

YOU MUST BE BORN AGAIN

John 3:1-21, Key Verse: 3:3

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“In reply Jesus declared, ‘I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.’”

In the last passage Jesus cleared the Jerusalem Temple. Jesus taught us that God’s dwelling place must be kept holy. We must repent of our sins daily and let Jesus cleanse us. Then we can be a blessing to God’s world salvation work. Since the old UIC Bible house was demolished, the Cook family basement has become a Bible study center. This is also where the children’s toys are stored. When no one else is there, David, Daniel, and Mary Claire go down and play. But when Bible students appear, they say, “One-to-one Bible study!” They put their toys away and run upstairs. We only thank God for this holy family.

In today’s passage Jesus meets a man named Nicodemus. He seemed to have everything. But he lacked the most important thing: the kingdom of God. Jesus humbly taught him how to enter the kingdom of God by being born again. All human beings need most to enter the kingdom of God. To enter the kingdom of God, we must be born again. This week, Time magazine’s cover story told how easy it is to enter the USA illegally. Since 9/11, we have invested a lot in homeland security, but still many enter the USA illegally. However, no one can enter the kingdom of God illegally. The only way to enter the kingdom of God is to be born again. Let’s accept Jesus’ truth in our hearts today.

First, a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus (1-2).

Who was Nicodemus? Look at verse 1. “Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council.” Nicodemus was a Pharisee. To be a Pharisee was not easy. In our times, most young people don’t become serious about their life direction until they decide their major in college. But to be a Pharisee, a young man had to start on a strict training course at the age of six. The goal of this training was to master the Old Testament law and its ritual practices. Under the tutelage of a strict rabbi he would study hard every day, memorizing many passages of Scripture. By age ten he knew the Torah and the intricacies of the oral law. By age thirteen he was considered a responsible covenant bearer of the law of God. He had overcome petty desires to become a noble human being.

Still, to be a Pharisee required further study. He had to enter a rabbinical college under a great teacher of the law. There he learned the spirit, ethics, and morality of his teacher, as well as the classic subjects of oratory, philosophy, history, medicine, politics, and so on. It was not easy. Last Sunday Dr. Tami McHugh, while waiting for a Bible student, was crying. It was because she had to work 95 hours that week as a first year resident. She wanted to spend time with her family. But there was no chance. This is the high cost of being a medical doctor. Nicodemus studied like this to become a Pharisee. Then Nicodemus went further. He became a member of the Jewish ruling council, the Sanhedrin. It was like being a U.S. senator. No doubt, he was wealthy and well-connected. Nicodemus had made it to the top. He had fulfilled the Jewish dream.

Look at verse 2. “He came to Jesus at night and said, ‘Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God, for no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him.’” He called Jesus “Rabbi,” respected teacher. He acknowledged the miracles Jesus was performing. But he came to Jesus at night. Perhaps it was to keep his visit unofficial. In reality, he was in the darkness. Jesus did not acknowledge Nicodemus’ praise, nor was he interested in the recognition of the Sanhedrin. However, Jesus was interested in Nicodemus. It is because Jesus is the good shepherd of all people.

Second, Jesus said, “You must be born again” (3-4).

Look at verse 3. “In reply Jesus declared, ‘I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.’” In spite of Nicodemus’ religious talk, he was spiritually blind; he did not see the kingdom of God. Jesus knew what was on the inside of Nicodemus. This well decorated man was empty and miserable. He had nothing left to hope for. Despair was his shadow. The sins he had committed while climbing the ladder of success became more lucid as time went by. His conscience tormented him over his selfishness and indifference to his suffering people. What was worse, he was getting old and the power of death was knocking at the door. To others, Nicodemus looked magnificent, like an object of envy. But Jesus understood his inner agony. Jesus got right to the point. Nicodemus needed to see the kingdom of God. To see the kingdom of God, he needed to be born again.

