

The Teachings of Jesus: Necessity of Regeneration

Salvation

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Bible Text: John 3:1-8

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John chapter three and we will read verses one through eight. This is a familiar passage. We have examined it several times in the past. I want to look at it again tonight.

There was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews: The same came to Jesus by night, and said unto him, Rabbi, we know that thou art a teacher come from God: for no man can do these miracles that thou doest, except God be with him.

Jesus answered and said unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.¹

In other words, Nicodemus, you are not seeing what you think you see. You think you are seeing something, but you are really not seeing it because only with opened eyes can you see what you think you are seeing.

Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.

Nicodemus saith unto him, How can a man be born when he is old? can he enter the second time into his mother's womb, and be born?

Jesus answered, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be born again. The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit.²

This passage very clearly talks about a very critical issue in the Christian realm and that is regeneration or, as is kind of commonly stated in our day, being born again.

¹ John 3:1-3.

² John 3:3-8.

And this is a very important issue because it is a fundamental doctrine of salvation. It is very important that we know the truth because if it deals with the salvation of our soul, that is important, is it not? And it is important that we know the truth because we want to be followers of the truth and we want to be believers of the truth.

When it comes to spiritual truth ignorance is not bliss. It is of greater value and joy and exaltation to know the truth. And to be comforted by it and with it and to be encouraged by the truth so that that truth can under gird us and strengthen us and in it we can find resolve. We can stand firm in a doubtful questioning day.

And so I want to look again at this aspect of regeneration.

You know, Nicodemus is kind of a... not only was he a real person, but he is a very good picture to us of humanity and of how men think and of the condition of men before Christ. He kind of gives to us an agelessness of Scripture.

We live in a day where we are... we hear about us constantly, "Oh, you believe in that old book, that old stuff? That is kind of passé now, you know. It has all been kind of surpassed. And it isn't really relevant to our day anymore. You know, maybe there was a time when it was good. You know, we are not going to debate that. There was a time... but it passed the time. It just doesn't fit today anymore."

Well, we find in Nicodemus kind of an agelessness because the fashion in which he came to Christ is the way a lot of people come to Christ today, exactly the same way. No difference whatsoever and they view Jesus the same way he did.

This also aids us from the standpoint that the doctrines which Jesus explained to Nicodemus is equally ageless and not only was important and valid and relevant to Nicodemus, it is important and relevant to you and me and to our age as well.

And this issue of regeneration has been one that has been doubted and questioned over the centuries. And every time you come to a blip in church history when there was a revival, it always centered around a resurgence in belief, in teaching about regeneration.

You say, "To believers?"

Well, remember what Paul said in Romans chapter one. He said, "I am anxious to come to see you because I want to talk to you about the gospel."

It is important that we talk about the gospel, not only to rediscover and recover the truth, but to be strengthened by it and in being so strengthened by it give praise and honor and glory to the Father, Son and Holy Spirit because they deserve it.

Just this week I was out and about delivering tapes to some baskets about town and I turned on the radio which is always kind of a questionable thing to do whether it is of any

value or not and I turned on a talk show guy and he was talking. He had on as his guest a very well known leader in the professing church rounds. If I told you his name you would identify it immediately. But so as not to embarrass him I won't give his name. And the host and he were talking together about our era as being an evil age. And they were both kind of talking about that. And I listened and the host of the radio show said, "Now, you are a minister. Tell me, what is evil."

He said, "Well, the world, you know. The world kind of leads us into evil. It is tempting us constantly and so on. And then there is the devil and the devil is very real and he tempts us and pulls us aside into sin and to evil." And he said, "And then there is our nature, our human nature. We have a tendency to evil."

I thought, well, that's pretty good. I can kind of follow that. That's all right. Good for you. And then he paused to take a breath and he said, "But we also have a tendency to seek after God."

I thought, what did I hear? What was that you said? We have here in us this tendency to evil. But we also have this tendency to seek after God?

Nicodemus. In a moment we will go over some things that are at the very heart of this question. Lest you think otherwise, man does not have a tendency to seek after God. He does not. He does not. He does not. He does not have any tendency to seek after God. In fact, his very nature he doesn't want anything to do with God.

I don't care how he talks about it. I don't care his outward appearances. At his very heart he has no desire for God, none.

Well, Nicodemus is very current, very relevant to our day. And this issue in question of regeneration is as vital as my radio program this week. And there are some hints other than the radio program that would indicate and confirm that truth that regeneration is an absolutely vital, relevant issue in our day.

