

February 27, 2011

Living Out The Gospel In Real Life

Born From Above

John 2:23 – 3:12

I love the way John puts together his gospel. It is so very simple, yet so very profound. He has a very limited agenda – to demonstrate that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, to show the salvation that He brings, and how men ought to respond to that offer – but he brings everything to bear on the subject. You might have the idea that he is just relating some stories – Jesus meeting John the Baptist, Jesus calling His disciples, Jesus doing a wedding miracle, Jesus cleansing the temple, and here, Jesus meeting Nicodemus. But John is not just a storyteller. Everything story serves the theme, and these are not unconnected stories. I trust as we go through this passage this morning you will get the connection.

Last week we saw Jesus in the temple, doing some cleaning. His visit was foretold by the prophets and we understand that He didn't just blow a gasket when He saw what was going on in His Father's house. His reaction was absolutely in line with the Scriptures that commanded that no leaven be found in the house during the Passover celebration. And in fulfilling Scripture and cleaning the house, He was also announcing the end to temple worship. The worship of God had been perverted by the corrupting influence of the religious leaders, changed into something that no longer served God but rather served mammon. But even more, the reality of what the temple pictured was now present, and the days of types and shadows was over. The Messiah had come. Now **authentic worship was connected to Jesus, not the temple.**

What Jesus was saying is that ***"I am the new temple. When I raise my body from the dead, everywhere in all the world, people may come to God through me. There will be no pilgrimage to Jerusalem, no more sacrifices that cannot remove the stain of sin, no more self-efforts at cleansing and redemption, no more wailing at the wall."*** In Jesus we meet God. We know God. We fellowship with God. In Jesus we find the infinite treasure of the all-satisfying God.

Now John goes on to make a curious observation: *Now when He was in Jerusalem at the Passover, during the feast, many believed in His name, observing His signs which He was doing. But Jesus, on His part, was not entrusting Himself to them, for He knew all men, and because He did not need anyone to testify concerning man, for He Himself knew what was in man.* John 2:23-25 You would think that Jesus would be thrilled that many believed in His name. But that is not what John says. He says they saw the signs – but Jesus did not entrust Himself to them. Why not? They saw the signs – apparently they believed in His name – but Jesus was wary of their allegiance. And the reason He was wary was because *'He knew all men'*. What this says to us I think, is that **their belief was superficial because it rested on the signs.**

John says that for His part, Jesus did not **entrust** Himself to them. The word translated **'entrust'** in verse 24, is the same word as the word **'believe'** in verse 23. John is really saying that many believed in Him, but He didn't believe in them. **He had no faith in their faith.** Their faith rested in the miracles and when the miracles stopped their faith dried up. Jesus performed miracles throughout His ministry, demonstrating that He was the Messiah, the Anointed One, and these signs were so that those who saw them might conclude that He was the Son of God and believe in Him. But here the faith that was inspired was not a saving faith. They saw Jesus as a miracle worker, and the Messiah that was going to wipe out the hated Romans and reinstate the kingdom. After all, He takes on this huge mob in the temple with just a little whip, and singlehandedly sends them packing. So He must be going to clean out the Romans in much the same way.

But they really missed who Jesus was. The only Savior they thought they needed was one that came in power and might and restored the kingdom to which they all looked forward. They didn't really understand that He came as the Lamb of God to take away their sin, and the sin of the world. **They focused on the signs and missed the reality.** Jesus knew what was in their hearts – He knew that they believed in Him as a miracle worker, but not as the Lamb of God. We run into this attitude many places in this gospel, most particularly in chapter six where Jesus feeds the five thousand. After this miracle, John records that: *Therefore when the people saw the sign which He had performed, they said, "This is truly the Prophet who is to come into the world."* John 6:14 They believed – in the sign, but not in Him. But Jesus knew that kind of faith is not a saving faith. Their belief was based on their full stomachs, not on the person of Christ.

Jesus knew that ***unless the Holy Spirit operates, men do not have a saving faith***. I believe what this says to us is that we need to be sure the faith we have is saving faith. Signs and wonders and miracles are great – and we ought to expect them as followers of Christ. But the demonstration of signs should always point people toward a saving faith in Jesus. Too many people in the Christians world today are caught up in signs and wonders – for the sake of signs and wonders. If you want to get a feel for that, just google the words, 'Signs and Wonders' on the internet and you'll get about 1.5 million hits.

