...this is a parable, friends.

This is fiction, and C.S. Lewis does not believe...he's not trying to tell you that he thinks this is what the afterlife is really like. It's a parable for how we find God or how we fail to find God. But at one place in the parable, one place in the little book Great Divorce, a ghost meets from hell on the bus, meets a person who's come down from heaven that he recognizes from life.

So you have the ghost and the bright man from heaven, and the ghost recognizes the bright man. Here's the interesting conversation. The ghost says, look at me now, says the ghost, slapping its chest, but the slap made no sound.

I've gone straight all my life. I don't say I had no faults. Far from it.

But I'd done my best all my life, see? I'd done my best by everyone. That's the sort of chap I was. I never asked for anything that wasn't mine by rights.

If I wanted a drink, I paid for it, see? And if I took my wages, I'd done my job, see? That's the sort I was. It would be much better, says the bright man, if you wouldn't talk like that. You're never going to get there like that.

What are you talking about, says the ghost? I'm not going on. I'm not arguing. I'm just asking for nothing but my rights.

I just want to have my rights. Same as you, see? Oh no, said the bright man. It's not as bad as that.

I never got my rights, and you won't get your rights either. You'll get something so much better. That's just what I mean, says the ghost.

I haven't gotten my rights. I've always done my best, and I've never done anything wrong. And here's the thing.

Well, if you don't mind my saying so, here's the thing I wonder about. Why should I be put down there below a bloody murderer like you? What's a murderer doing up there? And what is a sort like me doing down there? Well, the bright man says, I don't know where you'll be put. Just be happy and come.

What do you keep on arguing for, says the ghost? I only want my rights. I'm not asking for anybody's bleeding charity. Oh, then do, said the bright man.

At once, ask for the bleeding charity. Everything is here for the asking, and absolutely nothing can be bought. That may be all right for you, said the ghost, if they choose to let a bloody murderer in.

Just because he makes a poor mouth at the end, at the last minute, that's their lookout. I don't want charity, though. I'm a decent man, and if I had my rights, I'd have been there long ago, and you can tell him I said so.

The ghost was almost happy now that it could, in a sense, threaten. That's what I'll do. I'll go home.

I didn't come here to be treated like a dog. I'll go home. Damn and blast the whole pack of you.

And still grumbling, but whimpering a little bit as it picked its way over the sharp grasses, it left. If the gospel is true, then your conversion doesn't even begin until you realize the difference between what it means to be good, what it means to be moral, what it means to be religious. If the gospel is true, the ones who think they're spiritually okay are not.

They're in the most trouble, and the ones who say, I'm not spiritually okay, are on their way. So, conversion happens through God's initiative. Secondly, conversion happens through the challenge to religion.

Thirdly, the conversion happens through the transformation of the Holy Spirit. Look at verse 44 to 46. Jesus says to Nicodemus, you have to be born again by the Spirit.

Paul says in Titus chapter 3, you have to be reborn by the Spirit. And Luke tells us, this is what makes conversion. Conversion is not a matter of your will.

You're turning over a new leaf, you know, some program. Conversion is spiritual transformation by the Spirit. Verse 44, while Peter was still speaking his words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message.

And the believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out, even on the Gentiles. And here's the two marks that they were converted. They heard them

speaking in tongues and praising God.

There are the two marks of spiritual transformation. Now, some of you are saying, well, I can't wait to hear what a Presbyterian minister has to say about verse 46. Fine, go ahead, let's watch.

Let's watch what the Presbyterian minister says. Speaking in tongues and praising God are the two marks of spiritual conversion. Praising God is a mark of the psychological transformation the Spirit brings, and speaking in tongues is a mark of the sociological transformation that the Spirit brings.

First of all, let's do the easier one. Let's do the psychological transformation. How did they know they were transformed by the Spirit? They heard them praising God.

Now, you say, what's the big deal about that? Let me tell you what's the big deal about that. In the Bible, worship is defined as ascribing ultimate value to something. Ultimate value, that's what worship is.

Not just you like it, but you subscribe ultimate, ascribe ultimate value to it. You cherish it, you adore it. Now, the Bible says that even the most unreligious people, everybody on the face of the earth is doing that with something.

Everybody on the face of the earth looks to something as the ultimate source of your meaning and your happiness. Every heart in your heart of hearts cherishes something as the ultimate thing you adore and value, even if it's your own independence. And whatever it is that you value the most, whatever it is you adore the most, it's your spiritual oxygen, it's your emotional oxygen.

