

Using Conversion to Make Enemies

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[0 : 0 0] Hello, Table Church. Pastor Anthony here. I am once again in my basement. My family, we have managed to catch colds, myself included, so we've been hunkering down even more than usual this past week to make sure we don't pass on our runny noses to everybody else.

So that's why things are a little bit different. I'm here. The band recorded earlier. Always grateful for Jordan and for the worship team and all that they do. And we are continuing in our series about the Church of Us versus Them, about being caught up in the enemy-making machine. And I'll tell you what, I'm coming to this sermon to you today, you know, a little bit less prepared than usual. Thanks, cold. And also a little bit, you know, just filled with a little bit of trepidation because in a couple days we've got an election coming up. It's obviously been, you know, a contentious season. And we're all wrestling with really hard things. And I'll tell you what, right now I do not want to wrestle with my enemy-making tendencies. It feels really good to make enemies sometimes. It feels really good to make things very clear, thick black lines of us and them and who's right and who's wrong and who's got it all figured out and who doesn't. And so trying to preach about how we shouldn't do that is really fighting against all of my instincts. And I'm sure hearing sermons about how we shouldn't make us's and them's fights against all of our instincts. So I'm with you.

I'm with you. I hear you. I am in the same place. And yet I find myself continually confronted with Jesus who somehow managed to be this person, this kind of person who could hang out with the disenfranchised and the marginalized and the poor and the poor in spirit. And everyone at the world in his society rejected. He could do that. And he was loved and adored by him. As Rich Mullins used to sing, the prostitutes all love him and the drunks propose a toast. That's the kind of person Jesus was.

And Jesus was also the kind of person who'd go over to dinner to the Pharisees' house and the tax collector's house and those who were the ones in power, the ones who were oppressing. Jesus could hang with them too. Now, Jesus did not pretend like he didn't have enemies. And I feel like that's maybe the main thing I want us to come away with today is that when we live in such a way that we can love our enemies, pray for our enemies, that's not the same as pretending that we don't have any.

When we can pray for those who persecute us, when we can invite ourselves over to dinner or invite somebody else over for dinner who has very different views than us, that doesn't mean that we're pretending like those views don't exist. So that's part of what I'm wrestling with with this whole enemy-making machine, the church of us versus them. Me, myself, this is what I'm wrestling with, of how do we make sure that what distinguishes us and what divides us and what sets our opinions and our values apart, that we don't just like whitewash over them and that we don't just pretend like they don't exist. Because that's not reconciliation. That's not how we love those who are different than us.

[3 : 26] We have to acknowledge the hurt and the pain and the trauma and the difference so that reconciliation can do its honest and true and real work. That's what we're dealing with. So that's a lot of kind of throat clearing to get to what I want to talk about today. We've talked about some of the signs that were caught up in the enemy-making machine. We've talked about perverse enjoyment when we get pleasure from someone else's pain. We've talked about reverse definition where we only know what we're about because we know what we're against and anybody who's trying to figure out what we're about can only identify what we're against. And we've also talked about banners or dogmas. When we have an idea, belief, and we take out the practice, we're left with a banner where it's just something that we can hang, a tag that we can put on ourselves to make sure that we're in the right camp and everybody else is in the wrong camp. But it's actually divorced from the way we live our lives.

And one of those banners that we want to talk about today is the idea of conversion, decision. Are you born again? Have you made a decision for Christ? Now, let me be clear. The gospel demands conversion. The gospel, which is the good news that Jesus is king of the world and is settling scores with all of his enemies so that his rule and reign can be enacted and manifested in all times and all places. That's the good news. That good news demands a response. But oftentimes that response can be mutated into a mere banner of, have you made a decision? Have you said the right words, said the right prayer? Do you believe the right things? It becomes a banner when we begin to identify with people who are actively oppressing and hurting those that Jesus came to heal and to save.