For example, in our similarity to Nicodemus there are several things I would like to describe that are pictured in Nicodemus that are true today.

For example, we are more concerned about our reputation than religion. And in so doing we try our hardest to do service to one without hurting the other. Can't serve two masters. Jesus said that. You either love the one and hate the other or hate the one and love the other. You can't serve two masters. We try. We try to serve both our reputation and religion or God and it can't be done. Nicodemus was that way.

We are also more concerned about the honor of man than the honor of God. It concerns us greater that we offend man. We can kick God all to hell. That's ok. Oh, but, boy, we don't dare do that to our neighbor. We dare not offend them. But it is all right to offend God.

We also, like Nicodemus—and, by the way, you realize, of course, it was very offensive for Nicodemus to simply call Jesus a good man. “You are a good man. We know you are a good man, Jesus.” This is the Lord of glory, you know. It isn’t me. It isn’t you. This isn’t your neighborhood good guy. This is God in the flesh he is calling a good man.

Also we see in our day as in then that we try to get away with honoring God by esteeming Christ. “Oh, he was a good man. He was able to do miracles, a good teacher.”

Notice he didn’t call him the teacher. You notice he didn’t call him the prophet whom Moses and the other prophets foretold. Just a prophet.

He tried to get away with just kind of boosting him a little bit, but not really coming to the heart of the matter to hearing him dealing face to face with the Lord Christ.

We also find in our day that we try to get away with convictions instead of conversions.

I have this conviction.

Oh, do you? I am not impressed.

Conviction is not conversion. They aren’t the same. Everybody has got convictions. The witch doctor in South Africa has convictions. The demonic worshipers in Haiti have convictions.

Nicodemus had convictions. He came to see him after all. But he wasn’t converted. Later on he was, but at this moment he was not.

And then, of course, we are also very careful to protect our pride at the expense of humility. All indications pictured in Nicodemus that are present in our day as well, but blind our eyes to the truth of the doctrine of salvation called regeneration.

As a consequence, we preach a false gospel. As a consequence we hold often times fallacies about salvation, what it is and what it isn’t. As a consequence we don’t worship God in Spirit and in truth. We are to worship in truth, not just the way I design it, not just the way I would like to do it, not just the way that is convenient for me, not just the way that makes me feel good inside and be all tingly. No. We are to worship him in truth, truthfully, adhering to the truth, worshipping in truth.

We don’t, because we are holding falseness. We walk in darkness to the light. Maybe not total darkness, but, you know, you can stub your foot in very dim light. You can trip and fall in a hole in very dim light. So it is incumbent upon us and it behooves us to find light and walk in the light, not darkness because Jesus is the light. In him is no darkness at all.

Well, what is the cause that brings this about? Well, ignorance is one facet, one aspect of it. Another aspect of it is a distinterest in study. We want an easy time. We want easy messages. We want to present easy Bible study. We want to do things the easy way. We

even have the books. All you got to do is read the book and you just sit down and we will all get together and we will just read the book. You do your five questions. I'll do my five questions and we'll have a sharing of ignorance and go home none the better for it.

[?] study.

And also we don't want to believe the truth. We would rather believe something that is easy to believe, something that doesn't stretch us, something that doesn't damage my pride. We would rather believe that than the truth.

Well, we need to, in our day, reexamine the Scriptures, rediscover the truth, recover it, repent of our turning or being ignorant of the truth and apply it. We need to be that with this doctrine of regeneration.

That's our text, because it covers these issues. And I want us to look at just two things from here tonight regarding this doctrine of regeneration. Number one is the existence of humanity in one of two states. There are only two, not three, four grade levels, classes, groups. There are two. You are in one or the other.

The second thing I want us to see relative to regeneration is this, the extremity of our human nature, both of which are at the very heart of the necessity of regeneration, why we must be born from above.

First, I want us to look at this aspect that Jesus in answering and responding to Nicodemus identified for him, "Nicodemus, there are two groups. There's two classes, there's two lanes."

In our modern day you could say the haves and the have nots. We are not talking about money here, possessions, but in the spirit realm there are those who are in the Spirit and those who are in the flesh. And you read through Scripture and you find out that in a variety of ways the Scripture presents this truth that there is only the two. You are in one or the other. There is only the two. You are not part way into one. You can't be almost saved. You can't be partly saved. You are either saved or you are not saved.

And there are a variety of ways this is expressed and I will just mention a few of them without going into a lot of detail about them, but just to present a couple of ways that it is presented in Scripture to identify the two areas.

