



**Acts 26:19-32**  
**How Do People Change?**

Summary: After meeting Jesus Paul became compassionate toward others and shared a message of repentance, turning to God, and doing good works.

Jesus said the greatest commandment is to love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength and love your neighbor as yourself. We need to know that. We need to remember that. But we also need to remember the context of the command, because the next thing that happened was, a lawyer asked Him: 'Who is my neighbor? Jesus, can you define your terms for me? Who is it that I need to be so nice to?'

And then Jesus told the story of the Good Samaritan. A Samaritan was a person from Samaria, and the Jews and the Samaritans did not like each other. They actually avoided each other, they were prejudiced against each other, discriminated against each other. But, one day a Jew is attacked by some thieves who strip him of his valuables, beat him mercilessly, and leave him on the side of the road in the middle of nowhere.

While he's lying there, a priest walks by and ignores him. And then a Levite, another very religious Jew, walks by and also ignores him. The man is laying there suffering, Jesus says he's half dead, and his own people are ignoring him – they don't want to get involved. But finally, a Samaritan comes by and has compassion on the man. He picks him up, bandages his wounds, and takes him to an inn where he can stay and recover, then pays for his bills since everything the man had was stolen in the assault.

And Jesus says, the Samaritan, the least likely person to be nice to a Jew, was the one who acted most like a neighbor.

It's a story we need to keep coming back to, over and over again because it reminds us of how radical Jesus' commandment is. He calls us to show mercy and kindness to people who aren't like us. People that we would normally look down on, or who would look down on us. Jesus is calling us toward compassionate reconciliation.

He is calling us to seek the good of others. And not just others in our tribe. That's easy. We all like to do that. We'll do what we can to help a friend, a family member, a person on our team, in our circle, a person like us. But Jesus says don't stop there. Your borders are too narrow, we've got to push those out – you need to seek the good of an even greater number of people, an even more diverse population. You need to seek the good of people who are *not like you*.

And there's a part of us that says, yeah, that sounds good, that's noble, that's some good ethics there, lofty ideals. But at some point you have to stop appreciating it and start applying it and that's where life gets hard.

Because we have to admit: there are some people I don't like. People I don't care for. You might not say you hate them, but they're definitely not your favorite. They're not like you, in fact, they may even be against you, they're the other side, the other team. They're wrong and you know it and you can't wait for them to lose or get what's coming to them or at least just go away.

You might feel that way about the other political party, or about another ethnic group, or about another power group, or about management or leadership at work, or about your parents or teachers – anyone that's not like you, and especially anyone that you feel opposes you falls into this category. The category of people we're supposed to love. Because Jesus said so.

This morning, as we continue our study in the book of Acts, we see this play out as Paul explains how an encounter with Jesus completely transformed his life. He was once a religious zealot on the frontlines of his tribe, he was a hardcore activist, a protestor, an agitator, willing to do anything to show that his people were right, they were superior, including debating, fighting, arresting, and actually sentencing people from the other side to die. He was a fanatic.

Until he met Jesus who stopped him dead in his tracks and turned him around completely. Like, 'Hey Paul, we're going to take all that energy, all that passion, all that enthusiasm, and turn it around - we're going to express it through aggressive compassion.' Jesus said, 'You've been living for yourself and your ideas, your convictions, your preferences, your tribe, now you're going to live for Me.'

I had a personal moment like that in the summer of 1997 – Jesus Christ slammed into my life, rocked my foundations, and said – you've been living for yourself, and you know it's wrong, you need to be living for Me. Those were almost the exact words I heard in my soul as He melted me. And I wept and I confessed, you're right God. You're right. And many of you have had a similar moment – a time of recognition, confession, and repentance. The details will be different, but the substance is the same. You're able to say, with certainty – Jesus brought me to a moment of recognition, confession, and repentance. Maybe it will happen for some of you this morning. Maybe today is your day to get straight with Jesus – the day when things begin to change.

Well, Paul is telling the story of how it all happened to him, and we left off in the middle last week. We'll finish up this morning and spend some time thinking about the message God gave him, the messenger he became, and the mixed reaction of those who are listening.