Without it, life is unbearable. So, if you live for people's approval, if that's the main thing that your heart cherishes and looks for and says, if I have that, then I'll have happiness and joy, you're controlled by what people think of you. If the main thing is power, not people's approval, then you're controlled by status and money, your own or somebody else's.

But you do not control yourself, you're controlled by what you worship. You're controlled by what your heart most values, what it most adores, what it most praises, and you cannot change unless you change what you worship. You can do all the willpower stuff, all the programs, no matter what, all changes in your life is superficial.

None of it amounts to absolute spiritual transformation and conversion unless you change what you worship. You haven't really changed truly, lastingly, profoundly. Let me give you an example.

I remember some years ago when I was in college, I was in a campus Christian fellowship, and a man, a young college student, came to the fellowship one night, and we were struck, we were stunned. This fellow was sexually active, on the other hand, that's just way too weak a word, I just couldn't think of a better one. This man was sexually ravenous, very sexually active, and everybody knew it, and he shows up that night and he says, I've given my life to God, and I want to start living right, and I want to start coming to your fellowship.

And so we were amazed, and we were glad, and so we welcomed him in, but we found something interesting. Yes, he did morally made all the changes. He was abstinent, you know, he followed all the moral rules, but there were problems.

In every single situation he got involved with, he needed to be in charge. He needed to be the leader. He needed to be the one, and in every small group Bible study, his opinion had to prevail.

He was so domineering, and there were lots of clashes. It was very difficult, and eventually he dropped out, and I never quite say, what happened there? Some years later I was studying Alfred Adler's individual psychology, it was in a book, and Adler said he felt that everybody had to have some bottom line, something that they looked to, without which their life was unbearable, and everybody had a different one, and he suggested at least four different, what he called motivational drives. Power, approval, comfort, and control.

Now I'm not saying that there's only four, but I'll tell you, when I was reading that book, it suddenly dawned on me, and I realized what had happened with this man. In his sexual phase, it wasn't about sex, it was about power, because, and everybody knew it really, because as soon as he got the girl to sleep with him, he lost interest in her. It really wasn't about sex, it really wasn't about the girl, it was about power, the need for power.

So when he was in his sexual phase, very licentious and, you know, sexual, it was really not about sex, it was about power. But then he had his religious phase, but in his religious phase, it wasn't about God, it was still about power. In every, he was, in a religious venue, he was still trying to be in charge, he was still trying to exercise power, that was the real thing his heart was after, that was the real fundamental praise of his life, that was the real fundamental value of his life, and it hadn't changed.

Think about it. Superficially, it looks like a conversion, but it wasn't. He went from immorality to morality, he went from irreligion to religion, it looked like he changed completely, but he hadn't changed at all.

Why? He wasn't praising God yet. Until your heart's most fundamental worship is changed, you haven't changed. You can have your programs, you can turn over new leaves, you can have accountability groups, you can do everything you want, but you cannot spiritually change.

You're not converted. He wasn't converted, that man wasn't converted. What do you mean he wasn't converted? Didn't he give his life to Christ? He said so.

Didn't he try to go on the straight and narrow? He said so. Yeah, I think he was trying, but he wasn't converted. When the Holy Spirit changes you psychologically, it changes because it changes what you worship, and until God's love is the praise of your life, you haven't really changed.

Until the Holy Spirit makes God's love that real to you, you haven't really changed. So first of all, the Holy Spirit changes psychologically, but secondly, it changes you sociologically. They knew that they had changed not just because they were praising God, but because they were speaking in tongues.

Now what does that mean? When Peter saw it, it dawned on him, because in chapter 11, he recapitulates this entire incident to some friends in chapter 11, and he says about what happened to Cornelius, he says, the Holy Spirit came on them just as he came on us at the beginning. Wait a minute, what is he thinking of? Pentecost. Now here's what, what does speaking in tongues mean here? What does it mean here? I'm not talking about what it means across the street, tonight, some other place in the city.

What does it mean here? There are several places in the book of Acts where people are converted, and this is the only place where they're speaking in tongues. Didn't happen when Paul was converted, didn't happen when the African, you know, finance minister was converted, didn't happen anywhere else in

conversions. And there are a number of times in which the Holy Spirit came down.

It came down on Paul, but there was no speaking in tongues. It came down on the Apostles at the end of Acts chapter 4, and there was no speaking in tongues. But this time they're speaking in tongues.

Why? Peter knows. He suddenly realizes it. He says, this is just like Pentecost.

