

Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

Jesus Teaches the Teacher

Scripture: John 3:1-3

Code: 43-11

I want to remind you that preaching is not a spectator sport. It is not a matter of sitting and watching. It's not a form of spiritual entertainment. Preaching is really a form of engagement, it's a conversation. And I've always believed that you get from it what you bring to it. And one of the things that expository preaching does is engage you beyond the preacher with the Scripture. And that's the intention, that you bring your Bible, and even if you sit back in the corners far away from me where I can't really command your attention, the Word of God can command your attention because it's right there before your eyes in your hands. And that's very, very important because you're engaging when you come here not with me, I'm merely a tool, I'm really a light, a reflected light to point you toward the true light which is the Word of God.

Your benefit from preaching is going to be in direct proportion to your engagement thoughtfully in the text. Sometimes that's a little easier if you're closer to the front, but as long as you have the Word of God in your hand, you need to engage your heart and your mind with the text. And I'm saying that here because the text with which you are about to engage is one of the most important sections in all the 66 books of the Bible. In fact, one could argue that this might be one of the three or four most important scriptures in the Bible, and that's not simply because it is in fact the words of our Lord, although that is essential in itself. Every part of Scripture is the Word of the Lord even though it doesn't come directly from the lips of Jesus, but rather it is important because of the nature of the content here, having to do with the issue of regeneration or new birth, which is the first great miracle that takes place in the salvation of a sinner.

We understand the doctrine of salvation to be made up of many elements. There is, of course, the matter of sovereign election and predestination. There is the reality of regeneration. There is the truth of conversion. There is the great truth which we love of justification. There's the element of sanctification. There's the truth of redemption. There are the elements of faith and repentance and all of these are aspects and components of the one great miracle of salvation.

And in coming to John chapter 3, we come to the great truth of regeneration. In the work of God to save His people, this is the second work. The first being election--we are chosen in Him before the foundation of the world, predestined to be saved. When then in time election is activated into salvation, the first great work of God is the work of regeneration, which is the subject of this chapter of this conversation that Jesus has. This then becomes very foundational in our understanding of the work of God in saving His people.

Let me read these ten verses to you and we'll then begin to work our way through. Don't be under any illusion that we're going to get very far today because it would be a travesty on truth for us to hurry through this chapter.

“There was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews; 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.’ Jesus answered and said to him, ‘Truly, truly I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.’ 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?’ 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. That which is born of the flesh is flesh and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be amazed that I said to you, “You must be born again.” 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.’ Nicodemus said to Him, ‘How can these things be?’ Jesus answered and said to him, ‘Are you the teacher of Israel and do not understand these things?’”

Five times in those ten verses our Lord speaks of being born again, being born. Now that idea of being born again is a very familiar concept to believers. At least the terminology is a very, very familiar part of evangelical lingo. It has been popular for a long time, to speak of oneself as being a born-again Christian, to disassociate oneself from being some kind of traditional Christian. This is a kind of a Christian pop-culture; it's been turned into an adjectival phrase, a “born-again Christian.” Evangelists for decades have called for people to be born again, told people they need to be born again, and then told them how to be born again, the steps to take, the path to follow, the prayer to pray in order to be born again.

Books have been written on how to be born again. Articles on how to be born again. Pamphlets on how to be born again. In fact, there is no notion that is perhaps so common and so familiar in evangelical lingo as this one to describe what it means to be saved. It is so familiar, this born-again idea, that it is uncritically assumed without really being understood. People have for decades been told, “Here's how to be born again.”

But the very idea of being born again is completely alien to anything that a sinner could do. And that's why Jesus chose this analogy. The whole point of the analogy of being born again is to demonstrate that Jesus is saying something has to happen to you that you can't do, that you can't contribute to in any way. The analogy describes a spiritual reality to which the one born makes no contribution. Think of physical birth. What contribution did any of us make to our physical birth? None. We were non-existent. We made no contribution to our physical birth and that is why the Lord chooses this analogy because we also make no contribution to our spiritual birth...none.