But because they are saved, because they have made a decision, well, at least they're in the right camp. It becomes a banner when making a decision becomes an insurance policy against hell and a get out of jail free ticket to get ourselves into heaven. And it doesn't actually affect or change our lives. So how do we get out of this banner and out of the enemy making machine of who's saved and who's not? Who said the sinner's prayer and who didn't? And did you get baptized in the right way at the right time with the right people? How do we get out of that? So if you have a Bible, we're in the book of Titus chapter 2. And I feel like Paul writing this letter to a pastor named Titus gets at something that we need to wrap our minds around. So this is book of Titus chapter 2 verse 11.

Paul says this, For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all. Stop right there. This is one of the things that we need to wrap our minds around as we call ourselves Jesus followers, Christians, any of those things, is that who is saved and who is not is a question that is answered by scripture. It's right there in black and white. The grace of God has appeared. That's the good news.

Something happened in Jesus Christ. It's not good advice. This is the way you need to live your life. It's good news. In Jesus, his life, his miracles, his healing, his preaching, his suffering, his death, his resurrection, his ascension. In Jesus, something has happened. The grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all. And there's an old joke that I'm pretty sure every preacher I've ever heard has used. What does the word all mean in the original Greek? All. According to scripture, and I'll put a link in the chat and in the notes for other verses that attest to this. Salvation is a done deal. It is not our place to get to decide who's saved and who's not, who's in and who's out. We can relieve ourselves of that responsibility because in Christ, everyone's already saved. We've talked about this before, and I'm sure you'll hear me talk about it again, of bounded sets and centered sets. Bounded sets is imagine a fence that we decide who is inside the fence and who is outside the fence versus a centered set.

[8 : 13] Imagine a destination, a location, a center. And the question is not who's in and who's out, but rather who's going towards or who's going away. The salvation question, who has Christ saved?

Who has God relieved of the wrath that was due by taking that wrath upon himself on the cross? Who's in? Everyone. All. The Greek means all. Everyone is already saved. That question has been answered definitively in Christ. In Romans chapter 8, Paul talks about how the sin of one man, Adam, Genesis chapter 3, the sin of one person brought death to everybody, and then makes the argument, how much more then is the salvation brought through Christ, his life, bring salvation to everybody?

So the salvation question is answered. And I'm sure there's all sorts of like bells ringing in your head of like, wait, is Anthony a universalist? Is he saying there's no hell? We'll talk about that some other day. I'll answer that question right now. I'm not a universalist, and I believe everybody who wants to go to hell can go there if they want to. God gives us free will to make those choices.

But the question of who can escape hell, who Jesus has saved, who the wrath of God has no more power because God took that wrath upon himself. That question is answered. Salvation has been brought to all. Now I think, you know, we, we, we, we'll go back to Titus here in a second. We can imagine like a big circle where there's the church, people who call themselves Christians. And within that circle, there's a smaller circle called God's activity. God is up to something good, and it's within the confines of the church, of those who call themselves Christians. And I, it's not really how scripture talks about God's activity in the world. We hear the refrain again and again in the Psalms, the earth is filled with God's glory. If I go to the depths of Sheol, to the grave, to the pit, even you're there, God. We see in, in many places where God and Jesus show up in places that we don't expect.

Jesus says that I have a flock of a different name. We, we hear that God's activity is actually quite pervasive and wide and all-encompassing and all-reaching. And so rather there is the great, big, large, infinite circle of God's loving activity in the world, in the cosmos, in the universe, of which the church is part of that for sure, at least part of the church is part of that.

[10:56] And there are, there's more to it than that. So our question then is not, well, who's in and who's out, but rather recognizing that God's loving, good, redemptive activity is all-encompassing, is everywhere. Our job is not who's in and who's out, but rather where can I identify that loving, that good, that benevolent activity of God and join with it. And that means we're going to find it in surprising places. We'll find it in places of people who don't even know the name of Jesus, or maybe they've been told lies about Jesus all their lives. Maybe they think very poorly of the church and very poorly of Christianity because of what they've seen or what they've experienced, but they're up to something good in the world. And the only way that they're capable of doing that, I believe, is because of God's loving presence, God's spirit bringing healing through them. They may not even recognize that healing. They may not even want to call Jesus God, but that doesn't mean that God still can't work through them. So instead of falling prey to the enemy and making machine, who's in, who's out, who's saved, who's not? Is God working in their life or not? The answer is a resounding yes, of course God is working in their life regardless of the name that they claim.

