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You Must Be Born Again John 3:1-3

When most people are asked the question, "If you were to die today and stand before God and He were to ask you, 'Why should I let you into My heaven,' what would you say?" They invariably respond, "I have lived a good life." They respond, "I have tried to help people." They respond, "I have gone to church." They respond, "I have been baptized." They respond, "I have loved God."

All these responses seem to be so very reasonable to the vast majority of the world. And the world seeks to comfort themselves with those responses. But those responses do not address the core issue of salvation. All those responses give far too much credit to human effort and fail to appreciate the wretched condition of mankind. The core issue of salvation is **not** about how good we are or what we have done.

The core issue of salvation is whether or not we have been "born *again*." Over the next several weeks we will be exploring this wonderful theme as we continue our study of the Gospel of John, more specifically **John 3:1-15**. Let me read this passage for you, **"(1) Now there was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews; (2) this man came to Him 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 the kingdom of God.' (6) 'That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.' (7) Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' (8) The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going; so is everyone who is born of the Spirit.' (9) Nicodemus answered and said to Him, 'How can these things be?' (10) Jesus answered and said to him, 'Are you the teacher of Israel, and do not understand these things? (11) Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak that which we know, and bear witness of that which we have seen; and you do not receive our witness. (12) If I told you earthly things and you do not believe, how shall you believe if I tell you heavenly things? (13) And no one has ascended into heaven, but He who descended from heaven, even the Son of Man. (14) And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up; (15) that whoever believes may in Him have eternal life.'**"

What had led up to this particular incident recorded for us in the passage that we have just read? Jesus had been performing miracles during the Passover celebration and as a result of this many believed **"in His name"** according to **John 2:23**. Let me read this verse for you, **"Now when He was in Jerusalem at the Passover, during the feast, many believed in His name, beholding His signs which He was doing."**

This might seem to indicate that they possessed saving faith but John goes on in the last two verses of that chapter in **John 2:24-25** to make it very clear to us that their faith was only superficial.

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Let me read these verses for you **"But Jesus, on His part, was not entrusting Himself to them, for He knew all men, (25) and because He did not need anyone to bear witness concerning man for He Himself knew what was in man."**

Why didn't Christ entrust Himself to these individuals who supposedly believed in His name? Their faith did not embrace the whole of what Jesus had already given them. Rather than embracing Jesus as the Messiah, which they could have and should have done, it seems that they only embraced Him as a miracle worker and as a teacher sent by God. This will become apparent to us as we begin our study of **John 3**.

In **John 3** Jesus most likely encounters one of those alluded to at the end of **John 2**. And it is in this encounter that we see the theme of the new birth introduced.

The question that we will be seeking to answer over the course of the next several weeks is this: What do we learn about the new birth from John 3:1-15? We of course will not be able to fully answer this question this weekend. Actually we will only just begin to answer this question.

What is the first thing that we learn about the new birth in John 3:1-15? The first thing that we learn about the new birth is its necessity (John 3:1-3).

My hope for this message is not only that we would be better able to appreciate the necessity of the new birth for ourselves but for others as well. My hope is that we will be able to see more clearly the desperate condition that the world is in and would therefore be that much more determined to help them.

Let us begin by looking at **verse 1**, **"Now there was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews."** Nicodemus was a "Pharisee." The word "Pharisee" came to mean *separatist* because of their strict way of life. The Pharisees were very serious about their religious practices, in fact on the Sabbath they would carry no more food than the weight of a dried fig or not more milk than could be swallowed at one gulp, lest they according to their traditions, break the Sabbath. When dealing with a Pharisee you were not dealing with someone who took his beliefs lightly.

And exactly what were their beliefs? Although the Pharisees were right in many of their beliefs such as divine decree, man's moral accountability and immortality, the resurrection of the body, the existence of spirits, rewards and punishments in the future, they made one very basic tragic error. The Pharisees externalized religion. The Pharisees considered outward conformity to the law the goal of one's existence because they believed that outward conformity to the law brought salvation. Though they were right in so many of their teachings they were terribly and tragically wrong in this one particular teaching. And because of this error they were unable to enter into a personal relationship with God through faith. For the Pharisees, salvation was all about *works* and Nicodemus was a Pharisee.