But John's point is that these people had an inadequate faith, because it was invested in the wrong thing. And he says Jesus knew that: ***because He did not need anyone to testify concerning man, for He Himself knew what was in man***. John 2:25 He knew what was in man because He had made man. John's statement is another clear testimony to the fact that Jesus was God. In the Old Testament, we read that it is only God who knows what is in the heart of man. In Solomon's prayer at the dedication of the temple, he says: ***then hear in heaven Your dwelling place, and forgive and act and render to each according to all his ways, whose heart You know, for You alone know the hearts of all the sons of men***, 1Kings 8:39 The only one who knows the hearts of men is God, and here John says that Jesus knew what was in men – so the conclusion is inescapable – Jesus is Yahweh of the Old Testament – another confirmation.

Now right on the heels of the temple cleansing and the fact that there were many who saw the signs but didn't have saving faith, we get the story of Nicodemus. These are not unconnected. ***Now there was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews;*** John 3:1 The story of Nicodemus, is above all, a story of a man who was trusting in something other than grace for salvation. He was a Pharisee. That is, he was a member of the religious/political party called 'Pharisee'. It was a religious group first, but also wielded political power among the Jews – that is why he is also called a 'ruler of the Jews'. The Pharisee's originated about a hundred years before Christ came, and represented the religious right in reacting against the secularism and materialism of the culture in which they were living. You might say that they were the original puritans. They were interested in a pure form of Judaism, separated from the worldliness that was infecting their religion. In fact the word 'Pharisee' is an expression that means 'separatist'.

In many respects they could be admired, particularly in their doctrine. They believed in divine predestination. They believed in man's moral responsibility. They believed in man's immortality. They believed in the resurrection of the body, contrary to the Sadducees. They believed in the existence of angels and spirits. They believed in rewards and punishments in the future life. And they produced men of intellect and renown. For example, there was Gamaliel, at whose feet the Apostle Paul studied. There was Paul himself, he was a Pharisee. Josephus, the Jewish historian, was also a Pharisee. But the judgment of Jesus against them was that they had externalized religion. That is, ***being right with God was all about doing the right things***, and they had stripped their worship of any internal reality and Jesus labled them whitewashed tombs, beautiful on the outside and dead on the inside. In Christ's estimation, these Pharisees were no nearer to the kingdom of God than the prostitutes and tax collectors they despised.

They had built up a system of do's and don't that they followed religiously, thinking that they were making themselves acceptable to God. God had given them the Law, but they took it and improved upon it. For example, God said that the Sabbath day was holy and they were not to work at all, but rest. The Pharisee's simply expanded upon that in many and various ways. I told you earlier about the tradition of a Sabbath Gentile. Anything that would be considered work on the Sabbath, could not be done by a Jew, but they could hire a Gentile to do it. Another example is that they ruled that a woman should not look into the mirror on the Sabbath because she might see a gray hair and be tempted to pull it out. And if she reached up and pulled out a gray hair that would be working according to the interpretation of the Sabbath law.

If you had a sore throat or a cold in those days, one remedy was to gargle with vinegar. But on the Sabbath you could only swallow it, not gargle, because that would be working. And on the Sabbath, you could only eat an egg that a chicken had laid that day if you intended to kill it the next day to punish the chicken for laying an egg on the Sabbath. Outward conformity to the Law was the important thing for these people, and as long as you were careful to conform to the Law in all the do's and don'ts, God was happy with you.

So this is the background to a guy like Nicodemus – a Pharisee, a ruler of the Jews – a man that had kept the law as best he could and because of that expected the favor of God in recognition of his faithfulness. But there was something about this Jesus that intrigued him so John writes: ***this man came to Jesus by night and said to Him, "Rabbi, we know that You have come from God as a teacher ; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him."*** John 3:2

Every time John talks about Nicodemus, he refers to the fact that he came to Jesus by night. Some scholars have suggested that he came by night because there were no crowds around Jesus and he could have a private conversation. That may well be, but I believe he came by night because he didn't want everybody to see him meeting with this controversial figure, because in a sense he represented the Sanhedrin which was composed of the leaders of the Jews, both religiously and politically, and didn't want to necessarily link the Sanhedrin with this Jesus in any formal way. I think he saw something during the Passover in the signs that He was doing that caused him to think that there might be something to this Jesus. I believe that John also remarks on this fact because this story illustrates the fact that this was a man, a religious, moral man, who nevertheless, was living in darkness. In a sense he is everyone who is without Christ in the world.