Our Lord could have used other analogies if He had intended to communicate that we do make a contribution, but He chose this one to make it crystal-clear that new birth happens to us not by us. We receive this birth from someone else in the same way that we receive our physical way from someone else. Birth happens to us, not by us. And that is exactly the point of this analogy. No one gives himself or herself physical life, and no one by any means gives himself or herself spiritual life. That's the whole point. Spiritual birth or regeneration, or new creation, whatever term you want to use, is the second work of God in salvation. And it is wholly a work of God. The first work, election. Wholly a sovereign work of God. The second work, regeneration, wholly a work of God.

Now this text is so important and so foundational and so basic that a person cannot truly be saved at all without understanding this reality. There are a lot of things you don't have to understand. You don't have to understand or even believe the doctrine of divine election. But you must understand the doctrine of divine regeneration and new birth in order to be saved. It is also essential not only for salvation, but it is essential for evangelism and the fulfillment of the great commission. This is crucial truth and consequently we're going to work our way through it and I want you to make a total commitment to engage yourself with this amazing conversation which leads to the understanding of this amazing revelation.

Now it's a very familiar story. Everybody knows Nicodemus. We know his name. His name, by the way, is a Greek name, transliterated really into Aramaic. In Greek it means "victor over the people." The first part of it, "Nic" comes from *nike, nika*, which is the word for triumphant or victory. So his parents gave him a very elevated name, took a Greek name, transliterated into Aramaic and he was fully Jewish but has this unique, common, very common, Greek name. And we know about him. We know his story. But we really don't understand the full theology that is coming to us in this amazing account.

I'm going to break these ten verses that I read into three sections. We're going to start with the sinner's worry, verses 1 and 2. Then we're going to go to the Savior's way. And then we're going to go to the Spirit's work. Okay? So you can remember it with that simple little outline. The sinner's worry, the Savior's way, and the Spirit's work.

Now this account is more than a story. Many times this is told as a story and we don't get very deep into it. But we're going to go where maybe you've never gone before in the story. So much are we going to go into the depth of the story that it could take us a month to get through these ten verses. But I promise you, what it yields to you will be a treasure that you will highly prize.

Now I've been telling you that the whole purpose of the gospel of John can be understood by two concepts. One, it is polemical. That is, it is a defense of the deity of Christ. It is a proof and evidence of the deity of Christ. Every paragraph, every section, every incident is to indicate to us that He is the

Son of God. So it has a polemical aspect.

Secondly, it has an evangelistic aspect. Our understanding that He is the Son of God is so that we can believe in Him and have eternal life. That's the evangelistic side. This account is no different. It is first polemical. It proves that Jesus is God. How does it do that? Because Jesus knows what Nicodemus is thinking. That's omniscience. And it is also evangelistic because it gives us the necessary truth for salvation. So John, consistent with his twofold emphasis on polemics and on evangelism, covers both.

Now what this story makes clear for us, and I'm going to tell you this at the beginning and then I'm going to tell you at the end, and I'm going to show you in the middle. What it makes clear to us is that salvation is not for those who become more religious. It is not for those who try harder to be good. It is not for those who live morally improved lives. It is not for those who turn away from certain vices. It is not for those who diminish evil behavior and escalate noble and good behavior. Salvation is not for those people. The kingdom of salvation, the kingdom of God, opens its door only to people who abandon all of that. Did you get that? The doors of the kingdom open only to those who abandon all self-effort to earn their way. And, on the other hand, receive from God a new birth. In other words, they can't improve on who they are, they have to be someone else other than they are. The doors of the kingdom only open to those who cease trying to earn a place in the kingdom and are given new life. In other words, you have to delete your entire life, hit the reset button and begin all over again.