We pick it up in verse 19. Paul described that first encounter with Jesus, and he says:

**Acts 26:19** “Therefore, King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision, 20 but declared first to those in Damascus and in Jerusalem, and throughout all the region of Judea, and *then* to the Gentiles, that they should repent, turn to God, and do works befitting repentance.

Remember, Paul was on his way to Damascus to arrest Christians, because they were the other team, the other side, the people not like us. He was using his power and influence to shut them down. But then he's transformed by Jesus and immediately begins preaching the Christian message.

Unfortunately, that didn't go over well with all the people he used to hang out with.

21 For these reasons the Jews seized me in the temple and tried to kill *me*.

But it didn't stop Paul, he had been utterly convinced, and now, more than anything, he wanted the whole world to know the Christian message.

22 Therefore, having obtained help from God, to this day I stand, witnessing both to small and great, saying no other things than those which the prophets and Moses said would come— 23 that the Christ would suffer, that He would be the first to rise from the dead, and would proclaim light to the *Jewish* people and to the Gentiles.”

24 Now as he thus made his defense, Festus said with a loud voice, “Paul, you are beside yourself! Much learning is driving you mad!”

25 But he said, “I am not mad, most noble Festus, but speak the words of truth and reason. 26 For the king, before whom I also speak freely, knows these things; for I am convinced that none of these things escapes his attention, since this thing was not done in a corner.

Now, remember, Paul is giving his testimony in front of Festus, the Roman governor appointed to oversee the entire region and King Agrippa, the local, native ruler who serves under and reports back to Festus. Festus asked for his input so he can put together a report when he refers Paul's case to Caesar.

Agrippa's family has been involved in Jewish politics for decades. So, Paul knows that he understands exactly what Paul is talking about. He knows Jewish theology as well as recent history. He knows Agrippa can connect the dots, and presses him to do so:

27 King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know that you do believe.”

28 Then Agrippa said to Paul, “You almost persuade me to become a Christian.”

Now, this is why email and texting is so hard – you don't get the tone of what someone is saying. Was he being cynical or honest? We can't say for sure, just like you sometimes struggle to know what your friend meant by that text or how you should take your boss's last email. But it seems likely that he was sincerely moved, that he's making some real connections, he saw what Paul was saying, but still had some questions.

We'll come back to his response later, but for now here is the main thing I want you to take away this morning – I need you to see what happens next. I need you to see Paul's attitude and demeanor toward people who are not like him, people who are on the other side –

people who vote for a different candidate, people who are trying to hijack his culture and lead it away from traditional values – because that’s true.

Pre-conversion Paul would have been as fiercely opposed to King Agrippa and Festus as he was to Christians – he would have lumped them all together as godless, heathen, barbarians or heretics who were out to destroy Paul’s culture and way of life – but now look at his attitude as they have him under house arrest and have refused to release him as justice would demand, look at his heart toward his enemies:

29 And Paul said, “I would to God (I pray to God, I wish to God) that not only you, but also all who hear me today, might become both almost and altogether such as I am, except for these chains.”

He says, I want the best for you – everything that I have, except for these chains. Yes, point blank, I want you to become a Christian, you and everyone else who is listening. I have found the path of life, the path of peace. I now understand what it’s all about, and I want you to have it – I really, really do. I don’t hate you anymore, I want you to come to Jesus.

30 When he had said these things, the king stood up, as well as the governor and Bernice and those who sat with them; 31 and when they had gone aside, they talked among themselves, saying, “This man is doing nothing deserving of death or chains.” 32 Then Agrippa said to Festus, “This man might have been set free if he had not appealed to Caesar.”

In other words, he is completely innocent of all the charges made against him. We really could have let him go if we had handled this differently. But he appealed to Caesar during the process and we have to follow through.

We’ll cover his trip to Rome for that appeal next week, but for now, I want to circle back around and look at the message God commissioned Paul to share. What is it that God wants the world, including rulers like Festus and Agrippa and his sister Bernice to know? What does God want us to know?

Well, Paul said after his encounter with Jesus he immediately began telling other people (Acts 26:20) ... **that they should repent, turn to God, and do works befitting repentance.** That’s the broad outline. There are many ways we could fill in the outline to add color and detail and nuance, but in broad brushstroke terms, this is the core of the Christian faith.