You are either saved or your are damned. You are either righteous or sinful. You are either in the Spirit or the flesh as our text identifies it. You either walk in the Spirit in obedience or you walk according to the flesh in disobedience. You are either led by the Spirit or slaves of sin. You either honor God or you honor self. Your thoughts are either on the things of God or your thoughts are according to the lust of your flesh. You are either a friend of God or an enemy of God.

We don't like that one. We don't like that description. You are either a friend of God or an enemy. Jesus said very clearly, "He that is not with me is against me."³ Against me, against me. We don't like that.

We either exhibit the fruit of the Spirit or the works of the flesh. We either walk in light or in darkness. We either live by faith or we walk in unbelief. We are an object of God's delight or an object of his condemnation and wrath, another one we don't like. But that is the truth. That is our state, one or the other. We are either a new man in Christ or an old man without him.

Nicodemus tried to come to Jesus as if he were part of the kingdom.

"Good rabbi, good teacher, good master, I know you must be sent of God because of the things that you do."

And Jesus cut right to the heart and said, "Listen, Nicodemus. Unless you are born again you cannot see the kingdom."

All of the front, all of the presupposing, all of the acting, "Nicodemus, I want you to understand. There is two people: saved and damned. Unless you are born again you will not see, you will not enter the kingdom of God. You need regeneration."

We need to be born from above because flesh is flesh. Flesh cannot produce spirit. Flesh cannot bring about its own spiritual reclamation. Flesh cannot improve itself to be other than pretty flesh. Only the Spirit can produce Spirit.

"Nicodemus, I want you to understand. You must be born again. You must be born from above. You must be born of the Spirit."

So that is the first thing I want us to see as revealed to us that is relevant and important to our day given to us in this exchange between Jesus and Nicodemus.

2 Corinthians five tells us, "If any man be in Christ he is a new creature,"⁴ a new creation. "Old things pass away... all things are become new."⁵ Again, identifying for us the two realms, if you will. Christ being the one that makes the difference.

The second thing I want us to see about this necessity of regeneration that is part of this conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus is the extremity of human nature.

We like to think our human nature is pretty good, don't we? Yeah, we do. Yeah, we do. We don't like to think that it is of no value. We like to think it is of some value. We may debate about the amount of its value, but it is worth something just like the man interviewed on the radio.

³ Matthew 12:30; Luke 11:23.

⁴ 2 Corinthians 5:17.

⁵ Ibid.

“Oh, we have this tendency towards God.”

I want you to see the extremity of human nature because it is given to us in this exchange between Jesus and Nicodemus. Nicodemus blindly... I will... maybe I shouldn't defend him, but he didn't know. Jesus was teaching him. He was revealing to him the truth. And ultimately Nicodemus came to believe the truth because Nicodemus was one of those with another of what we call closet Christians, Joseph of Arimathaea that together the two of them took the body of Christ and buried it. Ultimately they came to the point where their faith in Christ brought them to where they could set aside their fears.

So ultimately Nicodemus... but here he didn't. He was still blind here and Jesus was trying to point out to him the truth. And so here is another truth that Jesus wanted him to see was revealed in the extremity of human nature. And here is the extremity. Here is how bad it is.

First of all, Jesus wanted him to see that the flesh was unfit. “It is unfit, Nicodemus. It is unfit for the kingdom of God.”

You fail to judge truth rightly. You don't see the truth correctly. Your life is full of corruption. Full of corruption? Boy, there is another one we rebel at, don't we?

“Oh, I am pretty good. I don't do... I don't lie. I don't steal.”

Oh, don't you?

Do you want me to really examine you to see if you don't lie? And I think I could find very quickly that almost on a daily basis you lie. I know I do, not deliberately so, not because I set about to do it, but I find on occasion... Why did I say that? That is not the truth. And it just came out so easily, so quickly.

One of the things I pray about a great deal is, “Lord, shut my mouth.” I talk too much. Yeah, I do. I talk too much. Lord, shut my mouth.

You know, the more you talk, the more you lie. The more you talk, the more you deceive. The more you say the more wrong things you say. And you are as guilty as I am. Don't look at me like I am some heel and you are somehow a saint, because I know it afflicts you just like it does me.

Well, the Scriptures tell us—and I will just read one of the references. It is in Titus. Because it describes it so clearly.

Titus chapter one verses 15 and 16, Paul writing to his friend says this:

Unto the pure all things are pure: but unto them that are defiled and unbelieving is nothing pure; but even their mind and conscience is defiled.

