

## ***HOW TO TURN CRITICS INTO CONVERTS***

**1 Peter 2:12 (Be Alert – Wk 8)**

**By Andy Manning**

The title of this sermon is “How to Turn Critics into Converts.”

On Sunday, October 1, 2017, America experienced its worst mass shooting in history (see image below). In Las Vegas, Nevada, a 64 year-old man by the name of Stephen Paddock aimed and shot at a crowd of people who were gathered at a country music festival. He killed 59 people and injured more than 500 others. Those 59 people did not know that that day was going to be their last. They didn't know that they were going to meet their maker. Were they ready? Were they saved?

You have many friends and family members who are lost, and you don't know when they are going to die. It could be today; it could be this week; it could be this month. And if they are lost, then they aren't ready for death. Because if they die without Christ, they will go to hell for all eternity.

But God loves your lost friends and family members. He loves them more than you do. He loves them so much that He sent His only Son to die for their sins so they could be forgiven and have eternal life.

And now God is on a mission. His mission is to send someone to your family friends to tell them how to be saved. Guess who that someone is? It's you.

God has called each of us to be full-time missionaries to the lost around us. He has called us to the task of evangelism – which is **taking the message of the good news of Jesus Christ to people and explaining it to them in a way that they can get in on it if they want to.**<sup>1</sup>

But here's the problem. **The very people that we want to reach often hate us.** They might not hate us, but they hate our religion.

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<sup>1</sup> Bill Bright.

In America Christians don't exactly have a good reputation.

Many people think Christians are ignorant because we don't believe in evolution.

Many people think Christians are intolerant, hateful, and judgmental because we are against abortion, and homosexuality, and transgenderism.

Many people think Christians are just hypocrites.

Many think that Christians are bad people.

And your family and friends may have bought into that. They may think that Christians are bad people. They might wish that you weren't one of those crazy, hateful, ignorant Christians.

So here's the question. **How do we turn our critics into converts?** How do we reach people who have a really bad opinion of Christianity?

It's not like we're missionaries in the jungles of South America trying to reach people who have never heard of Christianity, and so they have no opinion of it. The people we're trying to reach already have very negative opinions about Christianity. So how do we turn our critics into converts?

The good news is that we're not the first Christians who have faced this challenge. We're not the first Christians who have lived in hostile culture, in a culture that was anti-Christian. We're not the first Christians who have tried to reach anti-Christians.

The Christians in the first century dealt with this challenge.

When Peter wrote his first letter, 1 Peter, many people in the Roman Empire hated Christians.

It really started to get bad in A.D. 64, when the city of Rome burned down. There was a fire in Rome and over 70% of the city was damaged. At first the people blamed the emperor Nero, but he quickly deflected the blame onto Christians, who were already disliked. And so at the point Christians started being hunted down, tortured, and killed, simply for being Christians.

So Christians were believed by many to be terrorists.

Not only that, but Christians were also hated because they were thought to be atheists since they did not worship the emperor or the Roman gods. This threatened many people, because they believed that it would anger the gods and bring judgment.

As well, Christians were hated because they believed to be cannibals because of the rumors that they ate the body and blood of Christ.

And Christians were hated because they were thought to be incestuous since they referred to each other as brother and sister.

So get this. Christians were accused in the first century of being haters.

In A.D. 115 the Roman historian Tacitus wrote about the persecution of Christians during the time of Nero and said they were guilty of “hatred of the human race,” and he said they were “hated for their abominations.”

In other words, Christians were hated, and they were accused of being haters.

So how in the world were they supposed to reach the lost in that climate?

Peter addressed this challenge in 1 Peter 2:12 (CSB).

**“Conduct yourselves honorably among the Gentiles, so that when they slander you as evildoers, they will observe your good works and will glorify God on the day he visits.”**

Let’s look at this phrase by phrase.

First, **“Conduct yourself honorably.”**

If you look up the word honorably in the dictionary, it means live worthy of honor or deep respect.

Live in a way that earns or wins the deep respect of others.

Second, **“Conduct yourselves honorably among the Gentiles.”**

That word Gentile can mean non-Jews, or it can mean unbelievers, or pagans, or idolaters. That second meaning applies here. It means non-Christians.

Live in a way that earns or wins the deep respect of non-believers.

Third, **“so that when they slander you as evildoers.”**

The word slander here simply means to speak against you; in other words, they accuse you of being evil. They hate you.

Live in a way that earns or wins the deep respect of non-believers,

so that when they accuse you of being evil, when they accuse you of being hateful, when they accuse you of being hypocritical....

Fourth, **“they will observe your good works.”**

The word observe here means an ongoing examination.

When unbelievers accuse you of evil, they will observe your good works over a period of time.

Fifth, **“and will glorify God on the day he visits.”**

To glorify God means to esteem God highly; to worship God or think highly of God.

