

“You Must Be Born Again”

John 2:23-3:15

Preached by Minister Jason Tarn at HCC on July 22, 2012

Introduction

- ❖ The worse kind of deception is self-deception. It’s no fun to have a friend deceive you, to have a spouse or child lie to you. But at least in those situations, you have the opportunity to confront the deception and get at the truth.
 - But if you end up deceiving yourself, lying to yourself – and you’re successful at convincing others around you – then you’re really in trouble because you can’t confront deception that you don’t know about. So you just might end up stuck in a self-constructed web of lies never knowing the truth about yourself.

- ❖ It was because of self-deception that this morning’s passage was written. **For when it comes to Christianity, it is totally possible to deceive oneself.** To be convinced you’re spiritually alive when in fact you’re still spiritually dead. To think you’re a child of God and yet not be born of God.

- ❖ Friends, this is going to be a tough message because it will challenge your assumptions about your own spiritual condition. But we need to hear this. We need to be challenged in this way because in our context – here in the South, in the Bible Belt – we live and breathe cultural Christianity. It’s all around us. It’s part of the culture. A lot of us would say we grew up Christian, and if you didn’t, you probably know many who did.
 - **It’s so common, in our context, to be in church and to identify as a Christian, but really what does it mean to be one?** Does it mean you grew up in a Christian home? Does it mean you go to church on a regular basis?

- ❖ No, you might say. It’s not about where you grew up or how often you go to church. It’s not about what you do but what you believe, and to be a Christian means you’re someone who believes in Jesus. That sounds about right. But is that it?
 - **Because, in a sense, even the devil believes in Jesus, but does that make him a Christian?** The devil believes in Jesus more so than most of your atheist and agnostic friends. But obviously he’s not a Christian. There has to be something more.

- ❖ Well in v7, Jesus identifies this ‘something more’. It’s one of his significant sayings in John’s Gospel. Over the past few months, we’ve been studying this Gospel and looking at three sets of seven: a) the 7 Signs, b) the 7 “I AM” Statements, and c) 7 Significant Sayings.
 - This morning we’ll consider our first of 7 Sayings. This one took place in a conversation Jesus had with a prominent spiritual leader of his day. And what he ends up saying really catches this man off guard, but Jesus insists that nothing he said is really surprising if you know your Bible. Jesus tells him, “*Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’*”

- ❖ He says something similar in two other places. Look in v3, “*Jesus answered him, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.’*” Go to v5, “*Jesus answered, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.’*”

- ❖ The stress here is on the necessity to be born again. It's not something optional. It's not as if you have normal Christians and then born-again Christians. The label "born-again Christian" is thrown around a lot and commonly used in the media or in national surveys.
 - But it's redundant. It's like the phrase "unmarried bachelor". Adding 'unmarried' in front of the word 'bachelor' doesn't add anything to the word. It doesn't describe another class of bachelors. It means the same thing.
 - The same goes for the label "born-again Christian". That doesn't describe another class of Christian. **To be born-again is to be a Christian, and to be a Christian is to be born-again.** That is what Jesus is trying to emphasize when he says you must be born again. It is not an option.
- ❖ **So what this means is that it is possible to believe in Jesus and yet not be able to see the kingdom of God, much less enter it, unless you are born again.** You can believe in Jesus and still be spiritually dead – still in need of a new spiritual birth.
 - *Does this surprise you?* It sure surprised Nicodemus. I'm sure it surprises anyone who thinks that a Christian is just someone who believes in Jesus.

Look out for the possibility of self-deception

- ❖ Don't get me wrong. I believe the Bible teaches we're saved by grace through faith in Jesus (Eph. 2:8). But it also says we're not saved by just any kind of faith. **According to James 2, it is possible to believe in Jesus but with a faith that is dead.** That does not save.
 - ❖ There is a perfect example in chapter 2:23-25. *"Now when he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, many believed in his name when they saw the signs that he was doing. But Jesus on his part did not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people and needed no one to bear witness about man, for he himself knew what was in man."*
 - Notice it says that *"many believed in his name"* (v23), and yet *"Jesus on his part did not entrust himself to them."* (v24). So here have many believing in Jesus, but he did not believe them. Many trusted in Jesus, but he did not trust their faith. It says he *"knew what was in man"*, and Jesus knew these people were still spiritually dead on the inside so all they could muster was a dead faith.
 - ❖ Now John tells us in chapter 20:31 that he wrote this Gospel for the expressed purpose that we may read this and have faith. That we may believe Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing we may have life in his name.
 - **But from the beginning of his Gospel, John makes it clear that there is a kind of faith that people have that is insufficient.** It does not save. It does not make you a Christian – into a kind of person Jesus will entrust himself to.
 - ❖ Nicodemus is a prime example. He believed in Jesus. He made an effort to come to Jesus. This was a risky move for a *"ruler of the Jews"* meaning he was a member of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling council, the very one that ends up condemning Jesus to death. That's why he used the cover of night to have this meeting.