I know what God is saying to me now. Well, what was God saying to me now? Well, let's go back to Pentecost. What does Pentecost mean? On Pentecost, the Holy Spirit came down on the church.

There was a baptism of the Holy Spirit. There was a baptism of fire. There were tongues of flame on everyone's forehead.

And what happened? When they opened their mouths to speak the gospel to the city, everybody heard them in their own language. That was the speaking in tongues miracle. Everybody heard them in their own language.

You know what that means? What do you think that means? In the most vivid possible way, God was saying, there is no language and therefore there is no culture that is more of an appropriate vehicle for my truth than any other. What if the very first sermon had been in Hebrew? What if the very first sermon had been in Greek? What if the very first sermon had been in Latin? God would have said, this is the first culture and every other culture is derivative. Islam, Arabic, is the language of God.

The Koran can't be translated. But in Pentecost, God was saying something very, very different. Christianity is utterly different.

Christianity is saying, on the day of Pentecost, every language is equal. Every culture is equal. There is no one culture that is more appropriate for the gospel than some other culture.

Racial superiority has to end. Cultural superiority has to end. The Holy Spirit's job is to come into each and every culture and recreate Christianity in that culture.

No culture has a leg up on any other. In the strongest possible terms in Acts 2, God was saying, this is the end of racial superiority. This should be the end of racism.

But look what happened to Peter. In Acts 1, God said, I want you to go to Jerusalem, Samaria, and the uttermost parts of the earth. I want you to bring in all the nations.

When Peter walked in to Cornelius's house, did you see what he says? What's the first thing he says? Well, you may not have really quite recognized. You know what he's saying? He walked in the door and he said, I've never done this before. Do you know that? He says, all of my life it has been drilled into me as a Jew that I would not walk into a Gentile's house and sit down and eat with a Gentile because you're unclean.

And I'm only here because the revelation, because the messengers, because the angel told me to come here. And then suddenly he begins to speak, down comes the Holy Spirit, and God deliberately gives the Gentiles their own little Pentecost as a way of reminding Peter what Pentecost is all about. And Peter starts to say, oh I get it.

Because in spite of the fact that God had to hit Peter over the head to get him to understand the implication of the gospel, in spite of the fact that he was one of the great leaders, he still wasn't living out Pentecost. He still wasn't living out the gospel. He still wasn't living out the implication of the salvation by grace.

You're not saved by your pedigree. You're not saved by your record. That means everyone's equally a sinner, but everyone's equally loved.

And there is no unclean group. There is no unclean race. Do you know, we said this two weeks ago, I There are racial groups in this city that in your heart you despise, you look down on.

You don't mind that group, but you don't like that group. You're resisting the Holy Spirit. The flow of the Holy Spirit, the force of the Holy Spirit, the job of the Holy Spirit is to surmount racial barriers and bring unity in the Spirit.

The speaking in tongues on Pentecost was God's way of saying that when the gospel really has its way in your heart, you'll get over that racial superiority, that self-justification in every human heart that wants to attribute moral superiority and moral significance to mere cultural differences. That's over now if you understand the gospel, if you understand what the Holy Spirit wants. And so when the Holy Spirit comes down and transforms you psychologically, it will also transform you sociologically.

And when they saw that it happened to Cornelius, then they knew, here is not just a religious person, here's not just a moral person, here's someone who's been converted by the Holy Spirit. Now one last thing, we see that conversion is what? By God's initiative? It's a challenge to religion? It's an absolute transformation of the most fundamental part of your heart by the Holy Spirit, psychologically and sociologically? And one last thing, conversion comes through the words of the gospel. In verse 44 it says, while Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came.

Notice the Holy Spirit just doesn't come abstractly. Why didn't the angel, when the angel showed up, you know, four days before, why didn't the angel, if they wanted the Holy Spirit in Cornelius's life, why didn't the angel just zap him? Angels surely would be able to do it better than Peter. No, because the Holy Spirit's not an abstract force.

You could sit there in your room and say, oh Lord, hit me with the Holy Spirit, hit me with the Holy Spirit, it won't happen. The Holy Spirit comes through belief in the gospel. You want more of the Holy Spirit? Believe the gospel more deeply.

You want the Holy Spirit for the first time? Believe the gospel. Because it was as Peter was speaking those words, what were the words? Well, here they are. Verse 38, Jesus lived a perfect life of service for God and man.

Secondly though, Jesus died and took the curse. He died on a tree, which means it was a cursed death. In other words, Jesus lived a perfect life that earned a blessing, but at the end of his life he took a curse.