The day God visits can mean two things:

It can refer to the day Jesus comes back to judge the living and the dead;

or it can mean the day that God visits a person through the Holy Spirit to knock on the door of the heart and call them to salvation as they are hearing the gospel.

So the meaning of this phrase is that unbelievers will get saved when they hear the gospel, or they will be among the saved – those who glorify God – when Jesus returns.

So let me put it all together.

Live in a way that wins the respect of your lost friends

so that when they accuse you of evil, they will see your good works, and this will influence them to become Christians.

In other words, **to win the lost, first win their respect.**

If you want to win the lost, especially those who are critics of Christianity, skeptics, haters of the faith, start by winning their respect by the way you live. And this in turn will influence them to turn to Christ.

Have you ever heard the phrase, **“Actions speak louder than words”?**

That's exactly what Peter is saying here. He is talking about the power of your actions.

The key to turning your critics into converts is to first win their respect with your actions, and this is so powerful that it can lead them to embrace Christ.

This idea is called "life-style evangelism." The idea is that if you want to win the lost, you can't just focus on what you say to them; you also have to focus on your actions.

If your actions don't align with your words, if you aren't practicing what you preach, if you aren't walking you talk, then people won't listen to you.

Author **Brennan Manning** wrote, "The greatest single cause of atheism in the world today is Christians: who acknowledge Jesus with their lips, walk out the door, and deny Him by their lifestyle. That is what an unbelieving world simply finds unbelievable."

But Peter is going further than that here. Peter is not just saying that people won't listen to you if you are a hypocrite. He is telling us how to get people to listen to us. He is telling us how to win over our critics. To win the lost, first win respect.

If you want people to glorify God, first get them to respect you. Then they will listen to you. Then they will be open to your message.

This concept is found in several other places.

In Matthew 5:13-16 Jesus said that **we are the salt of the earth and the light of the world.** What did he mean by that?

Salt makes people thirsty. In the same way, we're to live in a way that makes people thirsty for what we have.

Salt also makes things taste good. We're to live in a way that makes the Jesus that we are preaching taste good to an unbelieving world.

What about light?

Light helps people see clearly. We are to live such good lives that we help critics and skeptics see Jesus for who He really is, and this will cause them to turn to Christ.

**Matthew 5:16** (CSB) says, "In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven."

This idea is also found in Titus 2:9-10 (CSB). "9 Slaves are to submit to their masters in everything, and to be well-pleasing, not talking back 10 or stealing, but demonstrating utter faithfulness, so that they may adorn the teaching of God our Savior in everything."

What does it mean to adorn something? It means to make something look attractive.

Paul was writing to Christians who were slaves, and he was instructing them to live in such a way that that they make the gospel attractive; that they attract people to Jesus.

Let me show this principle in one more place.

**1 Peter 3:1-2** (CSB) says, "In the same way, wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands so that, even if some disobey the word, they may be won over without a word by the way their wives live 2 when they observe your pure, reverent lives."

Now the principle is really clear here.

Notice the phrase “they may be won over without a word by the way their wives live.”

That’s exactly what Peter is communicating here in 1 Peter 2:12. **To win the lost, first win their respect.**

Peter was telling Christian wives to be very careful how they lived, because if they lived right, their actions could attract their husbands to Christ.

So how do you turn your critics into converts?

First win their respect. To win the lost, first win their respect.

Focus first and foremost on living in a way that would attract them to Jesus.

Make them thirsty for Jesus. Help them see what Jesus is really like.

So imagine that you have a neighbor who is not a Christian, and you want to win him to the Lord. But the problem is that he isn’t just lost, he is anti-Christian. He is an atheist, and he hates religion. How do you win a guy like that? **To win the lost, first win their respect.**

Focus on being a really good neighbor. Look for ways to help him. Look for ways to love him. Be a friend. Focus on acting like Christ, and not like a sinner.

And Peter is saying that as your neighbor observes you over time, your actions will influence him to turn to Christ. He will be more open to you; more open to Christianity; more interested in what you’ve got.

Now before we move on, there’s something else that needs to be said here. There’s a negative aspect to this principle.

The Bible says the key to converting our critics is to win their respect.



This means that if we are not winning our friends to Christ, it could be that we haven't earned their respect.

If the lost aren't attracted to Christ, maybe it's because they aren't attracted to us; maybe it's because they aren't impressed.

If we aren't reaching the lost, we need to take a close, hard look at ourselves and ask some tough questions.

Are we living honorably? Are we living lives of good works? Are we living attractive lifestyles?

Now let's talk about how to do this practically. There are two ways to win the respect of your critics. Both of them are found in 1 Peter 2:12.

## **2 Ways to Win The Respect of Your Critics**

### **1. Cultivate Christlike character.**

Peter said, "Conduct yourself honorably."

The word "honorably" in Greek is rich with meaning. It can mean beautiful, good, of good quality, fertile, rich, useful, profitable; it can mean excellent, goodly, pleasant, delightful; it can mean distinguished, possessing moral excellence, worthy, upright, virtuous."

