

Title: You must be born again
Text: John 3
Theme: Regeneration
Series: Christ said that?! #2
Prop Stmtnt Unless you are born again you cannot see the kingdom of God.

What many of you may know is that the movie Angels and Demons is opening this weekend in theaters. It is the controversial sequel to the highly profitable movie, The Da Vinci Code. What you may not know is that the Da Vinci Code is based in part on an “intellectual pursuit” to discover the historical Jesus. I use the quotation marks because, it is frankly not all that intellectual, and it does not pursue Christ, but in reality attempts to run away from him. Every year at Easter, Time, Newsweek or some other periodical run a front page article on, “Who really was Jesus?” Typically the writer appeals to some paper written for the latest version of the Jesus seminar. This attempt at redefining Christ, apart from the gospels has been going on since the time of Pelagius, but was resurrected in the modern era by Bernard Spinoza (1632-1677), Hermann Reimarus (1694-1768), David Friedrich Strauss (1808-1874), William Wrede (1859–1906) and of course Albert Schweitzer (1875-1965). Each of these men, and those who have followed in their steps were acclaimed to be the intellectual giants who would topple Christianity. But, here we are, and most of you have never even heard of these men. Their writings, seminars, and presentations are full of conjecture, possibly, perhaps and maybe. Layer after layer of insinuations may give entertainment movie produces fresh ideas for provocative films, but 10 years from you, the books, the films, the papers will collect dust in musty libraries, while the gospel of Jesus Christ will continue to thrill and change lives. But why the attacks? The attacks are mounted, not because Jesus is so hidden that there has to be a quest to find him, or so mysterious that scholars the world over have to try to figure out what he said. The attacks are mounted because he is so clear in what he says. I expect that, we should expect that to come from those who do not claim to know Christ. However, what I find so disturbing and ultimately so damaging is those who claim to know Christ, who attempt to water down that which he has said. This series is not my attempt at being controversial, the pure gospel is already controversial. This series on some of the sayings of Christ is being preached in order that you may gain a greater vision of God, and that your soul is freshly awakened to the glorious prospect of following him with complete abandonment. Here is my premise.

God is all at once the most glorious, the most awesome, the most demanding, the most generous, the most righteous, the most merciful, the most powerful, the most gracious, the most terrifying, the most tender, the most infinite and the most personal being ever. Therefore, we should not be surprised to find that his words are the most challenging and the most thrilling – all at the same time. When we try to water down his words, and take the challenge out of them because we are afraid that they will scare people away, we not only do a grave disservice to the very words of God, but we take away the thrill of living dangerously in the hands of our Sovereign God. It is an awesome thing to live in the hands of God. It is a glorious thing to rest in the shadow of the Almighty. I desire for you to desire God above all. I desire for you to desire to be thrilled, amazed by and dazzled with his grace. Christianity is not the pursuit of mediocrity; it is not the pursuit

of comfort. Therefore, for several weeks, I am doing a series on certain sayings of Christ that are hard to hear, but glorious to grasp. I want you to see how demanding it is to be a disciple of Christ. I want you to know the cost is high. I want you to know that this is not a game that we play, and that when we consider that Jesus Christ is the most glorious being who made the most supreme sacrifice, we should expect that following him would be the most challenging and thrilling life to live – ever.

Most people are not willing to live that way. There is too much to lose. There is too much at risk. There is too much at stake. If you are not willing to live that way, you cannot call yourself a follower of Christ. Following Christ has never been about playing it safe. Following Christ has never been about appeasement and compromise and middle of the road, and making everyone happy. Following Christ is just that – following Christ!

So, right here toward the beginning of his public ministry, when his poll numbers are going up and the buzz and hype and internet hits are all skyrocketing, he is approached by one of the major players in the game. Do not lose sight of this. Nicodemus is a mover and shaker. This guy is a political heavy weight. This guy is on the inside and he knows all of the boys in the game. He can make you or break you. And he comes to Jesus at night, because he is impressed. And if he is impressed, that means that you are on the verge of making it – big time! He is impressed, but Christ isn't!

Read Text:

What is true for Nicodemus is true for you. It does not matter if you have a Master's degree in bio-technology or work at a car wash. It does not matter if you drive a car or ride a bike. It does not matter what your family name is, 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

Unless you are born again – you cannot enter the kingdom of God. So, how can you be born again? That is the problem. I say that is the problem, when many of you don't even see that as a problem. Many of you think, well, that really is not that difficult, you just pray a prayer. If you say the prayer...you know the one about asking Jesus into your heart, then you are born again – right? In other words, if YOU say the prayer, and then based on what you do, you are the one who is the cause of the new birth. But, that is not what Jesus said! What did Jesus tell Nicodemus in verse 5? Did Jesus say, "Don't worry Nicodemus, all you have to do is pray a prayer and you will be fine."? Look at the text! Did Jesus say that? If Jesus did not say that, then why would you tell people that? Why would you believe something that Jesus did not say? If all you had to do was pray a little prayer then Nicodemus could have done that. When Jesus told Nicodemus that he had to be born again, he was pointing out that something had to happen to Nicodemus, of which he, Nicodemus was not the cause, but was the recipient. Please, do not water this statement down. Being born again means being born of the Spirit. Have you been born of

the Spirit? Have you been born of the water and the Spirit? Being born of the Spirit is something that is done to you. But many have defined “being born again” as something that we do to ourselves. What did you do in order to get yourself born physically? You were not the cause of your own birth. Jesus told Nicodemus that he had to be born again, and he went on to say that only the Spirit of God can do that. So last Sunday morning, I wanted you to taste and feel this tension that comes from the realization that Jesus demanded something from you that you couldn’t do.