And our job is not the decision maker, who's in, who's out, who's going to heaven, who's going to hell, but rather wherever someone is working in line with God's kingdom, with bringing healing and redemption and salvation and love into the world, let's join with them. Black liberation theologian James Cone says this, the Christian gospel is more than going to heaven when I die to shout salvation as I fly. It is also an eminent reality, a powerful liberating presence among the poor right now, wherever poor people fill in the blank with whatever you want there. Black people, people of color, indigenous people, gay people, wherever people struggle for justice, that's where the gospel is at work. So we need to become far less concerned than I think we tend to be about who's in and who's out, who claims the name of Jesus and who doesn't. Rather, we need to become expert detectives at discovering where God is at work, at where God's benevolent, loving, just presence is up to something good at the world and say, let me be part of that and not fall prey to the enemy making machine. Now, back to Titus. So Paul says, for the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all.

What does this gospel and this grace do? It trains us, verse 12, trains us to renounce impiety and worldly passions and in the present age to live lives that are self-controlled, upright, and the good old Bible word, godly, meaning making ourselves look like, act like, behave like God. So our work is not who's in, who's out, who's made a decision, who said the prayer, but rather the gospel of grace, the life of Jesus, training us to be a different kind of people. This is where we need to spend our energy. This is why Jesus uses the analogy of the speck and the plank. He says, you know, when you go to confront somebody, you are pointing out the speck in their eye, not even being aware of the plank, the two by four lodged in your own, which means that our attention needs to be less and less on everybody else's problems and all of the other places where the Holy Spirit needs to be doing the work of conviction.

our attention is rather on, God, what are you doing within me? Where are the places where I am unjust, where I am not cooperating with God's good presence in the world? And this is the number one way that we relieve ourselves of being another cog in the enemy making machine. It is easy, it is easy, it is so darn easy to point out everyone else's problems. And what that is, is drawing the attention away from ourselves and the own work that God is up to in our lives. And don't hear me wrong, that does not mean that one, I need to become a self-hating worm who only sees all the problems in my life. That is not what Christ meant when Christ said, love your neighbor as yourself. There is a deep need that we have to know that God loves us, likes us, adores us, would die for us, in fact has died for us.

We need that to be the foundation of how we understand our own growth and change and transformation. We need to start with Genesis 1, that God called us very good and made us in God's image. We need to start there. But we also recognize our brokenness. We only recognize our brokenness when we recognize God's original intention for us. And so when we recognize our brokenness, we don't do it out of a desire to stay there and just prove how bad we are. Rather, we recognize our brokenness so that we can heal. So there's that. There's also the fact that there is injustice in the world that we don't perpetuate, that other people are perpetuating. There is stuff going on in the world that needs to be said no to. And so when we acknowledge our own brokenness, that doesn't mean that we ignore the brokenness that other folks are wrecking, wreaking onto the world. But we do that, again, out of a deep-seated knowledge, an intimate knowledge of God's intention for the world. So when we bring, attempt to bring healing to the brokenness that is perpetuated by others, those who are against us or against those we love, against creation, we bring healing not out of a sense of condemnation and judgment and how can I shame you and hurt you and get enjoyment out of your pain. We bring healing out of a deep and intimate awareness of how God wants and desires things to be. Now, when we live that kind of life, that will reveal enemies. This was the life of Jesus. Once again, Jesus went around, filled with the Holy Spirit, doing good.

[17 : 31] He healed and he fed and he taught. And Jesus did not make a single enemy, but boy, a lot of enemies revealed themselves, didn't they? To the point of Jesus's own death. So when I say that we need to live lives of awareness and growth of our own brokenness and bringing healing into the world to fix the brokenness that's in there, that doesn't mean that somehow everyone's just going to get along just fine.