Here we learn a very important truth. The things of the world can never satisfy a human being. When we are young, honor and wealth seem to be worthy of our life investment. So we can stay up all night studying for a Ph.D., and we can burn our energy to establish a successful business. But these things soon perish and fade away. Mankind must see the kingdom of God. As a young man, Daniel was a POW in Babylon. His nation had been crushed and his people exiled as God’s divine discipline for their disobedience. But Daniel was not fatalistic. He made a decision to live a pure life before God by not indulging in royal food and wine. God blessed his decision and gave him spiritual insight to see the kingdom of God. In his vision, all the kingdoms of the world were like a statue of gold, silver, bronze, iron and clay. It looked dazzling and awesome. Then he saw a rock come and strike the statue, smashing it to pieces. The rock became a huge mountain that filled the whole earth. It was the kingdom of God. Daniel saw that the kingdoms of the world rise and wane, one after another. But the kingdom of God is everlasting. The kingdom of God gains the final victory. Those who hope in the kingdom of God will live forever and share God’s victory. Like Daniel, we must see the kingdom of God when we are young.

We must also see the kingdom of God when we are old. The Apostle John was once exiled on the island of Patmos because he preached the gospel boldly. He was old and alone. Yet in that difficult situation, God gave him spiritual insight to see the kingdom of God. He saw the complete destruction of the evils of the world, including the power of sin and death and the devil. Then he saw a new heaven and a new earth. In Revelation 21:2-4 he says, “I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.’” We must see the kingdom of God. To see the kingdom of God, we must be born again.

Look at verse 4. “‘How can a man be born when he is old?’ Nicodemus asked. ‘Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother’s womb to be born!’” Nicodemus was surprised. He didn’t like Jesus’ teaching, because it implied his human achievement was nothing. He didn’t really understand Jesus’ teaching. So he did not accept Jesus’ teaching. Although he called Jesus “teacher,” he did not have a learning mind. He could not accept what he did not understand rationally. He was also a touch rebellious. Jesus could have abandoned him. But he did not. Instead, Jesus humbly taught Nicodemus how to be born again.

Third, you must be born of water and the Spirit (5-8).

Look at verse 5. “Jesus answered, ‘I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit.’” New birth comes by water and the Spirit. Here “water” refers to the water baptism of John that accompanied repentance. Repentance is necessary for the new birth. Repentance is to confess our sins, renounce our sins, and turn away from our sins. One young man was secretly worshiping a young woman in his heart. Through the spiritual counseling of a friend he realized he was sinning against God. By the help of the Holy Spirit, he confessed his sin, renounced his sin, and made a new decision to live a holy life. It was his sincere repentance before God. This is our part: we must repent of our sins. Then comes the work of the Spirit. This is beyond human control: it is totally the sovereign act of God. The Spirit is free to work as he pleases. He does not ask our permission. Nor does he work according to our expectations. He delights in doing the unexpected. One young lady was living a double life. She seemed to have no intention of being born again. But as she participated in the work of God in one conference, the Holy Spirit came into her heart and gave her new life. He brought about a dramatic change in her. She stopped going out with worldly friends. She began to read the Bible diligently. Now she prays for

her classmates and teaches them the Bible. She has a great interest in the work and history of God. It is the work of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit gives birth to new life in a person.

In the process of new birth, the Spirit and the Word work together (Jn 6:63). 1 Peter 1:23 says, "For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God." When we accept one word of God in our hearts and hold on to it, the Spirit creates new life in us that is spiritual and holy. We gradually lose interest in the shiny things of the world. We begin to crave the pure spiritual milk of the word of God. As this new life grows in us, our inner person is transformed. Old sinful habits begin to disappear. The holy image of Jesus grows more and more. 2 Corinthians 5:17 says, "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone the new has come." There is an artistic young man. Before knowing Jesus, he lived a sinful life as a heavy metal rocker. He was miserable. As he repented before God, he heard Jesus' word, "I am the way and the truth and the life" (Jn 14:6). New life began to grow within him. He cut his long hair, began to wear a suit and tie, and worshiped God joyfully. As a UIC student, he studied hard, did well in school, and also wrote and shared heart-moving Bible testimonies every Friday night. He taught the Bible to many classmates. After graduation, he married a beautiful woman of God, established a house church, and became a dynamic fellowship leader in Chicago UBF. Recently, God blessed his family with a new baby boy, whom he dedicated as a shepherd for his generation. When we repent of our sins and receive the Holy Spirit through one word of God, we are born again as God's children.

Look at verse 6. "Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit." Works of the flesh never contribute to the work of the Spirit. John 1:12,13 say, "Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God." Only the Holy Spirit can give birth to new life in a person. Nicodemus knew how to succeed in his flesh. But this was totally useless in bringing about his new spiritual birth. Nicodemus was helpless. It was time for him to depend on God alone.