Now as we approach this text, I want to take you back to chapter 2, verse 23 because this is where we get the starting point. Jesus was in Jerusalem, this was the first Passover in His ministry, and you remember the last Passover of His ministry life He was Himself the sacrificial Lamb. But here is the first Passover in His ministry life: goes to Jerusalem; He's there with all the pilgrims for a couple of weeks because the Passover is followed by the Feast of Unleavened Bread. So several weeks encompass these great religious celebrations.

Now during the feast, verse 23 says, while He was in Jerusalem at the Passover, many believed in His name, observing His signs, His miracles which He was doing. The whole time He was there He was doing miracles. He was demonstrating divine power. Miracles, we know, came in a number of categories--power over demons, power over disease, power over death, power over nature. We don't know specifically here what they were; John doesn't tell us this, but there were many divine miracles.

As a result of this, many believed in His name. That sounds good and it's a starting point. Let's say it's a place where you have to begin. You have to believe, to start with, in Jesus to some degree. You have to believe in His name, meaning His identity, who He claimed to be; and there were many who did, many who did based on the miracles. But Jesus, verse 24, on His part was not entrusting Himself to them. It's the same word as believing. They believed in Him, but He didn't believe in their believing. He didn't have faith in their faith. He didn't entrust Himself to them as a Savior because they hadn't

yet believed sufficiently to be saved. They believed but they didn't believe enough to be saved.

And why did He not entrust Himself to them and how did He know the nature of their faith? End of verse 24, "Because He knew all men and because He didn't need anyone to testify concerning man for He Himself knew what was in man."

Whatever it was they were saying, and how would He know that they believed in His name? They would tell Him. This isn't one moment in time, when a mob came and said, "We all believe." This is a period of days, a couple of weeks, He's teaching, He's doing miracles, people are coming on and off and saying, "We believe in You, we believe You're from God. We believe You're a teacher from God. You can't do these things unless the power of God is with You." But Jesus is not affirming that as saving faith and establishing a relationship with them. Why? Because He knows that it's not sufficient faith to save. How does He know? Because He knows what's inside them. That's omniscience. And we talked about that, didn't we, that that's evidence that He's God.

Well one of these people, one of these many impressed by the signs, believing in Jesus is the man Nicodemus. He's one of them. He's the only one we know because he's the only one about which a story is included in the text of Scripture. The story of Nicodemus then is the illustration of chapter 2, verse 23. He's one of the many who believed but didn't believe sufficiently to be saved. How did Jesus know that? He knows it because He knows his heart, and here's an illustration of it in these opening verses. This is a very, very powerful, powerful account on many levels and from many perspectives.

But let's start just with Nicodemus. And we'll begin with what we call the sinner's worry, the sinner's worry. Now as you can see from verse 1, this man, Nicodemus, "there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews." This is a formidable man in the religious system of Israel, a very formidable man. In fact, maybe even stood out head and shoulders above the rest since in verse 10 Jesus says, "Are you *the* teacher of Israel?" This man has reached the absolute pinnacle of Judaism, of religion because he is *the* teacher, definite article, *the* teacher of Israel. He's a very religious man, but he is worried, fearful, guilty, anxious, doubtful, lacking in assurance. Why? Because he is an apostate. He's part of a defective religious system, an apostate Judaism. He's a hypocrite. He doesn't know God. He doesn't truly love God. His heart hasn't been changed. He is just another Pharisaical hypocrite. And He knows his heart. And the heart of a hypocrite is full of fear and doubt and dread. And what does he fear? That he's not headed for heaven. That's the sinner's worry. He fears that he's not headed for the resurrection and eternal life in heaven.

Now when you have reached the pinnacle of your religion and it doesn't deliver the confidence that you're going to heaven, you're a worried man. An irreligious, atheistic, openly immoral man has fear--fear of judgment, but not nearly the level of fear that an elevated hypocrite has because he's done everything he knows to do and when the fear and the dread and the reality that he doesn't know God

hits him, he has nowhere to go because he's reached the peak. That's Nicodemus.

