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## Conversions

**Text:** St. Luke 4:1-13

In the middle of Fyodor Dostoyevsky's great novel, *The Brothers Karamazov*, there is an extended tale told by Ivan Karamazov to his brother Alyosha. In it, Christ returns to history by suddenly appearing in seventeenth century Spain during the Spanish Inquisition. After performing numerous miracles, he is quickly recognized and acclaimed by the people. However, just like the first time that he was acclaimed by the people, he was quickly arrested by the religious authorities and condemned to death.

What is fascinating and horrifying about the tale is that it is an authoritative figure of the church of Jesus Christ, the Grand Inquisitor, who condemns him, and who proceeds to explain to the entirely silent Jesus why Jesus is a problem to the mission of the church. For, the Inquisitor explains, whereas Jesus came to bring freedom to humankind, the sort of radical freedom that he tried to bring is really too much for humanity to bear. Men and women, with few enlightened exceptions, would prefer to be taken care of rather than live with the heady uncertainty of freedom. Thus, the Inquisitor goes on, the church has taken away freedom in order to give humanity the security and the bread that most of them really would prefer. Rather than let things get confused, therefore, Jesus needs to put to death again.

In the course of his monologue, the Inquisitor analyzes the three temptations that Christ faced in the wilderness after having fasted for forty days and nights. It is by resisting the temptations to turn stones into bread, to make God serve and protect him, and to rule over the world, that Jesus effects his freedom. For it is bread, security and power that most tempt us, and

are the things that are most likely to make us trade in our freedom. It is these three things that the Inquisitor trades for freedom, doing so, he claims, in the interest of the majority of people.

Illustrations of the Inquisitor's point about the struggles between freedom and security, power, and bread are not hard to find. Aldous Huxley's novel *Brave New World* is really the tale of the Grand Inquisitor retold. It is the story of a world in which men and women have been genetically engineered to prefer an unending life of sex without responsibility, work without accomplishment, and drugs without hangovers over freedom. The hero of the novel, the one exception to the rule, is exiled to a far off island for preferring freedom and thus being a threat that will upset everybody else. But his exile doesn't happen until after an interview with the World Controller, Mustapha Mond; it is an interview strikingly similar to the one that Jesus had with the Inquisitor. When Mond details the reasons for keeping humanity safe, contented, stupid and docile, they are pretty much the same reasons that the Inquisitor gave Christ. Or, consider last year's critically acclaimed film, *Revolutionary Road*. It is another illustration of the point. A young couple early in their marriage dream of escaping from their narrow 1950s suburban world to Paris. They dream that there the husband, Frank, will become a famous writer and give up writing advertising copy. However, soon enough the security of suburban living in a rambler on the ironically named Revolutionary Road takes all of Frank's ambition away, and reduces him to one of the hollow men, the stuffed men, as T. S. Eliot called them. Betraying the revolutionary spirit of America, he, too, gives into all the temptations Christ refused, and loses his freedom and his dream – and ultimately his wife.

Dostoyevsky's reading of Christ's temptations, and what is at stake in Christ refusing to give into them is surely right. Freedom in the realm of the spirit will never come to us when our wills are bound to an unending cycle of things that reduce risk for us. We will never fly to

heaven when we are most concerned with how solidly we have our feet planted on the ground.

We will never do anything great when we will take no risk that might make us stand out. We will never live by the Word of God alone when we are most concerned about what other people say.

Thus it has always been for men and women of the Spirit. Until they have overcome the temptations of things that bind them, they will never be free. Thus throughout history, and across all cultures we have records of those who have struggled to overcome those very tempting things that in fact bind women and men to spiritual poverty and slavery. The Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius in his *Meditations* provides a classic example, as throughout those spiritual exercises he struggles to remind himself how ephemeral a being an emperor is. He struggles to remind himself that to be a man is something more, something deeper than being an emperor. He struggles with the fact that in order to find out what is deeper he has to shed the illusions that inevitably attend men in powerful positions, illusions that make them think they are in charge or that they are gods or masters of the universe when, in fact, their lives are derivative, unoriginal, and resting on things beyond their control. It is testimony to the success of his struggle that we still continue to read his *Meditations* with profit, instead of barely remembering him, if at all, as simply one more in a long dreary line of power hungry emperors in the late Roman empire.

But true as all this is, the struggle against temptations is not the whole story of spiritual life. This is because before we can even start to struggle to overcome what holds us back, it has to dawn on us that we are being held back. It also has to dawn on us that being held back is not a good thing. We have to develop a taste for freedom, a taste for being people of Spirit. Without that taste, to our minds, there will be no reason to struggle at all. Without that taste, we will give into temptation in an instant, for there will be no reason not to do so. If you can't understand and desire the power and value of spiritual freedom, the struggle to achieve it will seem pointlessly

exotic, and painfully distracting from your real goals in life. And the problem is that often we don't develop that taste, or that desire.

St. Augustine described the problem this way. Without question, he asserted, we always have free will. We can choose to do something or not. We can choose to do one thing rather than another. The problem, he went on, is that a person's free will in such choices isn't worth very much if he doesn't know what the way of truth is or if she doesn't love it. The problem is that if we are in love with bread, power, and security, we are going to choose for them every time over spirit. The problem is that the ability to choose between A and B isn't a very big deal when your values are such that you are bent on choosing one way only, and the wrong one at that.

