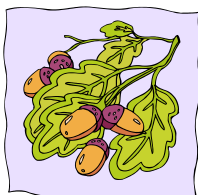


*"Those who are really converted show it practically.
That conversion which does not convert or turn the
life is no conversion at all."*

~ Charles Haddon Spurgeon ~



I became a Christian while living in Phoenix, Arizona - a part of the Sonoran Desert. A typical setting of sparse, desolation, and lack to most (geographically, topologically, etc.) but the setting of new life and new birth, spiritual awakening, and abundance to me.

I grew up in a Christian home in Wichita, Kansas – the heart of the American Bible-belt. My parents were faithful and diligent to take me to church every Sunday morning, Sunday evening, Wednesday evening and pretty much any other time the doors were open. My dad was a Sunday school teacher, a deacon at a bible church, and was commissioned to teach Moody Bible Institute's 'Memorize the Word' class at evangelical churches in our hometown. My mom was a church soloist, a Women in Construction Chaplain, and was active in Child Evangelism Fellowship. Both my parents were involved in the Kansas Communities Ministry of the Navigators and worked as counselors with the Billy Graham Crusades when they would come to or near Wichita.

My parents are amazing.

I had *everything* going for me.

As you could expect from this rich home life, I *believed* in God, *believed* I was a sinner, *believed* Jesus died on the cross for my sins, and prayed the 'Sinner's Prayer' when I was a tender six year-old, and considered myself 'saved' (from Hell). I grew up thinking that was *all* that was necessary - believing the 'right things' and sincerely praying the prayer (I mean, who in their right mind, if they believe in hell wants to *go* to hell?). Obedience - *optional*; love for the Lord - *not necessary*. I spent my life between the 'Sinner's Prayer' to after my first two sons were born living by the lie of easy-believism and cheap grace. The heresy that one can *decide* to become a Christian by an act of a fallen will, or one can 'ask Jesus into her heart' and then continue to live like hell.

That's what I believed. *That's* what I did....

That is until my husband and babies and I were transferred to Phoenix and we found a church where the Bible was preached fully and unapologetically from the pulpit. By the time we landed at this particular church, the congregation had spent almost a year in the Gospel of John - going through the Word of God verse by verse and in an expositional/exegetical style.

I didn't like the church right away. Kurt liked it, but I was offended by the preacher's style. He was bold. He was straightforward. He was not 'kind and gentle'. He did not dabble in self-improvement, 'how-to win friends and influence people', save your marriage, relate better, make the world a better place topical sermons. The pastor reminded me of my dad. Bold. Unapologetic. Dogmatic. (All qualities I appreciate now.)

I vividly remember the Sunday he preached on John 3. "The New Birth". The account of Nicodemus and Jesus. *"Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God."* Many so-called born-again Christians don't read this right. They read it as if the text says, *"Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he may not see the kingdom of God."* There is a huge difference between cannot (refers to inability) and may not (refers to not having permission). New birth precedes sight of the kingdom - that is what Jesus is saying here in John 3:3. Jesus goes on in verse 5 to reiterate this point: *"Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of the water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going; so is everyone who is born of the Spirit."* (John 3:5-8 New American Standard translation - nas)

The Pastor then turned us back to John 1 where it says, *"But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name, who were born not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God."* (John 1:12-13 nas)

I had thought (perhaps been taught) one could 'decide' to become a Christian - could *decide* to be born again. But Scripture declares being a child of God (obviously not everyone *is* - and Jesus Himself testifies to this) is not because *I* will it, or someone else wills it. I don't become a child of God because I'm human or born into a 'Christian' family or a 'Christian' country. I don't become a child of God because I 'decide' or 'will' to become one and pray a formula prayer or even by 'asking Jesus into my heart'. *God alone* makes me a child of God - *if I* am to become one. Radical. Shocking! Earth-shaking!!

The Pastor went on to flip forward to John 6 where Jesus goes on to say *"For this reason I have said to you, that no one can come to Me, unless it has been granted him from the Father."* (John 6:65 nas) There was that 'can' again. *No one is able* to come to Jesus unless God has given them the ability to come. Ability vs inability. This was all very radical to me....

The clincher was when he went on to demolish my idol of wrong thinking about 'what makes a Christian.' All my life I had thought the only requirement was to *sincerely* pray the 'Sinner's Prayer' - you know, the evangelical mantra proposed at every altar call or at the wrapping up of any sermon or gospel presentation:

"Dear God, I

a.) admit I am a sinner,

b.) believe You sent your Son to die on the cross and to pay the penalty for my sins,

and

c.) confess my sins and confess (agree) that I want to be a Christian and have You come into my heart and save me (from Hell)."