The Pharisees--there were six thousand of them, according to Josephus, in the land of Israel at that time--were the most devout, the most conscientious keepers of the Law. Not only the Law of Scripture, but all the other laws that they made up, prescriptions to produce holiness they thought. The word "Pharisee" comes from the word meaning "separated." They were the separated people, separated from the rest of the people by their devotion to the Law, separated from sin, separated from evil, etc., etc. They were at the very heart of apostate, corrupt Judaism. They were the people Jesus was assaulting when he went into the Temple in chapter 2, verses 13 to 18, made a whip and started throwing people out. It was their system that He was assaulting.

Now they were so devout that on many, many levels they had achieved external virtue. Listen to the testimony of Paul who was one of them, a Pharisee in Philippians 3. "If anybody has a mind to have confidence in the flesh, I do. I was circumcised the eighth day of the nation Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews." That means he followed all the traditions. "As to the Law, a Pharisee, as to zeal, a persecutor of the church. As to righteousness which is in the Law, found blameless."

Here's Paul; that's the testimony of a Pharisee. I dotted every i; I crossed every t religiously. I observed the laws, I was kosher, I carried out the traditions, I did it all. And it really came down to some bizarre minutia. There are records that tell us, for example, that a Pharisee could not look in a mirror on the Sabbath. A mirror would be a piece of flattened metal, not glass. But a Pharisee couldn't look in a mirror on the Sabbath because he might see a gray hair and be tempted to pull it out, and that would be a violation of the no-work on the Sabbath. A Pharisee who had a sore throat would normally gargle with vinegar; that's what they used, this kind of an antiseptic. But Pharisees couldn't gargle on the Sabbath because that was work; they had to swallow it immediately when they drank the vinegar. A Pharisee could eat an egg that was laid on the Sabbath if he intended to kill the chicken that laid it on the Sabbath.

I mean, that's how it developed into these ridiculous formulas for virtue. Well, this is one of them. The best description given in the New Testament of Pharisees was given by our Lord in Matthew 23, in the last week of His life and ministry before His death. Turn to Matthew 23 and this will be the best glimpse of the Pharisees. They are described along with the scribes for the most part who were part of them. It says in verses 1 and 2 of Matthew 23 that they put themselves in the chair of Moses. In other words, they became the interpreters of the Law of Moses, the Law that God had given to Moses back in Exodus. By the way, they tell you to do all those things but they don't do them themselves. They're hypocrites. They tie heavy burdens on you; they don't help you with those burdens at all. Verse 4, they do what they do to be noticed by men. Verse 6, they love the place of honor at banquets, chief seats in the synagogues. They love to be greeted in the marketplace and called rabbi. It's a term of respect, meaning teacher, a Chaldean term that came out of the captivity when they

were there. They loved to be called rabbi, they loved to be called teacher, they want to be called father as if they're the source of truth. They want to be called leader.

However, verse 13, "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, you shut off the kingdom of heaven from people and you don't enter in yourselves, nor do you allow those who are entering to go in. You stop people from the kingdom. You're not in the kingdom and you can't help anybody get in the kingdom. You're not in it and you prevent others from being in it."

And that's exactly where Nicodemus was. He wasn't in the kingdom. In his heart he knew he wasn't in the kingdom. Verse 15, "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, you travel over sea and land to make one proselyte and when he becomes one you make him twice as much as son of hell as yourselves." Verse 16, "Woe to you blind guides." And it goes on like this. Verse 23, "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, you tithe little tiny herbs and neglect the weightier provisions of the Law, justice, mercy and faithfulness." Verse 25, "You are hypocrites who clean the outside of the cup and inside are full of robbery and self-indulgence." Verse 27, "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, you're like whitewashed tombs." Verse 29, "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, you built the tombs of the prophets, adorn the monuments, etc., and through history you kill the prophets."

