“YOU MUST BE BORN AGAIN”

Scripture: John 3:1-10.

This morning John Chapter 3 is where we’ll be. We are working our way through the Gospel of John. The recurring theme throughout this gospel – it's a point I will keep driving home every week – is that Jesus is God. He is God who came to Earth and became human. Jesus is referred to by the Apostle John as both the Son of man (Jesus’ favorite term for Himself where He identifies with us) and the Son of God. In Chapter 1 John calls Jesus “the Word.” “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God... And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.” So far we’ve heard testimony from several reputable witnesses that Jesus is the Son of God; we’ve heard the words of Jesus Himself and seen Him perform a miracle – all underscoring that Jesus is God.

This morning we’ll focus on Chapter 3, verses 1 thru 10, where Jesus has a private one-on-one conversation with a Pharisee by the name of Nicodemus and He tells him how to be saved.

READ John 3:1-3.

Nicodemus, a Pharisee comes to Jesus. The Pharisees, as you know were very legalistic. They tried to keep every detail of the law. They were zealous for the law. They were extremely religious. They believed that salvation could be obtained by keeping the law. They were the epitome of the type of person Paul warns about in 2 Timothy 3:5 – “Having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power. Avoid such people.” Their religion focused on the externals, but they had no genuine relationship with God. There was no love, no joy, and no peace…just an empty outward religious facade.

Verse 1 tells us further that Nicodemus was a ruler of the Jews. In other words he was a member of the Sanhedrin, a very important man, a scribe, a teacher, interpreter, instructor of the law, an O.T. scholar.

Nicodemus comes to Jesus by night. Why do you suppose he did this? Most commentaries suggest that he met secretly because of what his fellow Pharisees might think. We don't know for sure. The important thing is that he comes to Jesus. He seeks Jesus out. He says to Him, “Rabbi (or teacher or master), we know that you are a teacher come from God.” It's obvious. How? “For no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him.” Now remember from Chapter 2 that Jesus had been performing some miracles. Nicodemus had apparently witnessed some of these miracles. He says, "Listen, it's obvious to us that You are a teacher from God. Nobody does those kinds of things without God’s power."

Nicodemus does not know who Jesus is, but he knows He is from God. And since there has not been a prophet in Israel for 400 years, Nicodemus is probably thinking that He’s a prophet of God. Now whether or not Jesus was Messiah – that was debatable to most of the people, but certainly this Jesus is a prophet from God. So Nicodemus seeks Him out. Being a religious leader, he wants to know more. So he comes to Jesus. Here we see the drawing of God the Father. Jesus said, "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him” (John 6:44). And here we see how God begins to draw Nicodemus and he comes to Jesus – that’s a good place to start. We do not know when Nicodemus actually becomes a believer in Jesus but somewhere prior to John Chapter 19 he becomes a follower of Christ. Sometime prior to Jesus’ death on the cross Nicodemus comes to Christ. I’ll say more about that a bit later. As the story goes on, you see how God continually penetrates his heart. This is how God works. He begins to draw a man and sometimes it takes time. The salvation experience itself only takes a moment, when a person puts his or her trust in Christ. But leading up to that moment may take some time.

In verse 3 Jesus answers a question that Nicodemus doesn't even ask. He knows Nicodemus heart. That’s what the last verse in Chapter 2 says. “Jesus answered him, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.’”

Jesus knows that there was only one thing in the mind of Nicodemus and that is, “How do I get into the kingdom of God?” Nicodemus know all of the O.T. promises concerning God's kingdom. He strives to keep the law so that maybe someday he can be a part of God’s kingdom. Nicodemus in his heart really wants to know how to get to God. He wants to know how to be a part of God's kingdom, to be righteous, to be redeemed. This is what is in his heart. He is diligently seeking God and Jesus knows this.

Well, Jesus answers the question of Nicodemus' heart. Jesus says, “Nicodemus, you must be born again.” Jesus uses the terms of a physical birth to describe what must take place in a person spiritually. What Jesus tells Nicodemus is simply this: “You have to start over again.” In Matthew 18:3 Jesus says, “Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” You have to get all of your pre-conceived, religious ideas out of your head and come to God as a little child --- innocent child-like faith, completely trusting God that He’ll do what He says.

Now I’m sure this response surprised Nicodemus because he thought in his mind, like all Pharisees, that he was doing pretty well spiritually. He thought when he came to Jesus that he was OK. Perhaps there might be one or two things he had not yet done and Jesus would let him know what they were. But Jesus tells Nicodemus basically that keeping the law was not going to get Nicodemus into the kingdom. Religion doesn’t get any of us close to God. So, just like a person must start out in his or her mother's womb and then experience birth, then grow to maturity, so would Nicodemus – in a spiritual sense. Well it certainly was NOT the answer Nicodemus was expecting!

READ John 3:4.

Do you think Nicodemus missed Jesus point here? I am going to give Nicodemus a little more credit than that. He knows Jesus is speaking in spiritual terms in verse 3 and so he uses the same physical birth analogy that Jesus used in his response back to Jesus. Nicodemus knows that Jesus is from God and that perhaps He is a prophet. He understands the spiritual significance of what Jesus is saying. So he responds, “I don't think spiritual rebirth is possible. I don't think it can happen to me. I have been on this road of law and works all my life. You don’t really expect me to change now do you? You see, when a person gets hung up on works, it’s very difficult for them to see grace. So Nicodemus says to Jesus, “Can you explain to me a little more what I need to do? How can I possibly go back to the beginning?”

READ John 3:5.

