

Title: You must be born again
Text: John 3
Theme: Regeneration
Series: Christ said that?!
Prop Stmt: Unless you are born again you cannot see the kingdom of God.

I have chosen to take a short break from our Exodus study in order to bring a series of messages that address issues that are absolutely critical for us to grasp. I say “absolutely critical” not in a hype sense, but in an urgent and completely honest sense. We are not immune to the cultural air that we breathe, particularly as it relates to matters of “religion”. Religious discourse and much popular preaching is full of soft, warm, shallow, vagueness that is designed for the most part to accommodate and not confront, to attract, but not correct, to appease, but not demand. Because of that, many professing believers are flat out ignorant of the sharp, edgy, challenging and demanding statements of Christ, or they are remotely familiar with them, but they have been watered down or fashionably explained away. So, I am preaching a mini-series entitled: Christ said that?! (subtitled: You gotta be kidding me, if you ever said that, you’d get crucified.)

I fear that many people who claim to follow Christ have very little knowledge of what Christ actually taught and therefore, they are deceived into thinking that they are followers of him. I am convinced that this is what is behind the many surveys that have been conducted which have found very little difference in the lives and choices between those who claim to be born again with those who do not. If that is the case, then when we examine the Scriptures, we must conclude that many of the people, who claim to be born again, are not.

Barna research e.g.

So, I am beginning this series, with a very controversial statement that Christ made. “You must be born again.” I fully recognize that for many of you, this may not, at first, appear to be controversial at all. But, I fear that most of you do not even know what this means. I am starting with this statement because this truth is the fountain-head and spring from which all of the other statements flow. If you do not understand this, you will never grasp the rest.

Now, before we read the text. I want you to know that I am not preaching this series just to stir things up and try to be controversial. I truly fear that some of you are deluded into thinking that you are a follower of Christ, and you are not! This series will separate the men from the boys – so to speak. I want for you to know and experience God as the deepest lover of your soul, the richest treasure for your heart, and the infinite well for your life’s greatest joys. I fear that some of you study the Bible driven by a desire to master its contents, to arm yourself with evidence for your arguments, to win points in debates, to appease some guilt and ultimately to find a sense of attainment over others in this world. For those of you who have been long in attending church, or in many cases, who grew up in church (like me) this series is of particular need for you.

Read Text:

Let's examine the text. Notice the flow: It starts off as a conversation, which becomes the occasion for Christ to explain a very important truth.

In order to see the kingdom of God (which also means to enter the kingdom of God – v.5) you have to be born again. Being born again also means being born of the water and the Spirit, and is also referred to by Christ as being born of the Spirit.

1. The New Birth is Necessary v.3

Most of you would agree with me up to this point. But, I ought to warn you how of how difficult this really is.

A. Especially for Religious people

Nicodemus is described by this text in several ways:

- a Pharisee

In many ways, Pharisees appeared to be some decent guys. They were theologically conservative. They believed that the OT was the Word of God, and they took it very seriously. They worked hard at figuring out how it was to be applied to daily life. All of the additional laws and rules they constructed were originally driven by this desire. Most of the Pharisees (only about 6,000) were from the middle class and were not those of the highest education, which is why they relied upon Scribes. Nicodemus (notice the Greek name) was probably one of the exceptions. He probably had a higher education than most (which was often reflected in having a Greek and Hebrew name). So, he was ethical, moral and educated.

- a member of the Jewish ruling council

Nicodemus was a member of the highest legislative body in the land. He occupied a very prominent position. Other historical sources like Josephus provide evidence that he was part of a political dynasty that had influence in Israeli politics for several generations. It would be like a Rockefeller or a Kennedy. He is also called...

- Israel's teacher

At first, his coming to Christ may sound good. He has noticed the signs and has admitted that Christ must have God with him. He also calls Christ, Rabbi, which is much better than what others called Christ. But, John mentions that Nicodemus came at night, and consistently throughout this gospel, John uses night to refer to more than the time of day, but to a spiritual condition. So, while Nicodemus, obviously came in the evening, it was more than dark in the sky, it was dark in his life. By the use of "we" Nicodemus is speaking on behalf of some other Pharisees who are wondering what to think of Christ.

Nicodemus, for all of his training (and there is a lot) has come to assess Christ, but finds out that it does not work that way. Jesus is not impressed with Nicodemus background or position. In fact Jesus makes it clear (v.10) that Nicodemus is in no position to judge Christ. He is not qualified to do so. In v.2, Nicodemus points to the “signs” (which is something that you see) as evidence that leads him to see something special about Jesus. Christ, responds by saying, unless you are born again, you are blind to what you have to see. If there was any possibility of Christ being the Messiah, Nicodemus needed to ask to be examined, rather than attempting to sit in judgment on Christ. But, of course that only illustrates the point that Christ makes.