- And in v2 Nicodemus calls Jesus “*Rabbi*” but also recognizes that the miraculous signs Jesus is doing suggest he is no ordinary teacher. He must be “*from God*” in the sense that God must be with him and enabling him to perform these signs.
- ❖ So we can say that Nicodemus believed in Jesus just like the “*many*” in 2:23 who believed in Jesus’ name when they saw the signs he was doing. But Jesus knew what was in his heart and went right at it with piercing words, which exposed Nicodemus’ faith to be lacking.
 - Read v3 again. “*Jesus answered him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.”*”
- ❖ Now you might be thinking, “How is Jesus answering Nicodemus when he didn’t even ask a question?” He just made a statement in v2. But implicit in that statement was a question regarding Jesus’ true identity.
 - It was as if Nicodemus was asking Jesus, “Who are you really? I can see you’re a teacher come from God but are you more than that? Are you really the Messiah?”
 - **Buried in that statement was an assumption that he has the insight (the spiritual sight) to see and evaluate Jesus’ identity.** He assumes he has the spiritual capacity to weigh the evidence and decide for himself who Jesus is.
- ❖ But Jesus challenges that assumption. **Nicodemus claims he can “see” something about Jesus in these signs, but Jesus replies that no one can properly “see” unless one is born again.** Unless one receives a new birth. Something Nicodemus apparently has yet to receive. So though he thinks he can see, really he’s blind. He thinks he is alive but really he is dead.
- ❖ This is shocking. We’re talking about a highly respected leader in the religious community. Notice how in v10 Jesus calls him “*the teacher of Israel*”. That suggests his prominence as a leading theologian of his day.
 - Yet with all of his knowledge and education, with all of his hard-work and life devotion to studying and teaching God’s Word, Jesus tells Nicodemus that there is no spiritual life in him. That he needs to be born again. That his first birth into a devout Jewish family is not enough. All that he’s accomplished in life since that first birth is not enough. Even the kind of faith he is exercising right now is not enough.
- ❖ This is scary stuff. This man was so convinced he could see and enter God’s kingdom. But in the end he was self-deluded. He was self-deceived. Still far from the kingdom.
 - Is this possible? **Is it possible to be born into a religiously devout family, to be active in your faith community serving and teaching, to even believe in Jesus AND YET be dead in your sins, without any spiritual life in you?**
 - Of course it’s possible. That describes Nicodemus perfectly. And frankly, that could very well describe many of us.

- ❖ When I share my testimony I usually mention how, at the age of 12, I raised my hand and “went forward” at summer camp. I remember praying to receive Christ. In fact, I remember raising my hand and going forward and praying to receive Christ a few more times after that.
 - So I know I believed in Jesus since age 12, but was it with a real saving faith? Was I born again at that point in life? To be honest, it’s hard to know. As Jesus goes on to say, the Spirit’s work in granting the new birth is a mystery. It’s as predictable as the wind. That means we can’t always pin our new birth down to a specific event or date.
 - But the whole point is that I should not be putting my hope of salvation in the fact that I “went forward” or prayed a sinner’s prayer. You can do these things without being born again.

- ❖ **My only hope of salvation is for a supernatural act of God to occur in my life. I need a miracle to happen in my heart.** Truly, truly, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.
 - Keep in mind when Jesus said that he wasn’t confronting a militant atheist. He wasn’t speaking to a complacent agnostic. He said these words to a deeply religious man. They were spoken for those who are convinced they’re destined for the kingdom.
 - But as Jesus said elsewhere, not everyone who says to him, “*Lord, Lord*” will enter the kingdom of heaven (Mt. 7:21). That’s a sobering warning. We have to look out for the very real possibility of self-deception.

