

I. The Story of Jesus and Nicodemus

A. John 3:1-7 . . . Now there was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews; [2] 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." [3] Jesus answered and said to him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." [4] 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?" [5] 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. (Ezek. 36:25-27) [6] That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. [7] Do not be amazed that I said to you, 'You must be born again.'

B. Prayer

II. The story

A. John 3:3 . . . Jesus answered and said to him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God."

1. There are two things about Jesus' words here that might interest you.
 - a. The first one has to do with the words, "Truly, truly." This two word combination appears only in John's gospel, and only as a preface to statements made by Jesus. In total, it occurs twenty-four times, and it is used to give emphasis to what Jesus is saying. Therefore, the "truly, truly" simply means, "pay close attention to the very next words you hear, or in our case, read."
 - b. The second point of interest are the two words, "born again." They appear only four times in the NT – twice here in John 3 (vs 3,7) and twice in 1 Peter 1 (vs 3,23). What I find interesting about this is that in the Protestant church, the words "born again" have become the foundation phrase for evangelism as well as the identifying and even the defining label for who is and who isn't a Christian.
2. We began our study of vs 3 last Sunday, and I said then that the point Jesus is making to Nicodemus is not that we must be born again in order to go to heaven when we die.

- a. Rather, Jesus is saying that we must be born again in order to have the ability to see, discern, ascertain, comprehend, and therefore understand the kingdom of God.
 - b. In other words, until we are born again, we cannot see selflessly enough and honestly enough, and therefore clearly enough, to make sense of and understand God, the ways of God, the will of God, the word of God, and therefore the kingdom of God.
- B. Now you may be wondering how the link between being born again and seeing to the point of understanding applies to us today.
 - 1. Jesus said, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God" (Matthew 5:8).
 - a. For our sake, the OT provides a number of examples of those who had sufficient purity of heart to see God. Some of the more well-known include
 - (1) Noah – a righteous man, blameless in his time,
 - (2) Enoch – who walked with God,
 - (3) Job – who was blameless and who God trusted so much that He allowed Job's faith to be sorely tested,
 - (4) Abraham – who became the father of faith,
 - (5) Moses – who spoke with God face-to-face,
 - (6) and David – who was a man after God's own heart.
 - b. Does this mean only the pure in heart can understand that God exists, and that God is good, and that God rewards those who diligently seek Him? NO!
 - c. The apostle Paul writes in Romans 1:19-20, that God has placed the evidence of His existence and the evidence of His wrath against sin within every one of us.
 - (1) And Paul goes on to say that God supports this internal evidence with the external evidence of creation – for, as Paul says, creation clearly reveals God's invisible attributes, His eternal power, and His divine nature – so that God, His attributes, and His nature can be seen, that is, discerned and understood through what He has made.
 - (2) Therefore, from Adam and Eve onward, everyone has the ability and opportunity to see, understand, and therefore acknowledge the existence of God, the goodness of God, and God's hatred of sin – which means everyone has the ability and opportunity to humbly submit to God and live a life that is pleasing to God.

2. So how do we reconcile the claim by Paul – that God has revealed Himself to everyone, with Jesus' words – that only the pure in heart see God? Can they both be right? The answer is "yes," for they present two very real, yet very different ways of seeing God.
 - a. Paul is right in that God has revealed enough of Himself for even the vilest sinner and for the most emotionally injured adult or for those raised in anti-Christian cultures to know that God exists, that God hates sin, that God is good, and that God rewards those who diligently seek Him. So yes, Paul is right.
 - b. But Jesus is also right in that the pure in heart not only see what the willful sinner or misled unbeliever sees and understands, they see far more!
 - (1) And how is it that they see far more? They see far more by the empowerment of God, the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit, and their changed mind. Therefore, they are able to grasp, make sense of, and understand God, the ways of God, the will of God, and the word of God in ways and to an extent the unbeliever can't.
 - (2) But it goes further than that, for the pure in heart are able to enter into the most personal and intimate relationship with God possible – this side of heaven. And it is this intimacy of relationship – which is the outcome of a pure heart – that opens their eyes even further.
 - c. Now I suspect you already know this, but let me remind you that no one makes this kind of progress in seeing, discerning, making sense of, and understanding God in these ways without being born again. Which brings us back to Jesus' words, ". . . unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God."
3. Does this mean unbelievers cannot thoughtfully read and gain some insight into the Word of God? Here again, the answer is no!
 - a. Anyone who can read, can read the Bible. And to whatever degree they are able to make sense of books other than the Bible, to that degree they are able to gain some insight and understanding from the Bible.
 - b. In the same way, to whatever degree a person is able to hear or watch a presentation and make sense of it, to that degree they are able to gain some insight and understanding from evangelistic presentations or teachings from the Bible.
4. However, those who are born again read and hear, think and discern, ponder and understand from a significantly different position than

the unbeliever. Those who are born again have an enablement, an enlightenment, a mindset, and beliefs, values, and a perspective that makes all the difference. And it makes all the difference because it is built on two primary changes that separate the born again person from the unregenerated person.

a. First, the born again person has repented – which means they have changed their mind in two profound ways – first about themselves, and then about God.

(1) In repenting and therefore changing their mind about themselves –

(a) Born again people have stopped believing that saving their life, that is, that taking matters into their own hands to promote and protect their well-being is the way to obtain the best, the happiest, the most pleasurable, and the most satisfying life possible.

(b) In other words, those who are born again have begun believing that losing their life is the only path to lasting joy, inward peace, and being completely safe in God's hands regardless of the circumstances.

