

I. The Story of Jesus and Nicodemus

- A. John 3:1-5 . . . 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."
- B. Prayer

II. The story

- A. John 3:5 . . . 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."
 - 1. As I pointed out last Sunday, Nicodemus heard Jesus' words about the necessity of being born again to see God's kingdom (vs 3) through an earthly, human birth filter.
 - a. And based on his responses to Jesus in the rest of the story, it appears Nicodemus did not have the kind of spiritual filter that would have enabled him to understand what Jesus was saying.
 - b. Therefore, upon hearing Jesus through his earth-bound filter, Nicodemus went on to point out that it was impossible for an adult to re-enter his mother's womb and be born a second time (vs 4).
 - c. We should not be surprised by Nicodemus' failure to understand, because in his introduction, John made it clear that Jesus and His teachings would be misunderstood. And so we read in John 1:5, "The Light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it."
 - d. But to be fair, Nicodemus does not stand alone in misunderstanding the truth of God, or the gospel of salvation, or what is required to see and understand the kingdom of God. There were many others who misunderstood Jesus and His teachings just as there are many in our own day who misunderstand spiritual things. For example:

- (1) In John 6:52-58, Jesus talked about the necessity of eating His body and drinking His blood in order to have life within us. Like Nicodemus, the Jews understood the earthly, human implications of what Jesus said. In other words, they understood they could not eat Jesus' flesh or drink His blood like regular food and drink. But they did not comprehend the spiritual implications of what Jesus was talking about.
 - (2) In John 8:57-59, Jesus said that He existed before Abraham was born. Here again, the Jews understood that, humanly speaking, someone Jesus age could not have seen Abraham. But they did not understand the spiritual implications of what Jesus was saying, which was, that He was God, and as God, He always was. Therefore, He existed before Abraham.
- e. And this brings us to the phrase in vs 5, where Jesus says –

B. Unless one is born of water and the Spirit –

1. This is one of those Bible statements whose true meaning is difficult to ascertain. Most of the early church teachers and writers held a particular view of what Jesus was saying, but even back then, there were those who saw it in different ways.
2. In our day, there are three main views on what it means to be born of water and the Spirit. Two of them are prominent within the Protestant church and one is prominent in the Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Anglican, and Episcopal church – though some Protestants hold this third view, too.
3. The first of the three main views says that to be born of water speaks of our human birth, and to be born of the Spirit speaks of our spiritual birth. To my knowledge, no one outside the Protestant church holds this view.
4. The second of the three main views is also a Protestant view, and it says being born of water and the Spirit speak of a cleansing or purification from sin. According to this view, the water and the Spirit present two figures of speech that convey the same truth. And those who hold this view support it by the fact that within this story, Jesus uses several different words or expressions to convey the same truth.
 - a. For example, Jesus is conveying the same truth when He uses the words born again (vs 3), born of water and the spirit (vs 5), born of the Spirit (vs 8), whoever believes (vs 15, 18), and whoever comes to the Light (vs 21).

- b. But beyond using the story itself to support their view, those who see being born of water and the Spirit as conveying the same truth use the following two scriptures as further proof their view is the correct one.
 - (1) Ezekiel 36:24-28 . . . For I will take you from the nations, gather you from all the lands and bring you into your own land. [25] 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. [26] Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. [27] I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to observe My ordinances. [28] You will live in the land that I gave to your forefathers; so you will be My people, and I will be your God.
 - (2) Titus 3:4-7 . . . But when the kindness of God our Savior and His love for mankind appeared, [5] He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit, [6] whom He poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, [7] so that being justified by His grace we would be made heirs according to the hope of eternal life.
 - c. It is probable that Protestants like this view because it protects their “grace plus nothing” view of salvation by removing the possibility of baptism becoming an additional requirement to faith and God’s grace for salvation.
5. And this brings us to the third main view of the words, “Unless one is born of water and the Spirit.” According to this view, to be born of water refers to the water baptism of believers, and to be born of the Spirit refers to receiving the Holy Spirit – which in the NT mostly takes place at a believer’s baptism.
- a. This view was the predominant view in the early church, and it continues to be the view of the Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Anglican, and Episcopal church.
 - b. Some hold that the water baptism speaks of John the Baptist’s baptism of repentance. Some hold that water baptism is necessary to receive the Holy Spirit and be assured of receiving the gift of eternal life. It is commonly held that water baptism was and remains a picture of dying to the old life and being reborn or

coming alive to live a new life in Christ Jesus. And all hold that water baptism is an expected, and even commanded part of the process of going from an unbeliever to faith in Jesus Christ – regardless of its spiritual, regenerative, saving, or ritual implications. For example:

- (1) Jesus stated the importance of water baptism for new believers in some of His last instructions to His disciples. We read in Mark 16:15-16, that Jesus said, “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation. [16] He who has believed and has been baptized shall be saved; but he who has disbelieved shall be condemned.”
- (2) The first evangelistic sermon preached following the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ includes these instructions: “Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38).
- (3) We know that the apostle Paul saw believer baptism as essential for receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit from this account in Acts 19:1-7 . . . It happened that while Apollos was at Corinth, Paul passed through the upper country and came to Ephesus, and found some disciples. [2] He said to them, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?" And they said to him, "No, we have not even heard whether there is a Holy Spirit." [3] And he said, "Into what then were you baptized?" And they said, "Into John's baptism." [4] Paul said, "John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in Him who was coming after him, that is, in Jesus." [5] When they heard this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. [6] And when Paul had laid his hands upon them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they began speaking with tongues and prophesying. [7] There were in all about twelve men.
- (4) Though these three scriptures point to three somewhat different implications of believer baptism, they share the same message – baptism is an important part of entering the Christian life.
 - (a) Now I acknowledge that there is wisdom in not making more of baptism than we ought, but there is also wisdom in not making less of it than we ought.