But he was not just any run of the mill Pharisee. Let us continue to read, "Now there was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews."

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Nicodemus was not only a Pharisee but "a ruler of the Jews" or in other words a member of the Sanhedrin, the very highest Jewish authority.

And it is this man who approaches Jesus in **John 3:2**. Let me read this verse for you, "**This man came to Him 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.'**"

The first thing that is mentioned about the approach of Nicodemus is that he came at night. Why did Nicodemus come to Jesus at night? Most likely he came to Jesus at night because of the prestigious position he enjoyed among the Jews.

As you know, Nicodemus was a member of the Sanhedrin. It would not have been a politically strategic move on his part to go to Jesus during the day in light of the firestorm Jesus had created by cleansing the temple. There was just too much interest as well as confusion surrounding Jesus for a Pharisee and a leader of the Jews to be seen going to the place where Jesus was staying.

Therefore it is quite understandable that he would have approached Jesus at night. But even though all of this is very reasonable the bottom line is that we really don't know.

But we do know what he said to Jesus. And He begins by assigning Jesus the title "**Rabbi.**" The word "rabbi" came from a word that meant "master" but over time was used simply as a title of respect.

In addressing Jesus with this title Nicodemus graciously acknowledged Him as someone whose thoughts were worthy of consideration. This is pretty impressive given the fact that Jesus had no formal religious training. Why would Nicodemus have done this?

Nicodemus approached Jesus in a respectful manner because he and others were convinced of His miracles and viewed Him as a teacher sent from God. Let us continue to read **Verse 2, "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 them."** Why would Nicodemus address Jesus as "Rabbi" even though He had no formal religious training? He and certain other members of the Sanhedrin, at least on the basis of the words of Nicodemus, had come to believe that Jesus had come from God.

How had Nicodemus and other members of the Sanhedrin come to the conclusion that Jesus had come from God? They came to that conclusion by either seeing the miracles of Christ personally or hearing about the miracles of Christ from others.

Nicodemus, coming to believe that Jesus was a miracle worker and a teacher sent from God was certainly a good thing, but unfortunately it was not enough.

He had not yet been able to get his arms around the breadth of what had been revealed to him and others by Jesus during the Passover celebration. He had not yet been able to comprehend the significance of the miracles of Christ and the cleansing of the temple.

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If he had, he would not have approached Him and addressed Him simply as "**Rabbi**" he would have addressed Him as the "Son of David" thus recognizing Him as the Messiah. But he was not yet there. In fact, this is very likely one of the reasons why he came to Jesus. Nicodemus believing that Jesus was a teacher sent from God, most likely approached Him to find out whether or not He was the Messiah.

I don't think we have to stretch our imagination at all to believe that what I have just shared with you is exactly right. And I believe when Nicodemus approached Jesus that Jesus knew this as well. So how would Jesus respond to Nicodemus? Will he begin to list out for him all the reasons why he should embrace Him as the Messiah?

It certainly would seem like a reasonable place to begin, but there was a greater need present in his life. The greater need that was present in the life of Nicodemus at that time was not whether he viewed Jesus as the Messiah but whether he viewed himself as *needy*.

Nicodemus had a much higher view of Himself than he should have. He was very much like all the other Pharisees.

Throughout Jesus public ministry, Jesus exposed the self-righteousness and sinful attitudes of the Pharisees. He pictured them as debtors too bankrupt to pay what they owed in **Luke 7:40-50**. He spoke of them as guests fighting for the best seats in **Luke 14:7-14**, and as sons proud of their obedience but unconcerned about the needs of others in **Luke 15:25-32**. The sad thing about the Pharisees was that they were completely deluded about their true spiritual condition and thought that they were fine.