He sums it up in verse 33, "You serpents, you brood of vipers, how will you escape the sentence of hell?" Pharisees, include Nicodemus. He's at the top of the pile. He...in fact, go back to verse 1...is a ruler of the Jews. A ruler of the Jews? That is right. He has reached the pinnacle. He has reached the highest level that anyone can reach. He is a member of the Sanhedrin. He is one of them, we learn in John 7. Seventy men chosen from all the leaders, the religious leaders of Israel, many of them Pharisees, some Sadducees, the most elite, in some cases the richest, in some cases the finest scholars, in his case, the best teacher, ex-high priests made up this ruling body called the Sanhedrin, the Seventy. He's a part of that group. This man is at the apex of religion. Very rare, by the way for a Pharisee to come to Jesus. There's only one in all four gospels, and it's him. The only other Pharisee we know about, Jesus went after him on the Damascus Road, Paul. This is very rare. He's the only story in the gospels of a Pharisee coming to Jesus.

He is full of fear, anxiety as hypocrites are. He fears judgment. He fears hell, punishment, exclusion from heaven. Pharisees believed in all of those things. Pharisees believed in divine sovereignty. Pharisees believed in human responsibility. The Pharisees believed in angels, they believed in the resurrection, they believed in heaven, they believed in hell, and he's got that much in his theology and that's enough to frighten him.

By the way, this is necessary angst for anybody to be saved, because until that fear rises in your heart, you don't pursue salvation. Well this man, verse 2 says, came to Jesus by night. Much has been written on the fact that he came by night, pages and pages and pages and pages. Let me tell

you what it means. It means this: he did not come during the daylight. That is what it means. That is the depth and height and length and breadth of what it means. If you asked me why did he come at night? I don't know. More, I don't care. You tell me, when is the best time to come to Jesus? Any time. Maybe his wife told him to clean the back porch and it got dark and then he came. I don't know. I don't know. I don't care. That's not the point.

It's not a metaphor of the darkness of his soul. He came. He was curious, he was concerned. He came with the sinner's angst, the sinner's worry.

Now you know, in Matthew 23, Jesus blistered the Pharisees. I just read it to you. "Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, hypocrites, hypocrites, hypocrites. Your house is left to you desolate," He says. "Judgment is going to fall on you. You kill the prophets, you stone those that are sent to you, you snakes."

But here at the beginning of His ministry comes this one Pharisee, and Jesus opens His arms to him, opens His heart to him. In a sense, Jesus treats him in the way that Matthew 12:20 says the Messiah would treat people. Matthew 12:20 quotes a passage from Isaiah 42, this is the passage. "A battered reed He will not break off, a smoldering wick He will not put out." When the Messiah comes, He will not turn down the broken people. This is a man who is a broken reed. This is a man whose fire is low. The Messiah will receive the broken and the smoldering who come to Him, and that's demonstrated here.

The conversation is initiated by Nicodemus. He says to Jesus, "Rabbi, we know that You come from God as a Teacher." Now back in verse 23 of chapter 2, many believed. What did they believe? Well here's an illustration. They believed that He came from God. You say, "Well, maybe just Nicodemus believed that." No. Listen to what he said. "Rabbi, we know you've come from God as a Teacher." We...he expands beyond himself and he's saying, "You know what? The many people who believe in You, this is what we believe. We believe You come from God as a teacher." Why do we believe that? "For no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him. We know You are a God-sent teacher."

Wow, that's a great, great confession. "We know, Rabbi"; by the way, He received that word every day of His life, He was called Rabbi, Rabbi; that's a term of great respect, honorable term. And now he turns and gives it to Jesus, which means he sees Jesus at least as his equal and He is the teacher in Israel. But You're one up on me because You're doing miracles that men can't do. Remember, miracles were not a part of life. That whole generation of people--never seen a miracle, never, never. There hadn't even been a prophet for 400 years, nobody they knew had ever seen a miracle; no ancestor had ever seen a miracle. Here were miracles all over the place in just a few weeks. "No one can do what You do unless the power of God is with him. We believe that You have come from God as a teacher."

