

## How do we become Christian?

### Transformation and mind renewal

“Do not conform to the pattern of this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind!” St Paul.

From time to time people ask me “How do I become a Christian?”

I think that is a legitimate question alright, but I think that is not the question Jesus would have us ask. He would far prefer the question **how do I become Christian?** There is a world of difference between the two!

In the Gospel lesson this morning we came across the story of the Rich Young Ruler.

This young man wanted to know how to connect with God. After death he wanted to be looked after by God and be acceptable to God. Jesus gave a thoroughly Jewish answer: Keep the ten commandments and you are in. Let’s remember that the ten commands are the greatest Foundational statements of principles of obligations to keep, and injuries to avoid.

There is no terser statement, or more important summary of these principles anywhere in world literature, than these ten commands. Thus, as one commentary says “The Ten Commandments concern matters of fundamental importance in both Judaism and Christianity: the greatest obligation is (to worship only God), the greatest injury to a person to avoid (murder), the greatest injury to family bonds to avoid (adultery), the greatest injury to commerce and law (bearing false witness or lying in order to deceive and profit by it, the greatest inter-generational

obligation to keep (to honor one's parents), the greatest obligation to community (truthfulness), the greatest injury to property (theft).

Many of my friends in the USA are very disturbed about the direction their country is taking. Bearing false witness has become a political strategy, embraced by the Republican party. This results in a deliberate undermining of the principles found in the Great ten commands. And when that happens there is nearly always a slide that goes on towards dictatorship or anarchy or war.

On a personal level the injuries listed in the ten commands destroy relationships.

But keep these commands, says Jesus, and you will inherit eternal life. But the young man wants to be very sure and so he asks "I have kept all these, what more do I need to do?"

And Jesus says "If you want to be perfect go and sell what you own and give your money to the poor and come and follow me."

And the young man can't do it, and he goes away sad, because he was very rich.

Yes, this young man is in, but when the challenge of sacrifice comes, he has to bail.

Many people bail when asked to sacrifice.

A little later the Scribes and Pharisees and doctors of the law want Jesus to say which of the ten commands is the greatest and Jesus answers them "Love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, thy mind and thy strength. This is the first and greatest commandment and the second is like unto it Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself."

But then he gets asked who is my neighbor? And Jesus talks about a Good Samaritan, and let's remember that Jews had no dealing with Samaritans, in the same way today that Israelis and Palestinians are two separate solitudes. The Samaritans are enemies to Jews, and Jesus, bless his huge heart, uses a Samaritan to teach his Jewish audience that they need to love their enemies.

True *Christianity is not a walk in the park*. It involves an obligation to love difficult people. A lot of us fail here and bail by withdrawal from relationship. We just stay away from people we choose to find difficult.

After the resurrection of Jesus takes place, Peter is asked to speak with a Roman centurion who asks what he needs to do to please God. And Peter makes a summary: "I have come to understand that the person who does what is right in any nation is acceptable to God." In other words, you don't have to be Jewish to keep the ten great moral commands, and have peace before God. The centurion was a good, moral, godly, pagan, man.

St Paul teaches the same thing and says that God has no favorites.

St Paul, as a Jew, believed in the ten commandments and was quintessentially Jewish. But at first, he had not learned who his neighbor was, because he was persecuting and having Christians arrested, jailed and of course eventually killed. So, he had much to answer for in his deep religious zeal. Like many radicals today he was killing in the name of God.

Following an encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus, St Paul converted to Christianity and became its greatest apostle founding the Christian Church in the gentile world. The change in Paul was deep and

profound. When asked “how do we become a Christian, St Paul was to say: “If Thou shalt confess with thy mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe that God raised him from the dead you will be saved”, or in other words you are in. **But then he spent the rest of his life teaching what it meant to *be Christian* in our behavior.**

There is something else I think we need to notice just to try to answer the question “How do we become Christian?”

Jesus takes the ten commands and tightens them. He is not interested in the letter of the law but the spirit of the law. The young man who has kept the ten has omitted the first which is to have no other god before God. Money is this man’s substitute for security in God. In other words, he is in actuality breaking the first command because he worships an idol before God. Money is first!

So, what Jesus does is ask him to get rid of that idol, give to the poor, and then follow him. So, it is not just the Ten Commands, is it? It has gotten suddenly harder.

He does the same thing when asked “Who is my neighbor?” and goes out of his way to illustrate that the enemy has to become neighbor. This is very tough stuff to swallow.

When asked about not committing adultery, Jesus makes it tougher. It is not just keeping away from the physical act, it is avoiding even thinking about it!

**Don’t think that being Christian is easy. It is not.**

That is why Deepak Chopra argues that Christianity is too hard for the average person to live by. He says that only saints can keep such a high standard!

In the time of the Protestant Reformation, when Protestantism and Catholicism were fighting with each other, there was a major argument. The Catholics argued that you can only get into heaven by good works.

Luther and John Knox argued that “by Grace are we saved through faith lest any person should boast about their good works justifying them.”

So, was Christianity too hard to keep for Luther and Knox? Was it only for saints? Should we lower standards and cut off the top of the mountain so that all of us can get at least half way up?