Why did he do that? He took the curse for us. How do we know he took the curse for us? How do we know that Jesus just didn't die? How do we know he died for us? How do we know he didn't just die? And the answer is the last part of Peter's words, the resurrection. We saw him, Peter said.

We ate and drank with the resurrected Jesus, and that's how you know his death wasn't just a death, it was a death for you. And that's when it came down. Let me put it to you like this.

Jesus talked about a baptism of fire earlier in the in the great book Luke-Acts. You know, Luke wrote both Luke and Acts, and earlier in the Gospel of Luke, Luke tells a story about how Jesus and his disciples were going through Samaria. They're going through Samaria, and the Samaritans wouldn't let them stay anywhere.

They were very nasty, very rejecting, very cold and hostile to Jesus and his disciples. And his disciples turned to Jesus and said, do you not want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them? Now why would they do that? Because they knew Jesus was a prophet. He was more than a prophet.

And they also knew in the book of the Old Testament Elijah was a prophet, and when the soldiers of Ahab came to try to get Elijah, fire came down from heaven and destroyed them. So if Elijah was so great that fire came down from heaven to destroy them, the soldiers, Jesus was greater than Elijah, surely the disciples said, well surely look at how they're treating you. Let's call fire down.

And Jesus rebukes them. And you know what he says just a little bit later? He says in Luke chapter 12, I have come to bring fire on the earth, the fire of God's judgment, and how I wish it were already kindled. I have come to undergo a baptism, and how crushed I am to see it completed.

Now if you understand something about Semitic parallelism, that they say things twice the second time just a restatement of the first, do you realize what Jesus is saying? Do you see reason why he says don't call fire down on these sinners? I have come to bring fire on the earth, the fire of God's judgment, and how I wish it were already kindled. And I have come to undergo a baptism, and how crushed I am until it's completed. When the soldiers came for Elijah, fire came down on them, God's judgment.

When the soldiers came for Jesus, nothing happened. Why? Because on the cross, Jesus took the fire of God's judgment. Jesus took the punishment for sin, so that we could have the fire of God's power.

We could have the fire of God's beauty and love. Do you see? Or put it this way, when he said it was a baptism, he was gonna be baptized with the fire of God's judgment, so we could be baptized with the fire of God's love and power. On the cross, Jesus Christ was baptized, he was immersed in God's absence, so we who believe in him could be immersed in his presence.

Jesus got the baptism of fire of judgment, so that we could have the baptism of fire of power. And that's what changes you. When they heard that, when they heard the gospel, when they realized, and when you realize, the fire of God's judgment came down on Jesus for your sin, at that moment the fire of God's beauty and power comes down on you.

You know why? St. Augustine said it perfectly. St. Augustine said the real problem we have in our lives is not rules that we're breaking or not breaking. The real problem we have in our lives is inordinate love.

Inordinate love. He says, for example, if you love your children more than anything else in the whole universe, more than God, they're gonna crush you and you're gonna crush them. You're gonna live your life through them.

You're gonna control them. You're gonna need to control them. And if anything goes wrong with their lives, you will be devastated.

If you love your nation more than anything in the world, more than God, that'll lead to racism and militarism. And St. Augustine says, there's anything wrong with loving your nation? No. Is there anything wrong with loving your children? No.

The problem is not that you love them too much, but that you love God too little in relationship to them. That's the problem. The only way you're gonna be healed is if you love God more than your children and more than your nation.

Well, how are you gonna do that? You're gonna say, okay, I'm gonna try. You just sit there as an act of the will, go ahead, just try. Let's just try.

Let's the wamp up a little more love. No. It's the minute you sense his infinite suffering for you.

That's what melts your heart. That's what begins to make God's love real. It's only when you realize the fire of God's judgment came down on Jesus for you, that the fire of God's love and power will come down on you, the baptism of the Holy Spirit.

That's when it came down, when they heard the words. And that's when it comes down on us. Now, conclusion.

A couple practicals. Real brief, but a couple. Are you one of the kinds of people who look at yourself and feel continually inadequate, guilty, bad, and unclean? You know, here's God saying to Peter, don't call anyone unclean.

And what he's saying, of course, is don't look at that racial group or that group of people over there and say they're unclean. But what if you're doing that to yourself? What if you're doing that to yourself and saying, I'm unclean? What if you hate yourself? What if you're down on yourself all the time? Use this truth tonight. Use the truth that God never comes after you, and you never would even want him unless he was coming after you.