In other words, to live honorably is to live with Christlike character.

So if you want to win the respect of your critics, focus on cultivating Christlike character. Develop Christian virtue. Virtue means moral excellence.

The New Testament is filled with virtues, or Christlike character qualities for us to develop.

A great place to start is Galatians 5:22-23 (CSB). “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, 23 gentleness, and self-control.”

A very helpful thing to do is to memorize this verse, and then God will use it to grow you.

But you can't develop Christlike character unless you understand it. Just memorizing these nine virtues is only going to help you grow to the degree that you know what they mean. So let's define this very quickly.

1. **Love** means doing what's best for others. Do you focus on doing what's best for others, or do only focus on your own needs and wants?
2. **Joy** means a celebratory attitude. Do you display a positive, cheerful attitude, even when you are going through tough times, or do you walk around looking like you just found out that your best friend died?
3. **Peace** means working hard to get along with others. Do you get along with others, or are you always fighting and arguing with people?
4. **Patience** means waiting with a good attitude. How do you behave when you have to wait for something – like traffic?
5. **Kindness** means only using words that are helpful and encouraging. How are your words? Clean or dirty? Encouraging or insulting? Respectful or disrespectful?
6. **Goodness** means that you help others. Do you focus on helping your critics, or do you just live to help yourself?
7. **Faithfulness** means you keep your word. Do you do what you say you will do, or do you have the reputation of a flake – unreliable; undependable?
8. **Gentleness** means you stay calm and kind when you are angry. How do you behave when you get angry? Do you fly off the handle and yell and scream and curse and threaten and insult and hit things, or do you stay calm and kind?
9. **Self-control** means you do what you should do, even when you don't want to. Are you self-disciplined – think about your physical fitness, your spending habits, your time-management? Or are you a slave to your appetites and feelings?

The fruit of the Spirit is a very helpful, brief definition of what it means to live honorably. It's a good starting place.

If you want to win the respect of your critics, start by cultivating Christlike virtues.

This kind of character is very attractive to lost people, because everyone, Christians non-Christians want to behave this way. Even non-Christians intuitively know that this is the way they should behave. And so if they see you behaving this way, they will be attracted to you; they will want what you have.

## **2. Care for your critics.**

We already mentioned this one in the fruit of the Spirit – goodness. Helping others.

In **1 Peter 2:12** Peter said, “Conduct yourselves honorably among the Gentiles, so that when they slander you as evildoers, they will observe your good works and will glorify God on the day he visits.”

Notice the phrase “good works.” That basically means helping others, or serving others by meeting their needs.

If you want to turn your critics into converts, **turn their needs into your assignments.**

Be on the lookout for ways to help them; to serve them; to meet their needs; to help them with their problems.

If you do this consistently they will have to change their opinion about Christians.

First they will say, “I don't believe, but I respect Christians, because my neighbor is a Christian and he's the nicest guy I've ever met.”

And eventually he will say, “My Christian neighbor was so nice I just had to learn more about his faith, and eventually I became a believer.”

## CONCLUSION

How do you turn your critics into converts? **To win the lost, first win their respect.**

And a good place to begin is by cultivating Christian character, and caring for your critics.

Before we close, consider a few questions to help you apply this to your life.

### Questions for Application

1. What about your life is not respectable? Think about your lost friends – maybe your parents, your children, your siblings, your friends, your classmates, your neighbors. Is there anything in your life that is not honorable; not respectable?
2. How do you need to become more like Christ? The more you imitate Christ, the more attractive you'll be to the lost.
3. In what ways does your behavior not line up with the Bible? If your behavior does not line up with the Bible you will be labeled a hypocrite.

I'll be you've never heard the story of Arland Williams. It was Washington D.C., January 13, 1982. Arland Williams was a passenger aboard Flight 90 which was taking off from Washington National Airport. It failed to gain altitude, and crashed into the 14th Street Bridge, hitting six cars and a truck on the bridge, killing four motorists. After the crash on the bridge, the plane plunged into the freezing, icy waters of the Potomac River. Soon only the tail section of the plane was still afloat. 73 of the 79 occupants were instantly killed. Only six people survived the initial crash, but they were in the icy river. Arland Williams was one of them. He was 47 years old. When the helicopter tossed down flotation

devices; he grabbed them and passed them to the others, leaving him without one. Then the helicopter tossed down a rope, and began rescuing one person at a time. Every time the rope would fall, Arland would hand it to someone else. After the fifth person was rescued, the helicopter returned to get Arland Williams; but by this time he had been taken over by fatigue, and he had drowned. He gave his life so that others may live.

All of us know unbelievers. And unbelievers are on their way to hell; without Christ they will drown in the floodwaters of judgment. And God has called us to be like Arland Williams. Just as he sacrificed himself so that others may live, we should do the same. We should sacrifice our live to bring others to Jesus.

And that means we need to start by winning their respect.