They profess that they know God; but in works they deny him, being abominable, and disobedient, and unto every good work reprobate.⁶

Now, there is a description for you. That is one who doesn't know Christ. We are unfit. We are unfit for the kingdom of heaven on our own, in and of ourselves. We are unfit for the kingdom.

Jesus pointed that out to Nicodemus. "Unless you are born again, Nicodemus, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven, because that which is flesh is flesh."

The second aspect of this extremity of this... of our human nature that Jesus point out to Nicodemus is this. It is unwillingness. It is unwillingness. Now this is at the heart of the conversation of the two men on the radio that I heard this past week. Man is not willing to submit himself to God. He is not. He doesn't want to. That is why he needs to be born again. He is going to act like a sinner and she is not going to want to follow after God. She may give some appearances of following after God, but at its heart, just as we just read from Paul's letter to Timothy, but interactions, just watch him long enough and you will find... oh, yeah. Yeah, there it is. There it is. There is the evidence.

We are unwilling. We delight in the flesh. We love our flesh. We have a disinterest in God. Our pursuits, our ambitions, our interest in and of ourselves are for whom? Me. Me. Me. Selfish at its heart. And that is what Scripture says to us. That is what Jesus said to Nicodemus. That which is flesh is flesh. That is all it [?] That is all he was really interested in, not interested in the things of the Spirit.

You say, "Boy, that is pretty strong."

Well, that is what the Scripture... Let's let Scripture be the deciding factor here, not me, not my evaluations and judgments. What does the Scripture say?

The Scriptures tell us very clearly that at his very heart, man is not interested in God.

Two passages just to confirm that. Romans chapter eight. We will read there of this chapter here where Paul sent considerable length talking about the distinctions between the flesh and the Spirit, the flesh and the Spirit. The flesh goes this way. The Spirit goes the other way. The flesh is interested in this. The Spirit is interested in these things over here. And he takes the whole beginning of the chapter from Romans chapter eight talking about the distinctions between the flesh and the Spirit.

And then he kind of comes to this [?] where he kind of summarizes it and he says it in this. What verses did I say? I want seven and eight is what I said. I forget what I said. Romans chapter eight, verses seven and eight.

It says, "The carnal mind [is what?] enmity against God."⁷ It is enmity. That is what it is. It is enmity against God.

⁶ Titus 1:15-16.

For it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be. So then they that are in the flesh cannot please God.⁸

Man isn't interested. He is just not. He is not interested.

Furthermore we read in John three verse six here where the Lord in interacting with Nicodemus points out, "That which is born of the flesh is flesh."⁹

And the Lord Jesus pointed out on more than one occasion he said... I am going to paraphrase here. He said, "How often I would have gathered you to myself as a mother hen gathers her chicks about herself. But what? You would not. You didn't want to do that. You weren't interested in God. You didn't to come to me."

In another place Jesus said, "You would not come to me that you might be saved. You refused. You weren't interested."

In parables Jesus spoke about it, giving parables of the kingdom. And the man who invited everybody to the feast. He said, "Oh, come to the feast."

"Oh, I am sorry. I can't. I have got to go and work at a piece of land I just bought."

And on the excuses went. What is he picturing? He doesn't want to come. Man is not interested in God in and of himself.

The third aspect of this extremity of the flesh or of our human nature is this. Furthermore, it can't. It is unable to do anything good towards God, towards redeeming himself, towards reclaiming himself from his sinfulness. He may, in fact, have some measure of understanding and acknowledgement of his or her sins. Can't do anything about it. Can't fix it. Can't change it. Can't improve itself. Can't take steps towards God. Can't in any fashion effect the change.

Again, Jesus said to Nicodemus, "That which is flesh is flesh. That which is Spirit is spirit. The Spirit blows where it chooses. It is like the wind, you know, you hear the wind, but you are not quite sure where it came from and where it is going."

The wind is spirit work when it is bringing about regeneration in the heart of man. It is the Spirit who brings it about, not man somehow causing it to happen, but God through the work of his Holy Spirit bringing it about, causing it to happen.

Well, without berating the point I hope you can see man needs regeneration. He needs to be born again and there isn't anything he or she can do about it. It is something that God does. It is a work of God by his Holy Spirit where he brings about new life, a new birth,

⁷ Romans 8:7.

⁸ Romans 8:7-8.

⁹ John 3:6.

the working of the Spirit of God upon the heart of a sinner, changing them, making them new, causing them to see things they never saw before, it is their light. They don't walk in darkness anymore. They are in light. And they have the Spirit of God to open their eyes to see the truth. And because they now see the truth, they [?] the truth. They pursue after it. It is the work of the Spirit of God. That is what he does. And that is what Jesus is trying to point out to Nicodemus.