Well that's a good start, isn't it? That's a really good start. Maybe like Moses, whom God attested with miracles around the life and ministry of Moses. Maybe like Elijah, Elisha whom God affirmed by miracles, a prophet like Isaiah, a prophet like Jeremiah, a prophet like Jonah, a prophet like Ezekiel. And just maybe in the back of his mind, maybe You are the Messiah. Maybe You are the Messiah. But he's like the five disciples in the first chapter who needed more information, remember their stories? They were followers of John the Baptist. John said, "Go follow Jesus." They followed Jesus and then at night they sat down with Him and asked all kinds of questions to fill out their faith and then believed and followed. He needs more information.

But this is a tremendous declaration from a man who was part...listen...of the enemies of Jesus who drove Him to the cross. Why is it important? I'll tell you why it's important. Here is a man who is a member of the most hostile, the most aggressive, the most angry, the most hateful enemies that Jesus had on earth, the Pharisees. And he is saying, "You are a teacher sent from God doing miracles." That is objective, first-person, plural because he says, "We know that You have come from God." This is objective, first-person, plural, eye-witness testimony to the authenticity of Jesus' miracles. And that's why John includes this. That's the polemical part of this. This isn't coming from John and Peter and Philip and Nathanael. This isn't the testimony of His followers. This is the testimony of one of His enemies, that He is on a divine mission empowered by God, speaking the truth of God as a prophet. This is not just polite. This is not just curious. This is not just cordial. This is not just hopeful. This is an amazing first-hand profession and affirmation of the miracle power of Jesus that affirmed Him as a Teacher sent from God, from a man who is at best indifferent, at worst hostile.

So Jesus didn't commit Himself to Nicodemus here as He didn't commit Himself to them back in chapter 2, verse 23, because this is not a sufficient faith to save. But it is a sufficient declaration to affirm that Jesus authenticated Himself as a teacher from God by His miracles. That's a starting point, that's a starting point.

You know, I commend Nicodemus. He took the road less traveled. Pharisee, who would want to be one of them? Who would want to worry about pulling a gray hair? He lived a most restricted life and, believe me, once you joined the association, everybody held you to those restrictions. The accountability was massive. In fact, perhaps one of the reasons he came by night was because that would be the only way he could isolate himself from the rest of the group to talk to Jesus.

He took religion to its apex. He took religion to its highest level, its noblest level. He reached the very pinnacle of it. He was as fastidious as fastidious could be. He was the guy who tithed the tiny little herbs, but his heart was full of fear and he wanted more information about Jesus. So he comes, a worried sinner.

Now come to verse 3, the Savior's way. How is the Savior going to respond to him? "Jesus answered and said to him." I always loved that in English, "Jesus answered and said to him." I don't know why they put "answered" there because he didn't ask a question, he didn't ask a question. He made a declaration, he made a confession. "We know You've come from God as a teacher, for no one can do these signs [these miracles] that You do unless God is with him." That's a confession, that's not a question. "But Jesus answered and said to him, 'Truly, truly I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.'"

Does that seem like an irrelevant comment? I don't know, I think if it would have been me I'd have said, "Well thanks a lot, Nicodemus. I appreciate that. I'm so happy to know that you believe that I have come from God, that I'm a teacher from God, I appreciate that." But Jesus ignores what he says, totally ignores what he says. Now this is a cryptic representation of the conversation. Let me promise you; I read that in three minutes earlier, that ten verses. This conversation with Nicodemus didn't last three minutes. It may have lasted hours; this is simply a cryptic summary of that conversation's most salient elements. So I'm sure Jesus was kind enough to ingratiate Himself to Nicodemus and respond His commendation.