This is where the doctrine of Grace became very important. Jesus taught that the prodigal son, who completely screwed up, is forgiven when he returns home to relationship with his father. His father loves him by Grace. The elder brother is into merit pay and as far as he is concerned the prodigal has a negative balance. But the father extends unmerited favor to the prodigal. He loves him and wants him back no matter what. **That is what God is really like says Jesus.**

Let me summarize Jesus on how to be Christian:

**Commit yourself to Loving the Lord your God with all your heart, your mind and your strength and your neighbor in the same way you love yourself. Jesus says this is a summary of all the law and the prophets.**

The prophet Micah said “What does the Lord require of thee but to do justice, love mercy and to walk humbly with thy God?”

And when we do not, we can seek forgiveness and God who is aware of our hearts and looks upon them, loves us by Grace alone.

So, we can keep the high standard as something to strive for, and throw ourselves on a Grace so great that it takes our breath away, as we fall into the loving arms of God!

Some born into a Christian family, will find being truly Christian to be second nature. Others who have wandered far away will hit rock bottom and through a conversion experience, like that of St Paul or the prodigal who came to his senses, they will return home to belief in God, ask for forgiveness and will receive a royal welcome. Then once connected to God, they go out and live a joyous selfless life for others, guided by the Man from Galilee, who lived his life for others and so found joy!

So, what's it all about when you work it out?

**Loving God, loving the neighbor which includes the enemy, and loving the self.** That is what it means to be a devout Jew, a devout Christian, a devout Muslim or a devout God seeker anywhere, for God has no favorites but the person in any nation who does what is right is acceptable to him.

Jesus is not interested in card carrying cultural Christians. He is into transformation!

Have you ever noticed that people become kinder around Christmas? As the song puts it:

“Christmas is a feeling filling the air  
It's love and joy and laughter of people everywhere  
Christmas is a feeling bringing good cheer  
It reaches out to touch you as the holiday draws near  
It's mistletoe and falling snow  
And candles burning bright  
It's a baby in a manger on a cold winters night

It's glad noels and chiming bells  
And presents by the tree  
It's the spirit of giving in you and in me  
For Christmas is a feeling filling the air  
It's love and joy and laughter of people everywhere  
But if Christmas is a feeling bringing such good cheer  
Then why oh why, don't you and I  
Try to make it last all year?"

It was at Christmas that Ebenezer Scrooge became transformed into a warm caring human being, from being a greedy old selfish man. He became Christian...he experienced a change of heart.

George Mapson, from Westminster B.C., talks about his change of heart, that began as a small boy.

It was at the age of 11, when the change took place. Five years before his father had died through drowning. His father had no pension or benefits. This was the time of the Great Depression and his poor mother had to make do with very little.

George and the rest of the children had cardboard in their shoes everyday because they had no soles. Their main diet was what they called 'French Toast' which was fried bread in lard. The house rent was \$25.00 a month and his mother took the social assistance check of \$25 to pay the rent at Christmas time, or they would be evicted on January the first.

George, sick of his footwear, decided to save up \$25 to get himself a new pair of boots. He wanted the very best with no cardboard for soles! He had his eye on *Pierre Paris Boots* which cost \$23.

The big day for getting his boots arrived on the afternoon of Christmas Eve. He walked to the bus some half a mile to go get them, but on his way, he noticed the homes all had Christmas lights and decorations up. He then realized that their home had no lights, no decorations, no turkey or ham dinner and that all they would get for Christmas would be 'French toast'...

He was only 11 years old, but he began to experience a sense of guilt. Here he was going to buy himself a new pair of boots while his mother was at home in tears, thinking of ways to explain why the children had no presents.

He got to the bus stop but decided not to get on the bus. The bus drove off without him. He had made up his mind what to do and **suddenly an enormous burden had been lifted from his young shoulders.**

A large grocery store was opposite the bus stop, a Piggly Wiggly.

Into the store he went brimming with happiness and excitement. He realized that his \$25 that he had worked so hard for, went a long way. He bought a turkey, a ham, oranges and all the Christmas trimmings. He spent every dime of his hard-earned money,

The store owner sent him home with his loot on the bicycle's carriers of two delivery boys, who put it all on the front porch of the house against the front door.

George knocked on the front door and when his mother opened the door some of the loot fell inside. She stood there absolutely dumfounded. Holding back all his tears, George hollered "Merry Christmas Mother! There really is a Santa Claus!"



He had a lot of explaining to do as they packed away the groceries. He said, that day he got enough hugs and kisses from his mother to last a life time!

His mother had been praying, and to see her prayers answered, more than made up for the loss of his *Pierre Paris* boots.

George had experienced what Jesus taught. He experienced a transformation still available to all of us whether we are card carrying Christians or not. He moved away from thinking it was all about him, into truly living for others. And then he discovered that he was brimming with happiness and excitement! **He was all in!**

2,000 years ago that is what Jesus had wanted for the rich young ruler, but the rich young ruler wanted his *Pierre Paris boots!*

Where was the real sadness? He had missed the richest meanings of life. He had missed the brimming excitement and happiness of being there for others!

Let us “Be transformed by the renewing of our minds!” And so find heaven on earth! And each other. And God...

Amen.