So valid and relevant to what man and every bit as much so in our day.

Well, what are the implications? I said I want them hopefully for the last time for tonight, the necessity of regeneration. We need to be born again. And there isn't anything we can do to make that happen. It is a work of God.

We can also see the consequences of failure to experience regeneration. You walk in darkness. We also see displayed for us in beautiful fashion the love of God in Christ Jesus. His grace, mercy, pursuing after us because he didn't have to. There is no requirement for him to do so. There is no law that required him to do so. There was no covenant that caused him to fulfill in that fashion except the one he made in and of himself, demonstrating his great love, mercy and grace towards us at the very extremity of life needing to be born again.

Well, what can the Spirit of God do for us with these truths? Well, there are several things he can do for us. Number one, he can instruct us and teach us into the truth and open our eyes to see the truth, that we might believe it and trust it, conform our thoughts, our beliefs, our actions in accordance to the truth.

The second thing he can do is he can comfort us. He can comfort us. Those of us who have come to faith in Christ, we can recognize on the one hand our desperateness, our worthlessness, our inability and recognize and thank God for his grace and his mercy, that he has demonstrated and showered upon us because, yeah, that was a picture of me. That was me before I came to Christ. That's me. That's you. But praise God he gave you new life. You no longer walk that way. That isn't a full description. Oh, maybe at times that describes us, but in the totality that is not a description of us. All because of his great love and grace. Thank you, Lord. And that can comfort us and encourage us, strengthen us.

It also gives us hope because as suddenly as you and I experience the new birth rather the suddenness with which those whom we love and our friendships can be changed just as suddenly, just as quickly because there is nothing too hard for God. When God wants to change a life he changes it. When God wants to give new life to someone, he gives it to them. When God wants to take a Paul who is on his way to Damascus hell bent to murder and destroy believers, he shines a light on him and life is unalterably changed, quickly, suddenly.

It can cause us to have great encouragement and hope to know that what God did for me, he can do for the one I love and for my friend, my neighbor, my family member, whoever it is. Just as quickly he can do it for them as he did for me.

The third thing the Spirit of God can do is he can convict us about our unbelief, about our failure to believe the truth.

Thinking about it isn't believing.

And a lot of times we delude ourselves into thinking that we believe something because we think about it a lot or because we even try to figure it out and try to analyze it so that I can believe it. That is not faith, then, is it?

“Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.”¹⁰

It is trusting in the darkness. It is trusting in those areas that we can't figure it all out and we can't put all of the pieces together like two gears meshing. In our mind they still may be butting into each other, but God I believe. That's what you wrote. Then I believe it.

Do you believe it? Do you believe the truth of Jesus trying to explain to Nicodemus here about your flesh and your human nature and the reality of the new birth in Christ that the Spirit of God gives to us? Oh, I pray that the Spirit of God will open your eyes to see it and to believe it, to trust it, to conform your life to the truth. You believe. Your meditations, your ideas, your concepts about God, your beliefs about yourself and about human nature and those about us. If you will conform your beliefs and your attitudes according to the truth, in so doing there will be this promise that the truth sets us free. And I pray that the Spirit of God will do that in your life.

Let's close in prayer.

Dear heavenly Father, how I thank you that you chose me to be your child and you sent your Son the Lord Jesus and he came willingly demonstrating his love and obedience for me and obedience to you and he came and paid the penalty of my sin that the Spirit of God might bring me to faith in Christ as my substitute. Thank you. All your work and you did it for me. I was just like Nicodemus. Thank you for changing my life, giving me that new birth. Thank you.

And, Father, I would trust that that would be the expression of those here tonight in our study, that that describes them as well. And we want to give you praise and thanks for your goodness, but I also want to hasten to add that we know from whom we love, either we are not sure or we are sure they don't fall into that camp. They haven't come to know you yet. And we would ask, heavenly Father, on their behalf that you would demonstrate your great love and grace and mercy towards them that you have shown towards us. That you would open their eyes to see that, Holy Spirit of God, you would give to them that new birth that you gave to us, that by your Holy Spirit you would change them, make

¹⁰ Hebrews 11:1.

them a new creature, that old things would pass away and all things would become new, that they would then have an interest and a desire to seek after you and come to faith and trust in the Lord Jesus, the only Savior.

Father, we would ask that with great fervor that you would do that. Thank you, Father, for our time together tonight. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.