But the best that he could come up with was that Jesus was a teacher that was sent by God. This fit his worldview. His worldview said that if you do everything the Law demands, God is obliged to accept you and save you. So the trick was to work harder, learn more about what it was that God required. So what the Jews needed were better teachers, and so whatever the signs were that Jesus was doing during the Passover, had the effect of convincing Nicodemus that this Jesus was a teacher from God. And perhaps he thought that since Jesus was a teacher sent by God, He might have some law-keeping advice that would finally put it all together for Nicodemus so he could be assured of getting into the kingdom of God. The reason I think this was the case is because of the answer Jesus gives to the unasked question. Remember, Nicodemus came with a statement – not a question: *"Rabbi, we know that You have come from God as a teacher ; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him."*

But Jesus addresses the question Nicodemus doesn't ask. *Jesus answered and said to him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God."* John 3:3 Nicodemus was much like the rich, young ruler who came to Jesus and said: *"Teacher, what good thing shall I do that I may obtain eternal life ?"* Matthew 19:16 He was looking for that final thing that would ensure his salvation. He'd been good – he wasn't slacking – he'd been doing the work. But he came up against the one thing that he couldn't do, the one thing that would keep him from eternal life – he couldn't change the nature of who he was. Jesus told him if he was really serious about eternal life to go and sell everything he owned and then follow Him. But he couldn't do that. To do that would require changing who he was and he just wasn't up to the task. And then Jesus comments to the disciples that what is impossible for men is only possible with God.

Essentially, Nicodemus is asking the same question, and he gets the same answer. 'All your outward observance of the law won't get you into the kingdom'. What you need is another life'. Nicodemus was relying on his ability to keep the commandments to get him into the kingdom, and Jesus says that first even seeing, or understanding the kingdom requires new birth. Actually what Jesus says is that Nicodemus needs to be **'born from above'**. That is the literal translation. First of all, to even see or understand kingdom of God stuff, you need a new birth. Paul tells the Corinthians: *'But a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised.'* 2 Corinthians 2:14 **What Jesus is saying is that new birth, being born from above, precedes understanding and faith.**

Nicodemus is looking for something to do, something to fix, something to add on to what he already has. **And Jesus tells him that what he needs is not remodeling or renovation, but re-creation.** So many people approach Christianity as a way to be a better person. Get rid of bad habits and get good ones – stop doing this or that and start doing other things. And the gospel comes to tell us that God is not interested in our trying harder to be better people – he wants to remake us. Its like the story of a man who was selling a warehouse property. The building had been empty for months and needed repairs. Vandals had damaged the doors, smashed the windows, and trashed the interior. As he showed a prospective buyer the property, the owner made it clear that he would replace the broken windows, bring in a crew to correct any structural damage, and clean out the garbage. "Forget about fixing it up," the buyer said. "When I buy this place, I'm going to demolish this and build something completely different. I don't want the building; I want the site." The gospel is not about being a better person – the gospel is about being made something entirely new. **The gospel is not about renovation but re-creation.**

Nicodemus thought that it was just a matter of trying a little bit harder and Jesus says, in effect, who you are in your natural state – even as moral and upright as you can be – are not fit material for the kingdom of God. **This natural life, unchanged by Christ, is not fit for heaven.** Spurgeon used to say, *'If a thief could somehow get into heaven unchanged, he would begin by picking the angels' pockets.'* The gospel is the good news that the new creation has come. *'Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature...'* 2 Corinthians 5:17

Alexander Pope, an eighteenth century poet, best known for his satirical verse and for his translation of Homer, once uttered in desperation: **'O Lord, make me a better man.'** His servant, probably understanding more of reality than Pope said, **'It would be far easier to make you a new man.'** A better man is not enough. Nicodemus was a better man than most. But better was not enough – relative goodness won't cut it. Without a new birth, the good are just as lost as the bad, the rich as well as the poor, the Jews as well as the Gentiles, the Baptists as well as the Lutherans.