Use the truth that God's salvation is completely by grace. I have a friend of mine, Harvey Kahn, late Harvey Kahn, who was a missionary to Korea years ago. And when he was a missionary to Korea, he worked with prostitutes.

And he said one of the difficulties he had working with prostitutes in a Confucian-based society was the prostitutes had even lower status there than they did in even other countries, and the women who worked as prostitutes utterly hated themselves. So when he would speak to them, he would say, hey, you know, you need, you know, you know, you need salvation. Here's the gospel.

They'd say, oh no, God would never, never talk to us. He would never want anything to do with us. We're so unclean.

And one day, Harvey Kahn decided to give him the doctrine of election. The doctrine of election. You know, like a good Presbyterian missionary, which he was, he believed that God would, you would never want God unless God was first drawing you.

So he said to them, he said, let me just tell you something. I believe in a God of grace. Nobody seeks God unless God's already just coming to them and opening their heart.

Do you want this God? Do you want a God who pardons you? Do you want a God who wipes away your past and your sins? And they say, yeah. Well, God's already after you. He's already in your life.

And Harvey would say, if you want this God, then God already wants you. Proof. And then he would say, meet me at one o'clock on the corner of such-and-such-and-such-a-place, and I'll take you to a safe house.

And sometimes he got beaten by the pimps, but it worked. Call nothing that God has made unclean, including yourself. Ask for the bleeding charity.

Do at once. Second practical application. Isn't it amazing what a faith we've got? Christianity has got faith.

Here's Peter, the evangelist, and here's Cornelius, the convert. Who is affecting who? Obviously, Peter is having a huge impact on Cornelius. He's getting converted.

But don't you realize that Cornelius is having every bit as much of an impact on Peter? Peter believed the gospel, but there were parts of his life that had not really experienced the gospel, parts of his life that actually hadn't been affected by the gospel. He still had his latent racism. Isn't it great to be part of a faith in which the evangelist converts the converts, but the converts convert the evangelists? And if you have any understanding of your own heart, you'll know that I don't care how long you've been a Christian, I don't care how much you think of yourself as an evangelist, you need to be converted by people, especially by people who are very different from you culturally.

If you get involved with people who are very different from you culturally, even people who need to be converted, as you help them, they will show you parts of your own life where the gospel has not come. Isn't it amazing we've got a faith that is so anti-triumphalistic, anti-triumphalistic, that the evangelists know that they still need to be converted by their converts? Lastly, I love the fact that Peter says, we ate and drank with him. He doesn't just say, we had a vision of the resurrected Christ.

You know, that could have been in his mind, that could have been wish fulfillment, that could have been a hallucination. He didn't say, we ate and drank with him. You don't ask a hallucination to pass the salt, and the hallucination, even if you do, would never give it to you.

If you ask a hallucination to pass the salt, you're nuts. If you actually get the salt, you're not having a hallucination. It's Jesus, and here's what Peter is saying.

Peter's saying, I'm not offering you this philosophy as one philosophy among many to see whether it works for you. I'm not saying it's true if it works for you, I'm saying it will work for you because it's true. It happened.

We saw him. Flannery O'Connor, the great Catholic Christian writer of fiction, in one of her letters said, Christianity is worthless if it's not true. Worthless if it's not true.

I read in the New York Times yesterday, the Metro section, a very interesting spot where there was an article about why do missionaries now take their children into dangerous places when so much of the world is so dangerous? And the reporter said, why do they still go? And the reporter at one point said, maybe it's because some family is just really looking for adventure. Here's the question I have for the reporter. Maybe you're here, it's New York.

Did Jesus rise from the dead? If Jesus rose from the dead, not only do you need to go, it'll be okay no matter what happens. But if Jesus didn't rise from the dead, it would be the stupidest thing in the world to put your family in harm's way just to get adventure. In other words, Christianity is worthless if it's not true.

But Peter says it is. He says we saw him, we ate and drank with him. In other words, don't ask whether Christianity is relevant, even though it is.

Don't ask whether Christianity is an adventure, even though it certainly is. Don't ask if Christianity is exciting and life-changing, even though it certainly is. Ask if it's true.

If it's true, it'll convert you. Let us pray. Thank you, Father, for giving us the Holy Spirit that comes to us through the gospel.

We ask that you would show us how we can know the power of the Holy Spirit in our lives and how we can know thorough going conversion. Some of us see that we're not converted. Some of us see that we're not thoroughly converted.

All of us see that we're not thoroughly converted. We pray that because we spent this time tonight, you would show us what we should do about it. In Jesus' name we ask it.

Amen.

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