It is so difficult for people who are wealthy in money or wealthy in religious deeds to admit that they have a need. People who are full of themselves are the least likely candidates for the kingdom of Christ because they perceive of themselves to be better than others. So, Christ, back in Matthew 5.20, makes another related and shocking statement, when he says, “Unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.”

Whoa!! Did you get that? That really flies in the face of how so many people think. Have you not heard people say, “If anybody gets to heaven, that person will because (fill in the blank) _____. ” What do they say? It is always tied to something they did or endured in order to pay their way into heaven (commonly viewed as the kingdom) – isn’t it? Well, she did a lot for the poor. He served in a soup kitchen. She made blankets for the homeless. He died, defending his country. She suffered from a difficult illness or in a difficult marriage and remained cheerful. If Nicodemus did not qualify to get into the kingdom after all that he did, there is no way that you can compete. And Jesus said, your righteousness has to surpass his! That means that you and I have a problem that we cannot solve. But, the problem is even more serious than what you may believe.

B. Without it (the new birth), we are dead

We are dead, because we are already dead. We are born dead. In the space of five verses, Paul points this out two times very clearly so that we do not miss this. Although many of you say you believe the bible, the implications of this are so difficult to accept.

Eph. 2.1-5;

2 Cor. 4.4

Without the new birth we are spiritually dead, which means that we are spiritually blind. We cannot see and savor the goodness of God and the glory of Christ. We cannot respond to his voice, we are under his wrath, we have hearts that are like stone, we cannot understand the gospel, and we are in bondage. We are dead.

C. Without it we would resist light and truth

John 3.19-20

When spiritual light shines – we naturally want to run away and hide from it. We do not want our hearts to be exposed. We fight against that. We point the finger of blame at our circumstances. We blame other people for the anger and bitterness that threatens to consume us. Over and over we scream about the personal pain that we are in, but when someone tries to lovingly show us that our own hand holds the knife that is stabbing our hearts, we get angry at them. We naturally run from the light. At the same time, evil grabs our attention. We are dead to the light, but alive to evil. Evil raises our eyebrows, it attracts our curiosity, it draws us in and entices us with promises of pleasure as the cords of bondage our tied tighter and tighter around our hearts. Apart from the new birth we would love what we should hate and hate what we should love.

John 3

Jesus goes right after the most important issue when he tells Nicodemus that the new birth is necessary for every person to experience in order to enter into and become a part of the kingdom of God. Unless a person is born again, they will not participate in the plan for which God made the world. This truth is very difficult for people who grew up in a religious setting or for religious people who pride themselves on being doctrinally informed and accurate. We have to do more than affirm doctrine, we have to experience Christ and we are completely dependent upon the mercy and grace of God in order to experience the new birth. Beloved, this is what I want you to understand in the depth of your soul. God is not obligated to us in any way. There is nothing that we can do that makes us redeemable or worthy of rescue. Naturally, we are spiritually dead, and unless we experience the new birth, we have no hope.

Unless you really enter into your true sense of lost-ness, you will never appreciate the depth of the love of God. (personal struggle) Nicodemus did not get it! “How can this be?” – he asked. I am Nicodemus. I am religious. I am moral. I am decent. STOP!! Unless you are born again – you cannot enter the kingdom of God. So, how can you be born again? What did you do in order to get yourself born physically?

2. The New Birth is Spirit-Driven v.5-8

Read v.5-6

John 6.63 – the Spirit gives life. So, it is very clear, that the new birth is something that the Spirit does to us. The new birth is not something that we do to ourselves nor is it something that we can do to others. It is an act of God.

A. It is an act of God

John 1.12-13 (read)
1 Peter 1.3 (read)

B. That changes your heart

To be born again, means to be born of the Spirit. (v.6, v.8) To be born again, or born of the Spirit also means to be born of water and the Spirit (v.5). What does that mean? Why did Jesus say this? Was he talking about baptism? No!! Remember to whom Christ is talking – Nicodemus. This man knew the OT inside and out. The reference to water and spirit would have immediately registered in Nicodemus' mind. If I said to you – For God so loved the world – what comes to your mind? (John 3.16) For Christ to say, water and spirit, Ezekiel would have flashed in Nicodemus' mind faster than John 3.16 in yours.