To answer the question of this sermon’s title: this is how people change. This is what generates the kind of whole person transformation we see in Paul. If you feel unsatisfied with your life, it’s likely because you are off course with God and you need these three simple steps.

First, repent. OK, but what does that mean? It means to have a change of mind. To see things differently, a complete change in your approach. You once thought this was the right thing to do, or at least you had no problem with it, and now you see you were wrong. Or, you

once said that this wasn't a big deal, or wasn't necessary, or didn't really matter and now you see you were wrong.

Paul once thought it was OK to tear into people he didn't agree with. He thought it was OK to go after them, to put them down, to talk bad about them. And now he realized he was wrong. I don't need to demonize the people I disagree with. I don't need to mock them, or put them down. I actually need to pray for them, maybe even reach out to them. I need to want the greatest good for them, which is their salvation.

Repentance requires recognition, you need to realize, and admit you were wrong. You need to call it out. And then there should be a sense of sorrow over what you have done or what you ignored or avoided, and then there should be a resolve not to do it again. And that process might take time - it can be instantaneous, God can just flip a switch in you and completely transform you - but for most of us, it's going to be a gradual process of growing: seeing where we're wrong, where we need to change, and working toward that change by God's grace and with His help.

That brings us to Paul's second point - we must repent and turn toward God. When you recognize you've been wrong, you've been headed in the wrong direction in life, you know you need to change, what direction will go? The answer is: turn toward God.

And the only way to do that, is to turn toward Jesus, remember, He said:

**John 14:6** - I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.

Earlier in Acts Peter told the crowds:

**Acts 4:12** [You cannot find salvation] in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.

The Bible says

**Hebrews 7:25** [Jesus] is also able to save to the uttermost those who come to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them.

Do you see that? The Bible says Jesus is actively, presently, saving people - saving them to the uttermost! In other words, completely transforming their lives, and **He always lives to make intercession for them**. Now, I don't know where you get your ideas about God from, you've probably picked them up all over - but the best place to learn about God is from the book that He has given you to understand. And in this book, God tells you that Jesus is making intercession for you.

That means He is advocating for you. He is cheering for you. He is working for your good. He is calling you to repent, and turn toward God, in fact, He has made it possible for you to do that, at His own expense. He is the good Samaritan who found you on the side of life's

road, and stopped to help when other people were passing you by. Other people who could have helped, but maybe they didn't see you, maybe they didn't know, or maybe they didn't know what to do, maybe they didn't feel like they had what you needed, so they passed you by, maybe they even felt bad about what had happened to you and the condition you were in, but they passed you by.

Jesus stopped. Maybe He's stopping right now, to speak to you. To press these truths into your soul. He shows up in your life to heal you, to care for you, and to help you find true life. He's calling you to repent, to turn toward God, and to do works befitting repentance. In other words, to do for others what He has done for you. To learn to see others the way He sees you. To talk about others the way Jesus talks about you.

Christians listen: we are called to do works befitting repentance, and that means we need to look, think, act, speak, and absolutely, beyond all shadow of a doubt, we need to post differently online. We are not who we were without Jesus, but sometimes we act that way. We don't always talk, think, act, and post like Jesus would. So, we need to go back to step one and repent – we need to change our mind, we need to see what else is affecting my emotions, my values, my decisions. What other ideas or values have affected my thinking? How did my upbringing or my past experiences shape the way I'm thinking? And how does that compare with how God thinks about this issue, that person, or these events?

I'm begging you to consider what the Bible says *to Christians*, to people in the church, to people who say they love God and follow Jesus. Look:

**Romans 12:1** I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, *which is your reasonable service.* 2 And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what *is* that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.

This is written to the Church. This isn't written to people who need to come to Jesus for the first time. It's written to those of us who already have. We've already been adopted as sons or daughters, we've already become citizens of the Kingdom of God – and we're told we need to be transformed by the renewing of our mind. We're told there's a process, a life-long process, of repenting, turning to God, and doing works befitting repentance as God points out the areas where we are out of alignment with Him, the places where our attitudes, reactions, and responses don't exactly mirror His.