Look within for evidence of a new birth

- ❖ Now you’re probably thinking, “*If it’s possible, then how do you know if you’re self-deceived? How do you know if you’re fooling yourself into thinking your saved when in reality you’re still dead in your sins?*”

- ❖ **To look out for that danger, you can start by looking in for evidence of a new birth.** As I just said, you can’t always pinpoint the moment of your new birth. Jesus says in v8 it’s like the wind, you can’t predict it or control it. But like the wind, you can see its effects. **You can actually see the effects of a new birth in your life.**
 - But first we’ll have to wrap our minds around the concept itself of a new birth. It can be confusing. Nicodemus was confused by it. Notice in v4 how he responds to Jesus. He takes his words very literally. “*Nicodemus said to him, “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?”*”

- ❖ Jesus’ words were lost on him because, as a teacher of Israel, Nicodemus was trained to see this concept of rebirth (lit. regeneration) as a future, global event reserved for the end of the age. And he was taught that all faithful Jews would be corporately regenerated and receive resurrection life and be welcomed into God’s kingdom.

- ❖ **But here in our passage, Jesus speaks of a regeneration that is required of each individually before the end of the world.** This is something you must experience now if you hope to see and enter the kingdom. This was a foreign concept to Nicodemus.

- But Jesus is astonished at his astonishment. As a leading expert in Jewish Scripture, Nicodemus should know that along with this idea of a future, global regeneration, the Old Testament also speaks of God promising to cause his people to be born again – with an individual regeneration as part and parcel of their salvation.
- ❖ In v5 Jesus explains himself again and alludes to the OT. *“Jesus answered, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.””*
 - The mention of water and spirit points us back to the prophecies of **Ezekiel 36:25-27**. Turn there with me. In this passage, we see the symbols of water and spirit come together in this amazing New Covenant promise that God makes to his people.
 - *“²⁵I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. ²⁶And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. ²⁷And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.”*
- ❖ Notice there are two things God is promising when he establishes his New Covenant. **1) He promises a cleansing from sin**, from impurity and idolatry, as symbolized by the sprinkling of water. **2) He promises a creation of a new human spirit**. He says *“a new spirit I will put within you”* marked by a new heart that desires to walk in his ways and is careful to obey his rules. And this new creation will be accomplished when God puts his own Spirit within you.
 - So when Jesus speaks of being *“born of water and the Spirit”* in v5 he’s talking about the New Covenant blessings he would purchase with his own blood. It would include the cleansing of our sins AND the impartation of God’s own Spirit that makes us more than forgiven sinners. He makes us new creations.
- ❖ **That’s what it means to be born again. If you’re not born again, then you’re not a new creation.** You’re still your old self, and you still have a heart of stone.
 - Now you can dress up your old self by becoming more religious. You can reform your old self and make some appropriate changes in your life. You might become a more compassionate person, a more patient person, a more generous person.
- ❖ But the whole point is that you can do all of this without being born again. **You can put lipstick and pearls on a pig but it’s still a pig.** And you can dress up your old self with religion and good morals, but that doesn’t address the fact that you’re still dead in your sins and outside the kingdom of God.
 - **Christianity is not about becoming a better you. It’s about becoming a brand new you.** Not just a morally improved version of your old self. But a new creation where the old has gone and the new has come!

- ❖ What you need, what I need, what everyone needs, is to be born again. **We need a complete and radical transformation. Not just the improvement in the spiritual condition of our hearts but a complete heart transplant.** We need our dead stony heart removed and replaced with a new living heart of flesh.
- ❖ Now we're all wondering if we've experienced that. When I look within do I see evidence of having been born again? *But what am I supposed to look for?*
 - Well I'm not looking for whether I accepted an altar call or prayed a sinner's prayer. I'm not looking for church involvement or biblical knowledge or good morals or a clean-cut reputation.
 - These things may have everyone (including myself) convinced that I'm spiritually alive, but these are not signs of spiritual life. Again, a spiritually dead person could do all of that or have all of that.
- ❖ What I'm looking for are definitive signs of life. Just think about your first birth. **What was the first sign of life?** It was a loud cry. The first thing you did when you were born was to cry out, and upon doing so everyone knew you were alive.
 - The same goes for your second birth. The first sign of new spiritual life is a cry – a cry of faith. **The first thing that happens when you're born again is you immediately cry out to Jesus with a living, saving faith.** Upon doing so, everyone knows you're spiritually alive.
- ❖ **But there is still the problem of distinguishing between a cry of living faith that comes from a living heart vs. a dead faith from a dead heart.** I can say I believe in Jesus, but how do I know if my belief is like the faith of the “many” in v23 or like the faith of the one who has been born again?
- ❖ Well ask yourself: Do I see Jesus in the same way as the “many” or as Nicodemus, as just a miracle worker who can fix my problems OR a rabbi who offers good principle to live by?
 - Or am I able to see Jesus for who he is – the Christ, the Son of God, who shed his blood to establish a New Covenant between God and man that makes a new birth even possible?
 - **If you can “see” Jesus in this way, the only explanation is that you must have new set of eyes.** Which means you must have received a new birth.
- ❖ As well, ask yourself: *Do I desire to walk in God's statutes? Am I careful to obey his rules?* I'm not asking if you're perfect at it. But is that your heart's desire – to walk with God in obedience, to do his will? **If so, the only explanation is you must have a new spirit within you.** You must have a new heart of flesh. Which means you must have received a new birth.