- (b) And because we ought not to make less of water baptism than we ought, I prefer this third main view of Jesus' words. For me, it makes the most sense that when Jesus said we must be born of water, He was speaking of water baptism.
 - c. But what about the second part of this phrase, "unless one is born of . . . the Spirit he cannot enter into the kingdom of God."
 - (1) Though there is some debate about how and when believer's receive the Holy Spirit, there is rarely any debate about the importance of the Holy Spirit for living a godly life here and now, and for being given the gift of eternal life after we die. For example,
 - (a) Jesus promises that when the Spirit of truth comes, He will guide us into all the truth (John 16:13).
 - (b) Paul says that if we walk by the Spirit, we will not carry out the desire of the flesh (Galatians 5:16-17).
 - (c) And Paul goes on to explain that the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23).
 - (d) Twice John writes that we know we abide in God and God abides in us because He has given us the Holy Spirit (1 John 3:24, 4:13).
 - (e) Paul speaks of the Holy Spirit praying on our behalf when we want to pray but don't know what to pray (Romans 8:26).
 - (2) And I could go on, but I think that is enough to remind you that without the Holy Spirit, we cannot see, comprehend, understand, or enter the kingdom of God.
- 6. Now lets return to where we started this story and work our way back to this point. Nicodemus came to Jesus and said that he was sure Jesus had been sent by God because of the signs Jesus was doing.
 - a. Jesus responded by saying, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God" (vs 3).
 - b. As I pointed out two weeks back, in using the word "see," Jesus is not speaking of going to heaven when you die, but rather seeing so as to discern, perceive, comprehend, and therefore understand the kingdom of God.
 - c. To this, Nicodemus asked, "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?" (vs 4).

- d. Jesus responded by saying, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter into the kingdom of God” (vs 5).
- C. So what does Jesus mean when He says you cannot enter into the kingdom of God without being born of water and the Spirit?
1. It is possible that in using the word “enter” Jesus is speaking of going to heaven when we die.
 2. However, the larger context and the fact that the kingdom of God is NOT confined to heaven itself or to the new heavens and new earth, open the word “enter” to more than a place we enter after we die.
 3. Let me explain. The term, “kingdom of God” appears 65 times in the NT. A good number of those times it is referring to God’s future kingdom that God’s people will be part of when Christ returns.
 - a. However, according to the Bible, the kingdom of God is not just future, it is past and present. This is supported by the fact that at least 9 times, the NT uses this term to speak of God’s kingdom as here and now. For example, we read in –
 - (1) Matthew 6:33 . . . But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.
 - (2) Mark 1:14-15 . . . Now after John had been taken into custody, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God, [15] and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel."
 - (3) Luke 11:20 . . . “[Jesus said] but if I cast out demons by the finger of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you.”
 - b. In other words, the kingdom of God is the rule of God which He extends over human lives throughout human history – beginning with Adam and Eve and continuing on into the new heavens and new earth.
 4. Therefore, entering the kingdom of God is not something we do only after we die. We enter God’s kingdom as active participants when we repent and come to faith in Jesus Christ – or as Jesus said, when we are born again.
 5. This does not remove the need to be born again in order to go to heaven when we die, but that is not the focus of this conversation between Nicodemus and Jesus. Jesus is showing Nicodemus that the kind of discernment that enables a person to truly understand the kingdom of God and enter into the kingdom of God – here and now

– is gained by being born again, or as Jesus went on to say, by being born of water and the Spirit.

III. Conclusion

- A. So how does all this apply to us? After all, we read God’s word from the vantage point of having been taught at least basic theology and having some spiritual understanding of what the Bible is saying, and having heard explanations of what Jesus meant when He said this or that.
 1. And so we are able to read what Nicodemus didn’t understand with a reasonable understanding of what Jesus meant. And though we accept that Nicodemus didn’t understand what Jesus was saying, it is possible some of us wonder how he could have missed it.
 2. It is at this very point where this part of the story applies to us. We may understand many of the historical and prophetic and spiritual truths contained in God’s word – even to the point of being able to teach others.
 3. But where we tend to fall short, what we too often fail to understand are the implications and practical applications of the truths and stories contained in God’s word about how we are to think, desire, feel, care, love, speak, behave, and live by faith – day-by-day – as followers of Jesus Christ. And beyond that, too many of us do not understand what the Bible says is required of us to become conformed to the image of Christ.
- B. On the assumption that Nicodemus was not yet born again, we can understand his failure to understand. But most of us have been born again, which means, we have the empowerment and the enlightenment and the ability to understand – at least enough to continue making measurable progress toward Christ-likeness.
- C. Therefore, may we use God’s empowerment, God’s wisdom, the Holy Spirit’s enlightenment, and our God given human ability to continue digging out the implications and practical applications of the truths and stories contained in God’s word about how we are to think, desire, feel, care, love, speak, behave, and live by faith – day-by-day – as followers of Jesus Christ.