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)

Verse 13 is very clear that becoming a child of God means to be born of God, NOT born of human decision. James 1.18 tells us that, “He (God) chose to give us birth through the word of truth.”

1 Peter 1.3 says, “In his great mercy HE HAS GIVEN us new birth into a living hope....”

The new birth is an act of God, that we see from the text, is ultimately based on his will. As an act of God it changes your heart.

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? (Jn 3.16) For Christ to say, water and spirit, Ezekiel would have flashed in Nicodemus’ mind faster than Jn 3.16 in yours.

(Turn to) Ezekiel 36 is a very powerful and promising passage for the Jews. At the time this prophecy was written the nation of Judah was in exile in Babylon, having been taken hostage by Nebuchadnezzar, who was the rod of judgment in the hand of God against them 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 their land, how is it going to be different? What is going to stop them from repeating the same sins? Nothing, 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. You have to have clean water sprinkled on you by God that cleanses you from your impurities and from your idols; which is a reference to a spiritual washing and not a physical one. So, when Christ references this passage in answering Nicodemus, he was making a point that Nicodemus should have already been familiar with and that in order to enter the kingdom, you have to have a new heart, and you can’t give yourself a new heart. You have a heart of stone, and only God can give you a heart of flesh. This act of God whereby the Spirit changes your heart has a level mystery to it.

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. Jesus said you won’t have it all figured out. That means you cannot turn this into a formula or a sales presentation. You can provide the most logical and passionate explanation of the gospel ever – and it may have not effect. It is an act 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 it 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. This truth is all at the same time one of the most terrifying and glorious truths of all because our fears stem from the fact that in our heart of hearts we wonder if we really believe what we sing. We wonder if it is really true that God is worthy of our trust. But, ...

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. (read)

Ephesians 2.1-5; 1 Peter 1.3

So far we have seen that to be born again is the act of the Spirit of God, based solely on God's mercy, whereby he breathes life into a person who was spiritually dead and changes their heart from stone to flesh.

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.

Think with me, what good is it for God to send the world a Savior, if everyone is spiritually dead and without eyes to see or ears to hear, and because they have no spiritual life, only reject him?

So, God did more than just send the Savior, he took the initiative to act in such a way whereby people who would otherwise have rejected the light, and remain in darkness, would now have their eyes opened and their hearts of stone replaced with hearts of flesh, so that when they saw the Savior high and lifted up, when they heard the gospel, instead of seeing but not seeing, instead of hearing but not believing, they looked and saw with the eyes of their heart, they heard and heard with their heart, their heart of stone was made a heart of flesh so that in seeing and hearing, 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 (35-40), (44), (65).

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.

4. **The New Birth gives birth to Faith.**

The new birth does not replace saving faith, the new birth causes saving faith. The new birth involves saving faith. You have to believe in order to be saved. You have to

believe in order to become a child of God. You have to believe in order to enter the kingdom of God, but you have to be born again in order to believe. And 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, “Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God.” 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. But, there is more. The Spirit of God uses the Word of God as the means to cause us to be born again. That is why we witness to others, why we preach, why we call people to repent and believe. We do it, not confident in our skills, but confident in God’s mercy expressed through God’s spirit using God’s Word.

Genesis 1-2 – God forms then God speaks and the body comes to life.

Ezekiel 37 – God’s Word is spoken and life comes

John 6.63 – “The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life.”

Romans 10 – “Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the Word of Christ.”

The Spirit of God Sovereignly uses the hearing of the Word of God as the means whereby he breathes life into a person, who then in response to having his heart changed, believes! That is your part. That is my part. Believe! Jesus said to Nicodemus (v.15) “that everyone who believes in him (the Son of Man – Christ) may have eternal life.” He then says, (v.16), “that whoever believes in him (the Son) shall not perish but have eternal life.”

So, I can with great joy, and great confidence call upon you to believe! I can say, along with the apostle Paul, “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved.” (Acts 16.31) I say that with such joy and confidence, because God is rich in mercy. God loves to save! God loves to open eyes, ears and hearts and cause you to love his Son and trust his Son and Worship his Son and rejoice in Son. So, believe that Christ is the Son of God. Believe that Christ lived in your place and then died in your place on the cross, because the only way for your sin to be punished and for you not to be destroyed was for God to condemn his Son instead of condemning you. Bank on that! Trust in Christ, knowing that the desire to believe is a gift to you from God that opens your eyes to see that this is not only true and true for you, but that it is desirable, it is glorious! What this means is that the new birth (also known as regeneration) and faith are married together. It is like fire and heat. The instant there is fire, there is heat, but the heat did not cause the fire, the fire caused the heat.

Next week - 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.