Being a Christian is something you can *decide* - and it was easy as ABC...or so I thought.

I had sincerely believed this was the ticket out of Hell and into the presence of God upon death. I had even imagined the scenario in my mind several times: prayed prayer as a child - meant it then...still don't want to go to Hell, so must mean it now...'knew' the right answers to choice questions – Jesus: Son of God; born of a virgin, sinless life, died on the cross to pay for my sins, rose the third day triumphant over death, Bible is God's Word, I'm a sinner deserving hell, etc....

Because I prayed the prayer and knew the right answers to the key doctrinal questions, I was *self-assured* I would 'go to Heaven' when I died. I would have passed the test, *or so I thought*.

Our Phoenix Pastor tore down my long-held belief; he exposed it for what it was. He stated being a Christian was not something you were born into by any earthly means – God has no grandchildren. I wasn't a Christian because my parents were Christians. I wasn't a Christian because I was born in a Christian-ethic country. I wasn't a Christian because I believed Jesus was God or Savior or Lord. I wasn't a Christian because I *wasn't* an atheist or a Muslim, or a Hindu.... Further, it was not something I could decide for myself. He went on to say it was not evidenced by knowing *about* or believing *in* God or even having reverence for Him.

What came next struck me over the head like a sledge hammer. This emphatic guy pacing behind the pulpit went on to read to us out of James 2. "*You believe that God is One (right doctrine/right answers/head knowledge). You do well; the demons also believe, and shudder.*" (James 2:19 nas) He explained that Satan and the demons not only *know* God better than we will ever know Him this side of heaven, but they even *obey* Him. That's more than what most professing Christians do....You know it, and I know it.

This utterly shocked me. I was stricken. All along I had thought I was a Christian because I had *wanted* to be a Christian. I wanted to be a Christian in order to escape the wrath to come, but not to mortify my flesh, not to forsake my sin, not to serve the King. All along, I had thought

I was a Christian because I sincerely desired to go to Heaven instead of Hell and because I had prayed the 'Sinner's Prayer' and had known some answers to some key doctrinal questions. I thought that's all that mattered because we were living in the Days of Grace.

*N*ow, I didn't know what to believe. *N*ow I knew I was in trouble.

*B*y the grace of God, I was motivated to use my two little boys' nap time to read the Bible – for myself!. You see, I had gone to church all my childhood...until I moved away from home to go to college... and I never remember being taught this stuff. This was important information I was hearing on Sundays - as uncomfortable as it was to face up to. Obviously someone was not telling the truth. It seems I'd been rooked. It was clear I needed to read the Bible for *myself* to see what it says. Since our church was learning the Gospel of John, I decided to start at John 1:1 and read it through.

On one particular day, sitting at the kitchen table during the boy's naptime, I got to John 14:15 "*If you love me, you will keep My commandments.*" This really *bothered* me. Jesus was equating love with obedience to His commandments (more than the 'Exodus 10'). I thought Jesus' death and resurrection did *away* with required obedience and 'the commandments'. I thought we were living in the 'days of grace' and the Law was obsolete, or only for the Jew. I thought obedience was *optional*...for those few who actually desired piety – but *that* could be dangerous to endeavor to since we could slip into legalism and nullify grace altogether. Further, I never thought about actually *loving* God. Never felt the need to have actual affection and gratitude for Him. But after reading this, I *knew* I didn't love God – not by *His* standard – and doubted I loved Him by even *my* meager standard...I certainly had no affection for Him. I certainly had no allegiance. A husband or boyfriend wouldn't be satisfied by that....

Then I wrestled my way to John 15:14 "*You are My friends, if you do what I command you.*" I literally about toppled out of the kitchen chair! Here was that 'command' and obedience connection again. I *wanted* to be considered Jesus' friend. But by *this* definition, I most certainly was not. I cared *nothing* about obedience to God's Word. My ethic was to believe what I wanted to believe and act on it without regard to what God had to say about it. (This doing things without regard to what God says and what God wants is called Practical – or Functional Atheism, by the way.) I hadn't even thought obedience to Him was important, let alone pivotal. If Jesus equated love with obedience, and obedience with being His friend I was in *serious* trouble. How do you conjure up love for God? How is this all accomplished? You can't fake it!

*F*or the first time, as a mother of two little boys, I realized I was *not* a Christian. No Judge in a court of law would have enough evidence to *convict* me as a Christian. I was not 'right with God' or reconciled to Him because I knew some answers to some choice questions and because I had 'asked Jesus into my heart' (which isn't even biblical, by the way), or because I believe he was Who He said He was.