(c) And how do we lose our life? By dying to self-centeredness, self-rule, and pride, and by laying down our life in love and service to God and others, and by obeying God so as to become holy in all our behavior.

(d) This is what it means to repent in relation to self.

(2) In repenting and therefore changing their mind about God

(a) Born again people have stopped distrusting God. They have stopped thinking of Him as someone who stands in the way of what they want or believe they need. They have stopped thinking there are times when they know better than Him what is best, and they have stopped intentionally disobeying Him.

(b) In other words, those who are born again have begun trusting God completely, and seeing Him as their loving Father who always is seeking their good and making all things work together for their good. And born again people have begun living according to God's will and His word.

(c) This is what it means to repent in relation to God.

(3) As you can see, the repentance that leads to being born again produces a profound change of mindset, beliefs, values, and

perspective that redirects our focus from self to God, from this world to God's kingdom, from anxiety and fear to confident trust and inner peace, and from the pleasures and promises of sin to the glory of righteousness and the honor of God's name – which is why Jesus said you must be born again to see, to perceive, and to understand the kingdom of God.

- b. The second profound change that separates the born again person from the unregenerated person is the empowerment of God and the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit – which enables them to grasp, ponder, understand, and apply truth that once made no sense or seemed like foolishness to them – which is another reason why Jesus said you must be born again to see, perceive, make sense of, and understand the kingdom of God.
- C. Does this mean evangelism is hardly worth the effort since unbelievers are significantly limited in what they can grasp and understand?
- 1. Of course not. Even the unbeliever can understand that God exists and that they are to humble themselves before Him and live according to His wishes.
 - 2. Jesus affirms this universal ability when He told His disciples to go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature (Mark 16:15).
 - 3. However, God, in His mercy, does not stop with revealing Himself to everyone and placing within us the ability to understand enough in order to repent and believe. God adds far more in order to bring unbelievers to their senses and make it easier for them to repent and believe. For example,
 - a. Jesus said that if He is lifted up from the earth, He will draw all men to Himself (John 12:32). And we join Jesus in lifting Him up when we talk to unbelievers about the loving, gracious, self-sacrificial, and redemptive work of Jesus on the cross.
 - b. Jesus also said that no one can come to Him unless the Father draws him (John 6:44). The point here is that God is actively drawing unbelievers to Himself, and without this activity by God, no one will come to Jesus in repentance and faith.
 - (1) Paul affirms this truth when he says that we are the ones who sow the seeds of the gospel and water what has been sown, but it is God who causes the growth (1 Corinthians 3:6).

- (2) However, on the other side of God's supernatural working is the unbeliever's responsibility to act on what they hear, for in Jesus' parable of the four soils we learn that it is the individual who decides what they will do with the seed that has been sown into their life (Matthew 13:1-23).
 - (3) And in his parable about the man who built his house on the sand, Jesus affirms the sinners responsibility to act on the truth he is given (Matthew 7:24-27).
 - c. But God goes even further, for Jesus speaks of a third supernatural work in relation to helping unbelievers come to repentance and faith, and that is the convicting work of the Holy Spirit, who convicts the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment (John 16:8).
 4. My point here is that evangelism is well worth the effort, for just as our understanding of God, His kingdom, and His word is aided by the supernatural work of God, so are our efforts at evangelism.
- D. Returning to Jesus' words that we must be born again to see and understand the kingdom of God, let us consider what Nicodemus saw and understood.
1. We do know that based on the signs Jesus did, Nicodemus realized Jesus was far more than a mere mortal, and that He had been sent by God.
 2. Based on vs 12, where Jesus says He told Nicodemus earthly things, it is reasonable to conclude that Jesus only said things to Nicodemus that Nicodemus could, or should have been able to understand, especially given his level of education, the fact that he was a Pharisee, a teacher, a member of the Sanhedrin, and an older man. I say Nicodemus was an older man because according to the Jewish Encyclopedia, you had to be advanced in age to be a member of the Sanhedrin.
 3. Yet based on the entire story, we see that Nicodemus did not understand much more than that Jesus had been sent from God. And we conclude this because most of what Jesus said to Nicodemus was either confusing to him or misunderstood by him. For example, we read –
- E. John 3:4 . . . 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?"

1. Whatever you may think of Nicodemus' response, be careful not to be smug or prideful.
2. You see, Nicodemus heard Jesus' words through the filter of the natural world, and through the limitations of his religious education, and through the shallowness of his spiritual maturity.
3. In other words, Nicodemus' thinking and understanding did not rise any higher than an earthly understanding of the words Jesus was using.

III. Conclusion

- A. Like Nicodemus, many of those we witness to will cling to their earth bound view of life, themselves, and God. They will not hear the truth we speak for the truth that it is. And many will argue against the truth we speak to them – not because they are having a hard time understanding what we are saying or because we haven't answered enough questions for them to overcome their scepticism and repent, but because they don't want to repent and leave their old life behind.
- B. Therefore, I urge you not to grow weary in sowing the seeds of the gospel, and in speaking truth, and in inviting unbelievers to repentance and faith in Jesus.
- C. Example – ES.
- D. As we will see, Jesus did not walk away from Nicodemus at this point, and we know He did not stop calling sinners to repentance after his experience with Nicodemus, for the story of the woman at the well is the first story in John 4.
- E. Therefore, may we follow Jesus' example and continue being salt, light, and a speaking witness to the unbelievers in our midst.