

Sep 5, 2010 – Tim Miller – The Mark of True Conversion (2 Corinthians 4:1-7)

Unconverted folks can do a lot of things that could pass as “marks of conversion” or “evidences of conversion.” For example, take the apostle Paul before he was a disciple of Jesus. **Galatians 1** and **Philippians 3** show us that Paul’s religious life before he met Christ. Here are 7 observations from Galatians 1 and Philippians 3: Things that were true of Paul before he was born of God, forgiven of sin, before he was saved.

- 1.) Paul was zealous for God and country
- 2.) Paul had a deep knowledge of Scripture
- 3.) Paul as almost certainly a man of prayer
- 4.) Paul was a theological and social conservative
- 5.) Paul was a God-centered and sacrificially devoted member of a rigorous group of spiritual ninjas
- 6.) Paul was morally, Sexually, Spiritually, Ritually, and Religiously faultless when judged by the OT law – or so he thought.
- 7.) He was jealous for the purity of the Jewish people. Extremely jealous. So jealous he travelled over great distances and took great care to purify Judaism of sectarian wackos, weirdos, and nutjobs, such as the group that still insisted and wouldn’t stop claiming the absurdity that a carpenter conceived out of wed-lock who was from the hick-town of Galilee, and who had actually come under the OT curse by being crucified (!) was in fact the Messiah – the now reigning Son of David. Yeah, right. And then why is Rome still supreme? Give me a break.

And Saul was all of these things *without being born again*. If that’s correct then that would also seem plausible that churchd folks may do the same sorts of things without being born again...

- 1.) Be zealous for **God and country** and not be born again.
- 2.) Have a deep knowledge of **Scripture** and not be born again.
- 3.) A person of much **prayer** and yet not be born again.
- 4.) We may be a **theological and social conservative** and not be born again.
- 5.) We may be a **sacrificially devoted member** of a religious group (tithe, small group, etc) and not be born again.
- 6.) We may be morally circumspect (don’t cuss, smoke, drink, sexually pure) and not be born again.
- 7.) And we can be so jealous for the **moral and theological purity** of God’s people and God’s causes that we would even part ways because “they” are too liberal/too legalistic...and not be born again.

So is there something we CANNOT do unless we are born again?

Here’s what happened when Paul shared Jesus with people. Paul would preach Christ as Messiah from the Old Testament as *clearly and plainly* (v2) as he could possibly do it. Then two fundamentally different groups would eventually emerge.

- a.) **Those who are being saved.** Some people who hear the Message would experience within themselves the following: “I *want that*. That’s got the ring of truth to it. I *am* lost. I *am* cut off from God. I *will* perish for my sins without someone to save me. I want this Christ you just told me about. I do believe that God is love. That *smells* attractive to me for some reason.” The cross lands on them in a way that they somehow sense that it’s “*for me*.” They say either, “Tell me more Paul, I want to know more.” Or maybe like the Ethiopian in the chariot with Philip, “Why shouldn’t I be baptized right now?!”
- b.) **Those who are perishing.** Others would argue. Argue against resurrection from the dead or argue against a crucified Messiah or any number of things that just didn’t click with their understanding of the Bible in what Paul was saying. It sounded foolish, or boring, or just something about it is repellant.

So there it is. Some people hear this story about Jesus and they find themselves drawn to God, others find the message of the cross just the dumbest thing in the world. Ridiculous myths! Intellectual suicide! Maybe even immoral and bad for society! Or, maybe just boring. Maybe just “Who cares?”

In 2 Cor 4 Paul gives us a glimpse into the spiritual psychology behind why some people respond and some don't. I promise you that unbelievers will find his explanation as offensive as they find his Gospel.

2 Cor 4:1-7 ¹Therefore, since through God's mercy we have this ministry, we do not lose heart. ²Rather, we have renounced secret and shameful ways; we do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God. On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God. ³And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. ⁴The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.

⁵For we do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. ⁶For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ. ⁷But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.

Why do some believe and some not? Paul says that unbelievers are unbelievers because the devil has blinded their minds so that they can't treasure Christ in the Gospel, and believers are believers because God made light shine into their hearts so that they can see the glory of God in the face of Christ, so that they do treasure Christ in the Gospel.

I chose Jesus because I'm awesome? Paul doesn't make a case that Christians are smarter than anybody else. In fact, he makes a case that we should be surprised when anybody does respond to the Gospel! Or at least as surprised as we would be when blind people suddenly see or dead people suddenly rise. When that happens, the impossible has happened and we bring in the word “miracle.” Paul brings that same truth to bear on conversion to faith in Christ. It CANNOT happen except as a miracle. It's not just a decision somebody makes for Christ. Surely, that happens. But that CANNOT just happen. Why?

1.) We are **God's enemies by nature**.

V4 *cannot* see the light of the gospel...