Ezekiel 36 is a very powerful and promising passage for the Jews. The nation is in exile in Babylon, having been taken hostage by Nebuchadnezzar, who was the rod of judgment in the hand of God against Israel for their continual rebellion. Now, they are in the land of Babylon and they want to go back home. God promises them that they are going to go home, however, their return to the land is only a taste of something that God is going to do on a much greater scale. Stop for a minute and think about it. Why did the Jews end up going to Babylon in the first place? They failed to honor God and keep his law. So, if now they go back to Israel, how is it going to be different? It isn't, unless something else happens. That something else is what the prophet is speaking about. Beginning in verse 22 (read through v.28), God promises that he is going to do something new. Instead of just giving them the law, he is going to give them a new heart so they want to keep his law. This is something that God is going to do. Notice how many times God says "I will"! God has to make the change in a person's heart, and when he does, he replaces a heart of stone with a heart of flesh that is cleansed and now has a new desire. Instead of being dead – it is alive. Instead of hating the light – it runs to it. Instead of loving darkness, it runs from it. Instead of resisting the law of God, this new heart longs to know them and obey them.

Do you see what Jesus was telling Nicodemus? In order to be part of my kingdom, you have to have a new heart. You have to be born of the Spirit. The kingdom starts on the inside!!!

C. It is mysterious (8)

Jesus says that you cannot tell what the Spirit is going to do. You cannot control the Spirit, you cannot determine the Spirit, and you cannot command the Spirit. The Spirit of God is beyond your ability to manipulate. We are completely at the mercy of God.

Now, I can anticipate what some of you are thinking (and I want you to think). I do not want you to passively sit here and just mindlessly accept everything that I say. Look at the text. Wrestle with these passages. What do you discover? The shocking truth is that God demands of us something that he alone can provide! In order to see the kingdom of God, you have to be born again, but you cannot birth yourself. You have to be born again, but that is up to the Spirit to do it. Once again, I want you to feel gloriously helpless so that you recognize that you have to bank solely upon the mercy of God.

D. It is based on his mercy

Here is phenomenal news. God is rich in mercy. God loves to be known as a merciful God. When we resume our study of Exodus, we will come to the breath-taking story of Moses who asks God if he could see God's glory. God tells Moses that if he did it would kill him, but, here is what he will do. He will hide Moses in a cleft in the rock, and will cover him with his hand, and then God will walk by and let Moses see what happens to the area when God walks by. As God walks by, having hid Moses in the rock, God tells Moses about God's name and says that he is a merciful God. God, what do you want to be known as? He loves to be known as a God of mercy. That is obvious from two of the passages that we have already looked at.

Ephesians 2.1-5; 1 Peter 1.3

So far we see that to be born again means, the act of the Spirit of God, based solely on God's mercy, whereby he breathes life into a person who was spiritually dead.

3. The New Birth is God-Initiated v. 16-21

In the rest of the conversation that Christ has with Nicodemus he tells him of the problem that the world is already in. The world is already condemned because of sin (v.18). But, God took the initiative to send to the world a Savior. But, what happened to the Savior? The Savior was executed. The Savior was rejected. The people did not believe the Savior. So, God did more than just send the Savior, he provided the means whereby people who would otherwise have rejected the light, and remained in the darkness, had their eyes opened and their hearts of stone replaced with hearts of flesh, so that when they saw the Savior, high and lifted up, they believed!! God provided the sacrifice, the salvation and the means by which you believe. Just as Jesus is the only way to God, the Spirit is the only way that you will ever believe!

You mean, Jesus said that? Look at John 6.

So, how do you know if you have been born again? The answer has two parts. 1) You know you have been born again if you have authentic faith? And 2) You know you have authentic faith if your life demonstrates spiritual fruit.

John 10.28 – You know you are a sheep if you listen to his voice and you follow him.

1 Cor. 1.22-24

This is so difficult for some to accept, but when you do, it is a glorious truth. What God demands – God provides. God causes us to be born again, by breathing spiritual life into us which provides us with the eyes to see our Savior and a heart that sees our need and accepts and banks upon his provision for us through death. That is what faith is. I cannot cause you to have faith. God has to give you that faith. When you are born again, you

are given faith to believe and you believe – 1 John 5.1. That God given faith unites you to Christ and you are then counted righteous in Christ, by faith alone. Works righteousness and pride/condemnation is replaced by adoption, position, standing and acceptance. The new birth turns the Spirit loose into our lives who begins making us like Christ so that one day we will enjoy God deeply and completely.

Genesis 1-2 – God forms then God speaks and the body comes to life.
Ezekiel 37 – God's Word is spoken and life comes