Augustine's point is not at all difficult to see. Everyday we see examples of the inability to choose, or even to get into the struggle. For example, there is not a smoker, past or present, who hasn't said, "I can quit anytime I want, I just don't want to." This includes those who keep saying that up to the point of a deadly diagnosis. There are those who pursue power, or fame, or security, not because, they claim, these things are in first place for them, but because they will give them the freedom that they really want. Yet, somehow they never give up the pursuit. They never stop competing. I have heard many a retired man of affairs admit that the hardest part about retirement is not the lack of activity, but no longer having the power he once had, and the respect that comes from power. Once in love with something, we have a hard time willing anything else. As Augustine observed, "my love is my weight." Some people have very weighty loves.

So what then is the answer? How do we ever find freedom? How do we ever get to the point where we can exercise a genuine choice for spirit and freedom? How do we change what we love when we love it so well, even to our own bondage? Well, as Augustine saw from his

own experience, and as Jesus preached, it is a matter of changing our minds, of changing our hearts as the New Testament word *metanoia* is best translated. It is a matter, as that word is normally translated, of conversion.

Conversion, however, is no easy matter. It is more easily said than done for the simple reason that it may involve a contradiction in terms. We can always *say* contradictory things; doing them is a lot harder. Think, for example, about the virtual impossibility that conversion would seem to involve. Changing your mind or your heart if it is already seriously wedded to a set of values is not a choice we can make for the simple reason that, because of what we already love, our wills are bound. If we have already made up our minds about what is important, then anything we propose to ourselves in the future is looked at in its light. Alternatives then simply don't appear easily to us, and serious alternatives rarely look very attractive, especially if they are radical. If they did appear attractive, we wouldn't think the way that we do now. So how then does a change of heart ever take place? Genuine conversion seems impossible for it depends upon a will that is already firmly fixed. Genuine conversion is nothing short of a miracle.

But miracles do happen. Let me tell you a story, not from the Christian faith, but from Buddhism that may help us to think about how the miracle of conversion takes place. I do so not because Buddhism is superior to or even the same as Christianity, but because sometimes it is easier to think outside the box with examples with which we are a little bit unfamiliar. Now, the story I want to tell is about a book by a Japanese philosopher by the name of Tanabe Hajime that came out shortly after World War II, with the rather opaque title of *Philosophy as Metanoetics*, which is to say, "Philosophy as Conversion."

Tanabe hit upon the idea of philosophy, that is to say, the idea of seeking wisdom, as a matter of repentance and conversion during the waning years of World War II when Japan itself

was under attack by Allied forces. It was a time, he relates, that freedom of expression was becoming more and more restricted by the Japanese government, as it tried to keep the true state of the nation and the war effort a secret from the Japanese people. Criticism was regarded as treasonous, and as weakening the resolve needed to defend the nation. Tanabe felt he needed to say something, and yet he did not want to cause divisions and conflicts. As a result he was tormented by his own indecision. There was no system he could build to change things for the better. But, he adds, “at that moment something astonishing happened. In the midst of my distress I let go and surrendered myself humbly to my own inability. I was suddenly brought to new insight. My penitent confession – metanoesis – unexpectedly threw me back on my own interiority and away from things external.” Finally able to resign himself to his weakness, this actually gave him a new task, namely to write philosophy as a way of conversion.

What does this mean? Well, Tanabe’s insight was the realization that we *cannot* change our minds, or even make up our own minds in the most important ways. We are stuck, and every once in awhile in a crisis, we realize that we are stuck. So what can we do? Trying harder, thinking more about the same things doesn’t work. Building a clever philosophical system is only a smokescreen for our confusion, and more of the same thing that confused us in the first place. It only makes it worse. Thus Tanabe’s insight was the realization that we can simply accept our weakness. We can break through the wall of self-image and ego, and accept our nothingness. But, he then says, and this is the important part, in this willingness to accept our nothingness, he discovered that he was “prompted by a Power outside myself. This Other-power brings about a conversion in me that heads me in a new direction along a path hitherto unknown to me.” It was then by entrusting himself to this “Other-power” that conversion became a matter of “resurrection.” And then as resurrected, one can return to the world so that this Other-power

can live and through one. As resurrected, there is hope and new possibility.

Buddhist philosophers may call it an “Other-power” rising in us. Christians have God’s name and that is vitally important, and we dare not forget it. But we, too, need to realize that freedom is possible, that conversion is possible, that a new life is possible, only if we quit trying to choose, only if we quit trying to exercise the power of choice, and open ourselves up to the power of the God who made us, who sustains us and who promises to redeem us. New life, and victory in our struggles to overcome life threatening temptation is possible, not by our own choice, but by letting God be the one who directs us, by letting God be our inner life.

When we read the story of Christ’s temptations in the wilderness, we, quite naturally, focus on the temptations. But it is just as important to think about the forty days of fasting that took place beforehand. For it was in the prayer and fasting of those forty days that Jesus’ victory over the temptations that the devil set before him really took place. For it was *there*, all alone, and relying only on God, that he learned that we do not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God. It was there that the conversion to God’s way took place, and convinced him unalterably and with God’s power of what his future was.

Lent is a time of preparation. It can and ought to be a time to struggle with loves and values that pull in different directions. But let us understand above all, that we will only see the value of that struggle, and we will only win those struggles for spiritual freedom, if we have given up choosing for ourselves. We will only be free if we give our directing our lives by our self-seeking choices, and if we are open to the power of God directing us, and giving us light. For without conversion, we don’t struggle, we just compete.

Let us all therefore during these forty days above all find ways to open ourselves to the God who made us, and who promises to make us his own. And if we do, we will find that our

conversion is a matter of resurrection.