Eph 2:1-3 ¹And you were dead in the trespasses and sins ²in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience-- ³among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.

1 John 5:19 We know that we are from God, and the whole world lies in the power of the evil one.

Romans 8:7-8 ⁷For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot. ⁸Those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

John 6:44 “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him...”

2.) **God**, not a human decision, **initiates salvation**. If God wouldn't enable us, nobody would become a Christian. Nobody gets saved without freely choosing Christ, but nobody would *want* Christ if God did not first enable and persuade them to do so.

- 3.) God initiates salvation by “shining light in our hearts” – enabling us to **see and savor Christ as the brightness of God’s glory**. Ephesians calls this the *gift* of faith. 1 Corinthians identifies this as the capacity to smell in the Gospel the aroma of life.
- 4.) **God’s enlightening work in our hearts precedes and enables our choice** to repent of sin and unbelief and pride and yield our lives to Him in worshipful obedience.
- 5.) This miraculous, saving divine light **accompanies the preached Gospel**. God puts power behind the Gospel to make it effective to save some who hear! God *loves* to do this. God *has promised* to do this. It isn’t gifted leaders who save people. It isn’t powerful dramatic skits and songs that save people. They never could! Every Christian is commissioned with doing something that they cannot possibly do – save people.

What’s the essence of the point I want to make in this sermon? It’s this: **The primary mark of true conversion is the capacity in our hearts to see and savor the glory of God in Christ’s face.** The inner *sense* of his worth. It’s not a mere mental agreement; again – demons have that. Throughout the Gospels demons are yelling about Jesus being the Holy One of God – in Acts a demonized girl followed Paul and Barnabas around yelling about how they were teachers sent from God. The demons get it, but the disciples were often miles behind in their comprehension. The demons have a mental assent to the truth – but they can’t stand God and they can’t stand the objects of His love.

But in the heart of the Spirit-born people of God, there is not mere mental assent, “Jesus died for my sins,” but there is also – and this is the critical piece - *a capacity to sense and savor Christ as of far greater worth than anything else in all creation*. He’s where the glory of God is communicated to us. You see Him – you see the Father, as He said to Thomas.

So what do I see when I peer into the Gospel?

Mona Lisa – “I don’t like it.” “Sir. These painting are no longer being judged. The viewers are.”

Christ a stepping stone to something else? Protect or save the marriage? Raise moral kids? So that “God will bless me” financially or in some other way? To help manage some sin that is lowering your quality of life? To support some cause? All good things. But none of them ultimate.

Matthew 10:37-39 ³⁷“Anyone who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves his son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; ³⁸and anyone who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. ³⁹Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.

The glory of God is ultimate. That’s the goal. That’s salvation. We get God. Everything else – atonement, forgiveness, reconciliation, expiation, propitiation, adoption, resurrection, second coming, new heavens new earth...all of it is to get us back to God. Back into the 5 billion degree glory – and clothed in Christ to enjoy it rather than being consumed. We were MADE FOR NOTHING LESS.

Romans 5:1-2 ¹Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, ²through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God...

Christ is no stepping stone to get something else, something better. Many of us perhaps start our journey toward conversion for lesser goals. But if eventually we don’t get here, we lack an essential mark of true conversion – an appetite for God’s glory revealed in the face of Jesus. A treasuring Christ as of far greater worth than anything else in all creation...and that through the bloody message of his cross. Why? *For me!* What love!

So that’s it. An *appetite for, a capacity to genuinely delight in* – Christ. That’s something an unbeliever cannot do: An unbeliever cannot savor the beauty and worth and sufficiency of Christ in the Gospel. To do that, we must be born

again. And if you can do that – I promise you – you are born of God – saved! And if you can do that – then I say let's go hard after Him. Let's learn how to please Him, know him better, and grow up into this Christ who so gloriously saved us.

One side bar on prayer – Do you see the importance and power of prayer for salvation? Do you see why Paul coveted the prayers of the saints when he would preach Jesus to lost folks? Because Paul knew that what Christ had sent him to do was impossible unless God does it. God has chosen to send the treasure in jars of clay. Whoa! And if God does it, and God answers prayer, then he may do it precisely because you and I prayed. Whoa!

Be grateful for your salvation! Let's not congratulate ourselves on our virtue! We didn't choose to believe because we were smart or clever or a good person. You and I owe our salvation to NONE of those things! We believe because the Father drew us to His Son! If he hadn't, we'd still hate him. Maybe we'd hate him like the older brother in the prodigal story – with religion. Maybe we'd hate him like the younger brother – with rebellion. But either way, if the Father hadn't drawn us, the flesh is opposed to God, and the devil has blinded the minds of unbelievers. If the Father hadn't drawn us, or isn't drawing us, we would ALL turn our noses up at his gospel. Be bored by his grace. Take offense at his cross. Turn away from his glory, and worship created things rather than the creator, who is forever blessed, Amen.