The water Jesus is talking about is not physical water. We do not achieve salvation through baptism or ritual cleansing or any sort of religious bath. Water is merely a symbol just as it was in the O.T. – a symbol of purification. Well, then, what water is Jesus talking about? As a good Jew, what water would Nicodemus immediately have thought of? The water used for purification. He knows the law and whenever an object or a person was defiled and unclean, they had to undergo the ceremonial washing of water. That’s what the baptism of John the Baptist was all about – an outward symbol of an inward cleansing of the heart.

Nicodemus knows the O.T. scriptures and he knows Ezekiel 36:25-27. It says, “I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.” The O.T. teaching in Ezekiel says God's redemption takes two forms: (1) the sprinkling of clean water on us; and (2) the placing of God's Spirit in us. So Jesus is talking about the purification process that goes on inside when we get saved. What Jesus is saying is “Unless a person is cleansed, purified, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.”

So, when a person needs to be purified this is done by the Holy Spirit using the water of cleansing. And what is this water? What is the agent of cleansing? We know it is not physical water. Ephesians 5:26 tells us: “That He [Jesus] might sanctify her, having cleansed her [Paul is referring to the church, the body of believers in Christ] by the washing of water with the word.” The Holy Spirit takes the Word of God and purifies, cleanses the heart of men and women. When we got saved we were cleansed by the Word as the Spirit of God spoke it to us. We were convicted of our sin. At the point of salvation, when we believe and receive Christ by faith, God baptizes us with the Holy Spirit. We are then regenerated, baptized, indwelt and sealed all at the same point in time. This is why Paul tells the Ephesians that there is “one Lord, one faith, one baptism” (Ephesians 4:5). The moment of salvation is the only time when we get baptized with the Holy Spirit.

So, at the point of faith (when we receive Christ), the Spirit of God recreates you, regenerates you by the washing of the power of the Word and brings life where there was death. Jesus is saying to Nicodemus essentially, “You enter the kingdom of God only by the work of the Holy Spirit. All your laws and all your rules and all that other religious stuff that you do won’t get you into the kingdom.” Paul tells us in Romans 6:4, “We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.” The Spirit of God does a re-creating work in us. He changes us from the inside out.

This is heavy stuff! It’s a lot for Nicodemus to grasp. He’s been programmed for years to believe that it’s all about keeping the law and works and now Jesus is telling him that none of that matters, that it is about faith and the internal work of the Holy Spirit.

READ John 3:6.

You cannot re-create yourself. You can make all the New Years resolutions you want, give up a bunch of bad habits for Lent, do all the positive thinking you want. You can go after the law and you can do all these works, but you cannot do anything in your own flesh to achieve the kingdom of God. The Spirit of God must come in and renew you, make you a new creature. Here is the bottom line: your salvation is not accomplished by your own works, but by the working of the Holy Spirit in your life.

READ John 3:7-8.

Nicodemus must have been amazed at this whole concept that salvation is entirely the work of God; that he (Nicodemus) could do nothing to enter the kingdom of God. Man wants to believe that he has to do something to earn God's favor. People want to believe that there must be more to it than that. It cannot be just as simple as being “born again.”

Jesus compares the wind to the Holy Spirit. People are so hung up on the externals, the outward appearances. They want to see a sign. Well, we can’t see the wind, but we know that it’s real. Nicodemus, the wind is there. You see what it does. You see the tree branches moving and the leaves blowing. You feel the wind against your face, but you can't it. You don't know where it came from, where it's going. That’s the way the Holy Spirit is. It doesn't mean He's not there just because you can't see Him. You cannot see the Holy Spirit with your physical eyes, but you can see His results in your life and in the life of others.

Nicodemus, like so many other people, was hung up on the trappings of religion, of works, of doing certain things a certain way. It was hard for him to understand what Jesus was saying. Notice how Nicodemus responds…

READ John 3:9.

There doesn’t seem to be a whole lot of progress made since verse 4. It appears that he’s gone absolutely nowhere in his faith. His mind is running around in circles. He just can't throw aside the law and accept this total re-creating work of the Spirit within him. He just can't do it. So Jesus gives Nicodemus one parting shot – something for Nicodemus to chew on…

READ John 3:10.

You mean to tell me, Nicodemus that you do not know that the work of God takes place on the inside of a person? That justification is by faith and not by works? Nicodemus should have known all of this from the O.T. scriptures. Paul in both Galatians and Romans uses nothing but the O.T. to show people that God has always declared a person righteous by their faith. Abraham was a primary example of that. Jesus says, “Nicodemus, I'm surprised at you, that you did not know this.”

Was Nicodemus converted here in John Chapter 3? We don’t know. There certainly is no bold declaration of his faith recorded. I believe that Nicodemus was the type of man (I’m this way myself) that needed some time to mull the things Jesus told him over in his mind. I do believe that eventually he came to an understanding and by an act of his own faith received Jesus Christ as his personal Savior and Lord. I mentioned John Chapter 19 earlier. Verse 39 of that chapter says this: “Nicodemus also, who earlier had come to Jesus by night, came bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds in weight.” Then it says that he and Joseph of Arimathea “took the body of Jesus and bound it in linen cloths with the spices, as is the burial custom of the Jews.” There is strong evidence to indicate that Nicodemus eventually becomes a believer in Jesus Christ. But in the passage we looked at this morning in John Chapter 3, Nicodemus isn’t quite there yet. But he eventually got there.

Let me close with this thought: What we need is not to spend more time at church, more rules, more services, more sacrifices, more prayers, more candles, more anything else. What we need, just like what Nicodemus needed, is to be born again; to have a relationship with God and be a part of His kingdom through a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. “Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’”