But the point that needs to be made is that what Nicodemus said wasn't important to Jesus. It was what Nicodemus was thinking that was important. And if you go back again to chapter 2:23 to 25, Jesus knew all men and He knew what was in man. His omniscience. He knew what Nicodemus was thinking and he knew the sinner's worry, he knew his angst, and he knew what it was about was that he was afraid he was going to die and miss the kingdom. He knew he didn't have a relationship with God. He knew he wasn't in the kingdom. He knew he wasn't headed for resurrection life and heaven. That's what he knew. And so Jesus ignores what's on his lips and goes to right what's in his heart and reads him like a billboard. "Jesus answered and said to him, 'Truly, truly I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.'" That was the issue. He was afraid he would miss the kingdom. He feared that all his religion, all his ritual, all his ceremony, all his external righteous acts, all his silly conformities to the prescriptions that the rabbis had amassed over the centuries, all of that had not gotten him into the kingdom.

Now what is he talking about? The kingdom of God can be understood four ways: the universal kingdom, Psalm 93, "The Lord reigns, the Lord reigns, He reigns over the entire universe, He reigns over eternity." That's one aspect of the kingdom of God, the eternal universal kingdom.

The second aspect of the kingdom is the mediatorial kingdom. That is the kingdom of salvation and redemption that He mediates on earth as He uses human means to bring people to salvation. The third element of the kingdom is the millennial kingdom, the thousand-year reign of Christ at the end of human history. The fourth element of His kingdom is the new heaven and the new earth and the eternal kingdom. So there is the universal kingdom, God rules over all. There is the kingdom of

salvation, working its way out in human history to be followed by the millennial kingdom of the reign of Christ on earth. And then the eternal kingdom. What he's talking about here is not the universal reign of God which is over everyone, not the future millennial kingdom, not the future eternal kingdom in particular, but the realm of salvation, the special realm of the redeemed, those who are saved from judgment, reconciled to God in relation to Him forever, headed for resurrection and life in heaven. Jesus says you're not going to be in that kingdom; you're not going to be in that kingdom unless you are born again.

Our Lord didn't connect, at least in the text, with Nicodemus' comment. He went straight to his heart. And Nicodemus knew he had a place in Judaism; he had a very elevated place in Judaism because he was a son of Abraham, and because he was a dutiful Pharisee. But he had no place in the kingdom of God. Abraham was his physical father; God was not his spiritual Father. He was no better off than an immoral pagan. And he was trusting in his religion to get him there and he knew in his heart it wasn't doing it. The Savior then gave him the way and he starts by saying, "Truly, truly," you're going to see that 25 times in the gospel of John, Jesus says that. He says it again in verse 5 right here. "Truly, truly." And when He says that, He is correcting a falsehood. And the falsehood is the religion of Judaism.

I'm telling you the truth now--"Truly, truly"--emphatic, strong, the current Jewish idea that all Jews are going to be in the resurrection and in heaven because they're a part of the kingdom, unless they are willfully apostate or blasphemous, and that's what the Jews taught--all Jews are okay. Let me tell you something. I want you to let that falsehood go. Here's the truth. "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see or participate in the kingdom of God."

Now what is the bottom line here? Here it is. Religion in any form to any degree is completely useless in getting anybody to heaven. Did you hear it? Religion in any form to any degree at any level is totally and completely useless. It is ineffective even at its highest levels of devotion. The words of Jesus here that you must be born again are simply saying there's nothing to add because nothing you've done matters. You have to go back and start all over again. You have to slay, as it were, or have slain who you are and be replaced by a new creature. His words shatter once and for all every supposed excellence of man's religious devotion and behavior. All religious behavior, all moral behavior, all religious achievement, all ceremony, all ritual, all devotion adds up to absolute zero, all accumulated morality adds up to zero. All the merits of human goodness add up to zero. It's all zero. In fact, it's worse than zero. Paul says I counted all these things gain and then I saw Christ and I realized it was all excrement, manure, Philippians 3.