- ❖ Do you see my point? It's easy to deceive yourself if you think you're fine because you believe in Jesus. But the deeper question is: *What kind of belief is that?* You're looking to see if it's the kind of belief in Jesus – the kind of cry – that can only come from a living heart of flesh that you get when you're born again.

Look up to the Son of Man on his cross

- ❖ So what do you do if the evidence is lacking? What do you do if you come to realize that you're probably not born again? How can you get yourself born again?
 - Here is where Nicodemus was right when he suggested in v4 that this idea of a second birth is a human impossibility. He's right. It's impossible for you to do this. **No one can cause himself to be born again.**

- ❖ Think about it: **You did not cause yourself to be born the first time. It wasn't because you decided you were good and ready.** It just happened to you. Well when it comes to your second birth, it's no different. It's not something you can bring about on your own. This is something the Spirit of God does, and like the wind, the Spirit is free to blow in ways we don't understand or can't predict.

- ❖ **But then how can this new birth happen to me?** That's what Nicodemus was basically asking in v9, *"How can these things be?"* How can this second birth happen?
 - Now Jesus chides him for not just not understanding his teaching but for not believing his testimony – for not recognizing him as the only One come down from heaven, as the Son of Man with authority to speak of these eternal truths. He's the teacher of Israel and yet he doesn't understand how these things can be.

- ❖ But graciously Jesus takes the time to explain how this can happen. In v14, he points Nicodemus' attention back to the Old Testament. This time to a story found in **Numbers 21:4-9**. *"And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life."*

- ❖ Jesus is referring to an incident that took place in the wilderness as the Israelites wandered about for 40 years. They were persisting in their murmuring and had spoke against God and against Moses, so as punishment the LORD sent poisonous snakes among them.
 - But he also told Moses to construct a bronze snake on a pole and to lift it up in the sight of the people. Anyone bit by a snake who lifted his eyes upon that bronze snake would not die but live.

- ❖ Well just as Moses had to lift up the snake, so must the Son of Man be lifted up. Jesus was talking about his cross. By the end of this Gospel, he would be lifted up onto a Roman cross.
 - But in this moment, **Jesus is challenging Nicodemus to look to him for new birth in the same way the ancient Israelites looked to the bronze snake for new life.**

- Only much later – when we’re told in chapter 19:39 that Nicodemus is at the foot of the cross helping Joseph of Arimathea take down Jesus body – only then would the full import of Jesus’ words really hit him.

❖ **But from our vantage point, Jesus has already been lifted up in shame on the cross but also lifted up in glory in the Resurrection.** So the point is that this new birth is granted to those who look to the Crucified and Risen Jesus, who is far better than the bronze snake. That snake eventually had to be destroyed because it became an idol (2 Kg. 18:4). People started treating the snake like it had magical powers.

- But Jesus is far better. He is not some sort of magic token that you pray to for healing or for your wishes to be granted, and those who treat him that way – as just a miracle worker – are the kind of people Jesus does not entrust him to.

- **But whosoever looks to him and looks to his saving work on the Cross and in the Resurrection – whosoever believes in him may have eternal life.** We may receive a new birth upon which we may see and enter the kingdom of God.

❖ If any of you desire this gift of new birth, then ask for it. Elsewhere Jesus said that everyone who asks for the God’s Spirit to be put in them will receive him. He says that if *you* know how to give good gifts to your children, *“how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!”* (Lk. 11:10-13)

Conclusion

- ❖ Friends, let me leave you with a final question and challenge. If you believe you have received this new birth, if you believe yourself to be born again, then ask yourself, ***“Is my new birth evident within my life?”***
 - That is, can others tell that I’m not just a religious person with good morals? Can they tell that I’m actually born again, that I’m actually a new creation in Christ?
- ❖ ***If you truly are a new creation, then what aspect of your old self do you need to put off and put away for good, and what aspect of the new do you need to further put on?*** Meditate on this and discuss it in your family, in your small groups – if I’m born again, then what of the old do I need to put off, what of the new do I need to put on?