But to Nicodemus' legalistic mind, that doesn't compute: *Nicodemus said to Him, "How can a man be born when he is old? He cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born, can he?"* John 3:4 He was asking, 'How does one go about starting over? I've been a Pharisee for a long time and now you say it has all been for nothing – everything I've built my life and hope on is suddenly no good? What am I supposed to do?' And Jesus answers him: *Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.* John 3:5 **The way into the kingdom of God does not involve ritual, rites or religion.** The way in is from heaven. Jesus says that to be born again involves water and the Spirit of God. What does that mean?

There are three possible answers, maybe more than three – but there is only one probable answer. To be born of water indicates either water baptism, natural birth, or something else. It most likely doesn't refer to water baptism because the only requirement for salvation in the Bible is faith alone. Water baptism won't save anyone, but if that were a requirement, then all the Old Testament saints never made it into the kingdom because they were never baptised. In fact baptism is never mentioned in the Old Testament. Furthermore, all those since Christ who have believed but were not baptized are also eternally lost. A.W. Pink in his commentary on John says that this idea would, **'...shut heaven's door upon the repentant thief, as well as all the Quakers and members of the Salvation Army, the vast majority of whom have never been baptised.'** So Jesus most likely wasn't talking about water baptism. **Not water baptism.**

He may have been referring to the fact of our natural birth as we are born as it were essentially in a bag of water. The moment of birth comes as the waters break and the baby comes out of the womb. And this is what I had presumed for a long time, probably because that is what I had been taught. But the more I pondered this passage and the rest of Scripture, I began to realize a couple of things. One is that Jesus probably wouldn't have referred to our natural birth as a requirement for the new birth. In effect He would have been saying that unless you are born a human and born of the Spirit you cannot enter into the kingdom. That is unlikely. **Not natural birth.**

Water in the Bible is symbolic of several things, but for the Jew, water speaks of purification. Remember the water jars set aside at the wedding for the Jewish rite of purification? The image that would have come to Nicodemus' mind at that point would be the Old Testament picture of water that was used for purification. Since he no doubt knew the Old Testament very well, he probably would have recalled the words of the prophet Ezekiel: *"For I will take you from the nations, gather you from all the lands and bring you into your own land. Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols.* Ezekiel 36:24-25 And then Ezekiel links the cleansing with water with the filling of the Spirit: *"I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to observe My ordinances.* Ezekiel 36:27 **The new birth is cleansing and filling by the Holy Spirit.**

Everything Jesus did or said worked to fulfill prophecy, and so it is more than likely Jesus was intentionally presenting this picture of salvation from Ezekiel to a man who probably knew that portion of Scripture very well. So what is the clean water that the Lord will sprinkle on us to clean us? Without going into a lot of detail, perhaps on another occasion, **the water is the Word of God.** In Psalm 119 the psalmist says that God's word revived him, or literally, made him alive. Paul told the Corinthians that he had begotten them through the gospel. That is the word of God had caused them to be born again. And Paul tells us in Ephesians that Christ will sanctify His church **'...having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word'** Ephesians 5:26

So Jesus is telling Nicodemus that **the way to understand the kingdom and the way to enter the kingdom is by the word of God and the Spirit of God.** And we shouldn't suppose that these are two individual things or actions, but it is the **Spirit of God working through the word of God to cause life to spring up in deadened hearts to understand and embrace the truth of the gospel to the end that something new is born** – a new creation. The word goes out – the gospel is preached – we are born from above – new life arises, and we believe the word and we at once can see the kingdom and we enter the kingdom. This is what it means to be born again, or born from above. The Holy Spirit takes the word of God and purifies and makes alive. This is what John referred to in chapter 1 when he said, **'...this is the One who baptizes in the Holy Spirit.'** John 1:33

It is important that we get our theology right – otherwise we run the risk of convincing men they are saved when they are not. A.W. Pink writes: *Tell the average church-goer that "Except a man be born again he cannot see the kingdom of God," and these solemn words afford him no qualms. He is quite at ease, for he fondly imagines that he has been born again. He will tell you that he has always been a Christian: that from early childhood he has believed in Christianity, has attended church regularly, nay, that he is a church-member, and contributes regularly toward the support of the Gospel. He is very religious. Periodically he has happy feelings; he says his prayers regularly, and on Sundays he reads his Bible. What more can be required of him!*