Nowhere is this better captured than in **Luke 18:9-14**. Let me read this story for you, "**And He also told this parable to certain ones who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and viewed others with contempt: (10) 'Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee, and the other a tax-gatherer. (11) The Pharisee stood and was praying thus to himself, "God, I thank thee that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax-gatherer. (12) I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get." (13) But the tax-gatherer, standing some distance away, was even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven, but was beating his breast, saying "God, be merciful to me, the sinner!" (14) I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself shall be humbled, but he who humbles himself shall be exalted.**"

You might say, "Boy those Pharisees certainly were messed up" but they are really not much different than most people today, even many people who have attended churches for many years. Why would I say this? I would say this because the vast majority of people today, even many people who have attended churches for many years think that they, by their own good works, can make themselves acceptable to God. This is why so many of them when asked what they would say to God if He were to ask why He should let them into His heaven answer as they do, even those who have attended church. And as long as people view themselves in this way they have no hope of being saved. This obviously is a very serious problem. And it was a very serious problem for Nicodemus.

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Jesus, immediately after Nicodemus had greeted Him *turned* the tables on him in John 3:3. How did He do this? Let me read for you **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.’**” This is an amazing statement, which puts a lot of pressure on Nicodemus. How did Jesus do this? First of all Jesus stresses to Nicodemus the importance of what he was about to say. How does he do this? He says, “**Truly, truly I say to you**” in other words, “Listen very carefully to what I am about to tell you, it is very important.”

So what is so very important? He goes on to say, “**Unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.**” What is the meaning of the phrase “born again?” The word rendered “again” (ANOTHEN) signifies “from above” or “anew.”

What is Jesus saying to Nicodemus? Jesus is saying to Nicodemus that anyone who would enter the kingdom of God must be born “anew” or “again” from heaven. Of course the implication of this is clear. Every human who has been born into this world, no matter how good they might think they are, will never be able to enter the Kingdom of God through his or her own self-effort. They will not be able to enter the kingdom of God by their own effort because they were all mortally wounded by the sin of Adam according to **Romans 5:12**. They will not be able to enter the kingdom of God by their own effort because they were born into this world spiritually dead and therefore cannot do anything to please God through their own effort. This is very clear to us in **Ephesians**. The only thing that those who are spiritually dead can do is sin.

Romans 3:10-18, “There is none righteous, not even one; (11) There is none who understands, there is none who seeks for God; (12) All have turned aside, together they have become useless; There is none who does good, there is not even one.” (13) Their throat is an open grave, with their tongues they keep deceiving, “The poison of asps is under their lips”; (14) Whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness”; (15) Their feet are swift to shed blood, (16) Destruction and misery are in their paths, (17) And the path of peace have they not known.” (18) There is no fear of God before their eyes.”

When Jesus tells Nicodemus that “**unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.**” He is plunging a stake into the heart of those who would espouse a works salvation.

He is telling Nicodemus “You think because of your good works you are acceptable to God, but the truth is that you are so messed up that you will never enter into the Kingdom of God unless you are born again.

So what exactly is the Kingdom of God that people will not be able to enter unless they are born again? In the context of John 3:1-21 the reference to the Kingdom of God is a reference to the spiritual kingdom of God and is synonymous with *salvation* (John 3:16-21). In essence Jesus is telling Nicodemus that unless he is born again he will never be saved.

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CONCLUSION

Do you believe this? Do you believe that you are so messed up, so wicked, so evil that there is no way that you could get into the kingdom of God based on your own good works? If you do then praise God! This is the first step toward salvation. It is certainly not the only step but it is a necessary step.

If someone were to come up to you today and say to you, "If you were to die today and go to heaven and God were to ask you, 'Why should I let you into my heaven what would you say?' A good way to begin might go something like this, "Certainly it has nothing to do with me for I was a vile and wretched sinner who desperately needed to be born again from above."

Most people think that if they would admit such a thing they would somehow be damning themselves. But this just is not so!

Who is God going to let into His heaven? God is only going to let those into His kingdom who have been born from *above*. Next week we will consider how this is actually accomplished.