So that's Jesus' view of religion. All religion is useless, absolutely useless. You may be the Pope and all that religion is useless. You're no better off than a pagan atheist; it counts for nothing, it counts for nothing. The Savior's way, you must be born again. Five times He says that in this text. You've got to go back to the beginning, cancel, delete all religiosity, all religious achievement, all moral

achievement, all human goodness, all noble behavior--it adds up to zero.

Now, you're familiar with being born again, but let me tell you something about the word "again." It's the Greek *anōthen*, *anōthen*. It actually means "from above," "from above." It can be translated "born again," but it could also be translated "born from above," and both are correct. You need to have another birth from above, from above. You have to be created all over again to enter the kingdom from above, which is to say you make no contribution to it; that's why the analogy of birth is used. And again I say what I said at the beginning. You made no contribution to your birth; physically you make no contribution to your birth spiritually. That birth is not achieved by man. So it could be translated "you must be born from above." And by the way, *anōthen* is used at the end of this chapter, near the end in verse 31, and there it's translated "from above." He who comes from above, it's the same word. In chapter 19, *anōthen* is translated "from above." So it means "from above." You have to be born and you have to be born not by something done here but by something done above, above.

I don't...it doesn't matter whether you're a priest. It doesn't matter whether you're a religious leader. It doesn't matter whether you're an atheist who hates and rejects religion. You're all in the same boat. I know we get upset in America with the rise of atheism. You should be no more upset about the rise of atheism than you should be upset about the rise of false religion in any form 'cause they're all in the same boat. This has to happen from above.

Go back to John 1. At the very beginning John made this clear. In verse 12 he talks about children of God, children of God. And with that implies birth, doesn't it? In order to be a child, you have to be born. In order to become a child of God, you have to be born from above; that's what he says. He talks about having the right to become children of God by believing in His name. Then verse 13 makes it clear, "Who were born not of blood"...that is, this spiritual birth isn't something you inherit..."nor of the will of the flesh"...it isn't something you get because you want it hard enough..."nor of the will of man"--that is by some human devised religious scheme. But this is a birth of God who were born of God from above.

Regeneration is a divine miracle that happens from heaven. Nicodemus has physical life. He didn't contribute to it. He has no spiritual life. He needs it. But he can't contribute to that either because that's a work of God that comes only to those who cease trusting in themselves. In divine majesty with one glorious stroke, Jesus obliterates all the sinner's refuge, all the sinner's safety in traditionalism, formalism, ceremonialism, legalism, ritualism, ecclesiasticism, and points the barbed arrow of spiritual truth at the vital point. You have to discount all of that. It's manure. You need to be born again.

Jesus had respect for the Law. Great respect for the Law. He was the author of the Law. He fulfilled the Law. But He knew the Law couldn't save, the Law could not save. This man had one great need and it's the same great need that every sinner has. He needs to be regenerated, reborn from above.

This great truth of Christ splintered by destructive lightning coming out of the sky all the forms, all the formulas, all the dogmas, all the legalistic requirements, all the ecclesiastical rituals placed between a man and God. He went to the root of the issue, regeneration. Nicodemus didn't need more laws, more rules, more services, more sacrifices, more prayers, more candles; he needed to become a new creation; only God can do that. And that is every sinner's need.

Next time we'll talk about his response.

We thank You again, Lord, for the wonderful time that we've enjoyed this morning in fellowship and worship. We thank You for Your Word. It just illuminates everything. We understand the world. We understand things that people can't understand. Thank You that it elucidates everything. And we pray for sinners here who are worried sinners, who are hypocritical sinners, who know in their hearts that they're outside the Kingdom, that they're not headed for resurrection and eternal life, who are living in fear and doubt and dread, and anxiety, and angst over their condition. And some for sure have tried religion, some have tried it in an extreme way, and it has delivered nothing for the soul. I pray for those people, Lord, that they would cease trying and they would cry out to You to give them life as they put their trust in Christ to as many as received Him, God gives the right to become the children of God, born of God. May You give that life today, to Your everlasting glory we pray. Amen.

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