Because, that's the goal, remember: that we would look more and more like Jesus as life goes on. That we would be more and more accurate representatives of Him, ambassadors for King Jesus in this kingdom full of conflict where we live.

This was Paul's message for everyone. For young and old, for male and female, kings and slaves, Jew and Gentile, Democrat and Republican, Tea Party or Independent, Chinese, Mexican, Korean, or purebred American melting pot mutt.

And, Paul pointed out, there was really nothing new about this message because there was really nothing new about man's problems. We've always need to repent and turn toward God and do works befitting repentance. The question was how? God knew we could never do it on our own, so He promised to send us a Savior, He promised to make the way for us. And He began to unveil his plan over time. All of this is recorded in what Paul refers to as Moses – the first five books of the Bible that speak a lot about him, and the Prophets, all the rest of what we call the Old Testament today.

Paul tells King Agrippa – the Jews have always hoped that God would fulfill His promise of a deliverer who would change our lives and deal with our sin, and now we know He has, through Jesus of Nazareth who died on a cross in Jerusalem and rose from the grave.

And at this point Festus interrupts. You can tell, he doesn't get it. He says 'Alright Paul, that's enough, you're nice guy and all, but you're out of your mind, you're crazy, get a grip.'

How does Paul respond? Does he blast back? No, he says:

25 ... "I am not mad, most noble Festus, but speak the words of [truth and reason](#).  
26 For the king, before whom I also speak freely, knows these things; for I am convinced that none of these things escapes his attention, since this thing was not done in a corner.

Paul points out – all of this has happened locally and recently, we can go to Jerusalem and see the tomb where Jesus was buried. We all know He was crucified – that was done by Romans, and done very publically – Agrippa's great-uncle was part of the events. But tell me, King Agrippa, where is the body today?

You see, I think Agrippa was honest when he says, 'Paul you're close to converting me,' because he knows how much of this true.

And here's the point I want to make to you today – we talk so often about the fact that the events in this book, the events in the Bible are real. We know who Festus is and who Agrippa is because we have history books that tell us more about them. We know where this all occurred because we know where the city of Caesarea was and where it's ruins are today. We're talking about real history.

The Christian faith is rational and intellectually credible. It is also morally true and emotionally satisfying. People do not reject Christianity because it's illogical or demonstrably false, they deny it because they do not want to repent, they do not want to turn to God, they don't want to do works befitting repentance.

We all have our own ideas about life and we have our own reactions to life's events. We don't always want to adopt God's perspective.

Here's the sad truth: Jesus came to save us and to change us, but some people, like Festus, simply do not want to be saved.

**John 3:16** For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. 17 For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved.

Look at the good God has done for us, even when we were His enemies. We were in trouble and Jesus came to help. But will you accept the help?

18 “He who believes in Him is not condemned; but he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. 19 And this is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil.

My friends the world is full of darkness because people love their evil deeds. Many people simply do not want to change.

2020 has been an incredibly difficult year – more difficult than anything most of us have ever experienced and the year isn’t over yet, there’s going to be more, and possibly worse ahead. We see darkness and difficulty, online, in our country, in our communities, in our homes, and in our own souls.

Jesus came to deliver us from the darkness. To drive it out of our souls, and then hopefully out of our homes, that we might make a difference in our communities, our country, in this world, and online as He shines through us.

He wants to totally, utterly, and completely change us. He wants to make us look more like Paul who stood before his governor and king and even though there was a world of difference between them he didn’t seethe against them, he didn’t grit his teeth, he wasn’t spiteful or embittered, he was emboldened. He shared the good news of what Jesus had done for him and the fact that it was possible for these men too.

He said I would tell God that you might be just like me, because it’s the best thing for you.

So here’s the challenge Christians – can we echo the words of Paul? Do we look enough like Jesus for us to say, I would tell God that you were just like me, except for these chains? Is God having His way in you? Where do you need to repent, turn to God, and where, when and how do you need to do works, or keep on doing those works, befitting of repentance?

May God tailor the answer for each of us today and then scatter us this week throughout the darkness where we can shine for Him – reflecting the goodness and grace that we have received.

Let’s pray.