I was afraid now of this holy God. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom and knowledge. (Psalm 111:10, Psalm 1:7, Hebrews 12:31.) I *wanted* to be right with Him. I wanted to love Him, but I knew love wasn't something you could 'work up'. He knew everything – there is no pretense with this God! I couldn't 'fake' Him out! The only thing I could do was cry out to God to have mercy on me. I was in trouble and I didn't have a clue how to get out of it. If this was to happen, God would have to make it happen - - - *or not*.

Jesus tells of something like this when He told of the Pharisee and the Publican:

"And He also told this parable to certain ones who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and viewed others with contempt: 'Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee, and the other a tax-gatherer. The Pharisee stood and was praying thus to himself, 'God, I thank Thee that I am not like other people; swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax-gatherer. I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get.'

But the tax-gatherer, standing some distance away, was even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven, but was beating his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, the sinner!'

I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself shall be humbled, but he who humbles himself shall be exalted."
(Luke 12:9-14 nas)

In theology, the word 'justified' means: to *declare* guiltless; absolve; acquit.

It is a legal term.

So one cannot be considered a friend to Jesus or right with God if one doesn't desire and strive to know and obey His Word, *but* by the account in Luke, mere obedience isn't the 'mark' of someone right with God either. Pharisee's were *excellent* at keeping the Law. They had *highest standard and fulfillment* of living out Scriptural expectations. Jesus did not say the Pharisee was justified. He said the tax collector, who was broken and contrite and *knew he was hopeless except for mercy* - he was justified.

It became crystal clear that I couldn't consider myself a Christian just because I prayed a mythical prayer and knew some correct answers. I couldn't consider myself a Christian if I wasn't obedient to His Word; yet mere obedience to the Word of God was not evidence of justification in God's sight. Obedience is necessary in the life of the Christian, but it does not *make* you a Christian, it doesn't evidence that you *are* a Christian obviously.

So what is it?

What is that element that sets Believers and make-believers or non-believers or even the deceived apart? What sets the *real* Christian apart from the rest?

LOVE!

Demons believe. Demons obey. Demons revere. Demons do not *love* God. They do not treasure Him. They do not *adore* Him. I knew I couldn't not 'decide to love' God. You can't work up true, abiding, affectionate love. You can't fake God out. I needed help! I needed Divine mercy!

"For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that (even the faith) not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works (having belief, praying a prayer – me; near-perfect obedience - Pharisee), that no one should boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them." (Ephesians 2:8-10 NASB)

"That is, it is not the children of the flesh who are children of God, but the children of the promise are regarded as descendants.

For this is a word of promise: ' AND THIS TIME I WILL COME, AND SARAH SHALL HAVE A SON.'

And not only this, but there was Rebekah also, when she had conceived twins by one man, our father Isaac; for though the twins were not yet born, and had not done anything good or bad, in order that God's purpose according to His choice might stand, not because of works, but because of Him who calls, it was said to her, 'THE OLDER WILL SERVE THE YOUNGER.'

Just as it is written, 'JACOB I LOVED, BUT EASU I HATED.'

What shall we say then? There is no injustice with God, is there?

May it never be!

For He says to Moses, 'I WILL HAVE MERCY ON WHOM I HAVE MERCY, AND I WILL HAVE COMPASSION ON WHOM I HAVE COMPASSION.'

So then it does not depend on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy....So then He has mercy on whom He desires, and He hardens whom He desires."

(Romans 9:8-16,18 nas)

God showed me my need for His mercy in the Sonoran Desert of Phoenix, Arizona. Up until then, I was blind to my condition.

*“Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me.
I once was lost, but now am found - was blind but now I see.
T’was grace that taught my heart to fear, and grace my fears relieved.
How precious did that grace appear, the hour I first believed.”*

~ John Newton ~
Amazing Grace – Christian Hymn

I pray the Lord has blessed you by this account and you are encouraged to examine yourself and see if Christ be in you; for the enemy of our soul is cunning and has many lulled into thinking they are right with God when in fact they are not. *“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?’ And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.”* (Matthew 7:21-23) **“Therefore, brothers, be all the more diligent to make your calling and election sure, for if you practice these qualities you will never fall.”** (2 Pet. 1:10) **“Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Or do you not realize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you? – unless indeed you fail to meet the test!”** (2 Cor. 13:5)

There is no more important and urgent examination than the condition of your soul. A great place to start is to examine yourself against the signs of those with eternal life in the first letter of John, for in I John 5:13 it says, *“I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God that you may know that you have eternal life.”*

Is Jesus your Savior?

Is Jesus your Lord?

Is Jesus your treasure?

I love you and desire grace for you!

A Grateful Wretch, Saved by Grace ~

Fill Grier