Of course not. There are going to be people who are violently opposed to the goodness and the justice that you are claiming and proclaiming and enacting in God's world. When we say things like, Black lives matter, enemies will reveal themselves because that threatens their way of life. When we say things like, Love is love in support of our LGBTQ brothers, sisters, and niblings, there will be enemies that reveal themselves because they can't imagine a world that is that inclusive and love that is that wide and just. So we still need to have the kahunas to stand for what is true and what is right and what is good, recognizing that we don't need to spend our energy making enemies. Enemies will pop up on their own, and that's their energy to spend. Rather, we spend our energy paying attention to God's goodness, to the good that God is up to in the world, and to the healing, the restoration, that God is bringing in our own lives. If we spend our energy that way, paying attention to those kinds of things, we don't need to make enemies. They'll show up by themselves.

Paul continues, So, the grace of God has appeared, the good news of Jesus Christ, that Jesus proclaims that he is king of the world, bringing salvation to all. That grace is training us to renounce impiety and worldly passions in the present age to live lives that are self-controlled, upright, and look like God.

Verse 13, While we wait for the blessed hope and the manifestation of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ. One writer puts it like this, History is not just one damn thing after another.

History has a direction, has an intention, has a goal, that is being directed by the sovereign God. This is what sets Christians apart.

[20 : 03] We are not just altruistically working for things to hopefully get better. Rather, we are joining in God's already good work of bringing healing to the world.

We didn't invent charity. We didn't invent doing good things. God has a mission to redeem and to save the world that God has been up to since the beginning and will bring to a glorious consummation when all things are made new.

And so we are joining in God's good work that is already in progress. This is what's called hope. And we're going to talk about this more in a few weeks because we're going to focus our attention on the end of the world.

Why not? And how hope is not magic. Hope is work. Hope demands our lives. Hope demands our energy. Hope demands everything of us because if we believe that God is bringing the world into something beautiful, if God is working to redeem all things, to bring reconciliation to all things above the earth and in the earth and under the earth, as Colossians puts it, if God is doing that kind of work, then it will demand everything from us as we join God in that work.

Which gives me hope to know that God is up to something good, that I can stake my life and risk my life and spend my life knowing that God will use it for good, and to click this world forward toward a beautiful consummation of the way things are meant to be.

[21 : 42] So, takeaways. God is up to something good. There is a much wider circle of God's good activity in the world than just the church, those who have made a decision.

God's goodness and activity up in the world is broad and wide and long, and there is nothing that can separate us from us, from God's love, because it is so pervasive. We can't escape it even if we tried.

So, if that's true, then that's where we spend our attention. Discovering those good places and joining God in the work. And we reject the temptation to spend our energy making enemies, picking fights, trying to aggravate people because we've got it right and they've got it wrong.

Rather, we spend our energy working for justice, working for good, standing up for what is true and right and pure and noble. And if enemies pop up along the way, then that's why we have the church.

That's why we have like-minded, Christ-centered fellow friends and believers with us. So that whatever enemies pop up along the way know that we are not alone, that we are the embodied people of Jesus Christ, bringing healing and restoration to the world.

[23 : 08] David Fitch in his book, *The Church of Us vs. Them*, puts it like this. Our first question, therefore, is not, do you know that you are a sinner condemned to hell? Rather, it's to tend to the presence of God working in someone's life, even their suffering, their guilt, their pain, even in the smiles and the joys, whatever that situation is in their life.

And when the time is right, our job is to proclaim, I believe I see God working in you too. Can you see this too? Would you like to enter into the salvation that God is already working in and through your life through Jesus Christ as Lord?

People are always on their way to the kingdom unless they opt out otherwise. But that's not our call. We are witnesses only, not members of a jury, not executioners, and certainly not the judge.

Rather, we are witnesses of God's good and glorious work. of God's good and glorious work. You can count on us as many people when your heart is always walking.

We are witnesses of God and we are at the placickening of grosDY■■ interestingly 2 years.