We must understand that the new birth, being born from above, is altogether a sovereign act of God. When we preach the gospel we ask people to respond by praying something called a sinner's prayer – but we often fail to point out that the only reason they can in good faith pray that prayer is because God has already done the decisive work in their hearts to believe on Jesus. Inadvertently we give people the impression that praying a prayer causes new birth, when that prayer can only be a response to the previous work of the Holy Spirit. If we teach otherwise, then our prayer becomes the decisive factor, not God. And then it becomes very important that we pray the right prayer – include all the right stuff. It is illuminating to realize that we have maybe two examples of sinner's prayers in the Bible – the thief on the cross who said, '**Remember me when You come into Your kingdom**', and the publican in the temple who cried out '**God have mercy on me a sinner**'. But strangely, I never heard one of these used in any gospel crusade or seen them in a gospel tract.

Jesus is telling Nicodemus that it is the Spirit of God that births the necessary new life to see and enter the kingdom – it is not his moral character or his dutiful attention to do all the commandments. Because Jesus goes on to say: *"That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.* John 3:6 In other words, without being born of the Spirit, Nicodemus, all your religious effort is just a human attempt to reach God, and it is doomed to failure because what you need is divine intervention. To be born again is not the reformation, or the education, or the purification of the flesh, it is the creation of something spiritual. It is as Peter tells us in his second letter, becoming a '**...partaker of the divine nature**'. 2 Peter 1:4

Nicodemus must have looked astonished at this point because Jesus says, *"Do not be amazed that I said to you, 'You must be born again.'* John 3:7 To understand spiritual things you must have a spiritual nature. And then He gives him an illustration to clarify what He is talking about: *"The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going ; so is everyone who is born of the Spirit."* John 3:8 Jesus was comparing the properties of the wind with the nature of the Holy Spirit. And in doing so He notes several profound truths. Just like the wind, **the Spirit is sovereign in His movement**. That is, no one tells the wind what to do, no one directs it, no man is in control, He goes and does what He pleases. The wind is mysterious in that no one knows where it comes from or where it is going – **so too the Holy Spirit**. And the wind is irresistible in its force – the best that man can do is put up temporary blocks, but when the hurricane comes, resistance is futile – **just like the Holy Spirit**.

What this says about the new birth is that God is sovereign and mysterious in His choice, and irresistible in His pursuit of those He has chosen before the foundation of the world to be His. We don't know how or why He singles out individual for salvation, or why He chose Paul and not some other Pharisee, or why He chose Jacob and not Esau. That is His business, not ours. All we know is that to see and enter the kingdom we must be born again. And all Nicodemus can do is say: *Nicodemus said to Him, "How can these things be?"* John 3:9 *Jesus answered and said to him, "Are you the teacher of Israel and do not understand these things?"* John 3:10 In other words, 'Nicodemus, you know the Holy Scriptures, you've studied the word of God, you teach this word and yet you don't know the first thing about what these Scriptures really say. You are truly a religious man, but all that religion will do is keep you out of the kingdom.' All he had gotten out of his dedicated labor in the word was a system of rules and regulations that were supposed to get him into the kingdom.

At the wedding in Cana, Jesus implicitly condemned religious ritual – in the temple He made it clear that authentic worship was no longer connected to the temple, but to Him – and here He blasts the Law and works as the way to God. The question we have to answer is 'What is it we are trusting in to get us into the kingdom? Salvation is of the Lord. Trust in Christ and the work He has done on your behalf on the cross today.

Our gracious God and heavenly Father,

You are worthy to be worshipped and praised with our every breath, loved to the last ounce of strength in our souls, served in every act of our lives. You have loved us, purchased us, washed and cleansed us, clothed us with Your own righteous robes, when we were still worthless, sin-stained, and dead in our iniquity. We had no eyes to see You, no ears to hear You, no taste to savor Your joy, but by Your Holy Spirit You have given dead men life and raised us and seated us in heavenly places with Christ. Forbid it Lord that we should trust in any religious ritual, any self-effort, any moral striving as our means to find approval with You. Holy Spirit, come blow on us, lift the mists and darkness of unbelief and waken those still dead to new life. Grant them the assurance of new creation, alive in Christ, dead to sin, and changed forevermore, so that we may all be those who delight in God through Jesus Christ, spreading His joy through the gospel to all people we pray in the life-giving name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.