Jesus told Nicodemus, "You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.'" Jesus was not teaching something new. Jesus was teaching what the Old Testament prophets had foretold. For example, Ezekiel 36:24-27 says, "For I will take you out of the nations; I will gather you from all the countries and bring you back into your own land. I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws." Nicodemus should have understood the new birth from Bible study. But he did not. His motive in Bible study was not to know Christ; it was to be successful. We must study the word of God to know Christ.

Look at verse 8. "The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit." Recently, we have seen the strong winds of hurricanes strike our southern coast. We named them "Frances" and "Ivan the terrible." But we could not control them. They went wherever they wanted. The Holy Spirit is more powerful. We cannot control the Holy Spirit. But we can learn to pray and wait. After his resurrection, Jesus visited his disciples and said, "Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit" (Ac 1:4-5). They prayed and waited. Then, on the day of Pentecost, the wind of the Holy Spirit blew with great power. The disciples were transformed into bold witnesses of the Risen Christ. Their gospel message was so powerful that it shook Jerusalem and reverberated throughout the world. It is a divine mystery that the work of the Holy Spirit gives new birth. We cannot completely understand it. We certainly cannot control it. But where there is repentance, the word of God and prayer, the Holy Spirit is pleased to work.

Fourth, look and live (9-21).

Jesus' teaching was simple and clear. But Nicodemus was not ready to accept it. He again said, "How can this be?" This time, Jesus rebuked him. Look at verse 10. "'You are Israel's teacher,' said Jesus, 'and do you not understand these things?'" When Jesus exposed his spiritual ignorance, it cut Nicodemus to the heart. He would not speak to Jesus after this. Jesus did this to help him accept his word.

Look at verse 11. “I tell you the truth, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony.” “We” probably refers to Jesus and John the Baptist. John had testified that Jesus is the promised Messiah. Look at verse 13. Jesus is the Son of God who came from heaven. He can speak about heaven uniquely because he has been there. But the religious leaders did not accept the testimony. They did not want to repent. Nevertheless, Jesus told Nicodemus plainly that he was the Messiah.

Look at verses 14-15. “Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.” Jesus refers to an event that is described in Numbers 21:4-9. When his people began to complain, God sent venomous snakes among them to bite them fatally. They repented and Moses prayed for them. God told him to make a bronze snake and put it on a pole, promising that anyone who looked at the bronze snake would live. To human reason this does not make sense. Those who are bitten should seek immediate medical care. But God promised that when they looked at the bronze snake they would live—“look and live.” Jesus applied this to his death on the cross. Jesus was lifted up on the cross as the Lamb of God. Jesus shed his blood for the sin of the world. Those who look at him with faith receive eternal life. This solves the root problem of each person completely. It is the best news to anybody, no matter who he or she may be. Look at verse 15 again. “That everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.”

Why does God do this? Look at verse 16. “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” God loves us. God sent Jesus to save us. God really wants to give us new birth into an eternal life in the kingdom of God. We must only look at Jesus and live.

God did not send Jesus into the world to condemn the world. No. The world is already condemned because it is under the power of sin and death. Jesus came to save everyone who believes in him. Jesus is the light of life. But many refuse to come into the light because they love the darkness. What they fear most is that their evil deeds will be exposed. Unbelief is not an intellectual problem. It is a moral problem. Look at verse 21. “But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God.” To live by the truth is to confess our sins and believe the promise of God. When we do so, Jesus saves us for the glory of God.

What happened to Nicodemus? He appears twice more in John’s gospel. In John 7:50-51, Nicodemus defends Jesus before the Sanhedrin and is rebuked for it. Then, in John 19:39-42, Nicodemus appears at the cross to help bury Jesus’ body. Nicodemus publicly identified with Jesus. Humanly he risked everything: his position, his wealth, his fame—everything. But he could do so freely. He was no longer bound by the things of the world. He could see and enter the kingdom of God. He looked and lived. I believe we will see him in the kingdom of God.

In this passage we learn that human achievement has a great limitation. Sooner or later, what all people really need is to see the kingdom of God. We can see the kingdom of God when we are born again. Let’s remember that God loves us and really wants to give us the kingdom of God. All we have to do is repent of our sins and look at Jesus with faith in God’s promise. May God help you to look and live.