

Study Guide for the Central Church of Christ 4-22-18

April 22 we will study John 3:1-15. Discussion questions are:

1. If you could live your life over, what changes would you make?
2. When you were baptized what were you thinking?
3. What is erroneous about the phrase, “born again Christian”?
4. What impresses you about Nicodemus?
5. If Nicodemus wanted to join a church today, how would he be received?
6. What passage in today’s text teaches being born again is not optional?
7. What does “born again” imply about changes in one’s life?
 - a. In what ways might a person seek to substitute pruning and fertilizing for being born again? (By focusing on repenting of a few specific sins and by focusing on developing healthy spiritual practices rather than turning to God for a whole new beginning.)
8. What did Jesus want us to understand by his illustration of wind?
9. How can you tell if a person has been born again?
10. What specific thing about himself did Jesus want Nicodemus to believe? (vs. 14)

Sermon:

The Bible uses lots of metaphors to describe how salvation happens. Familiar metaphors are: wash, remission, darkness into light, alien to citizen, enemy to friend, orphan to adoption, grafted in, blindness to sight, war to peace, death to life, stumbling to walking. The metaphor that is best known and used almost universally is “born again”. We hear a lot today about “born again Christians” as if there was some other kind. Most of the time when the phrase “born again Christian” is used it means there are Christians who are not “born again”. Typically “born again Christian” means a Christian who has had an emotional religious experience that was cathartic.

So it is very important that you hear Jesus challenging that narrow definition of “born again”. He says, “You **must** be born again.” It is not an option. As Jesus uses the metaphor there is no room for born again and non-born again Christians. You are either born again or you are not Christian.

In the text today Jesus tells us 3 things about being born again. He tells us...

- Why you have to be born again.
- What it means to be born again.
- How to know if you are born again.

Let’s look first at why you have to be born again. In verses 3, 5, and 7 he says, “Unless you are born again you cannot see the kingdom...you cannot enter the kingdom of heaven...and you **must** be born again.” Why is he so emphatic? Notice who he is talking to - Nicodemus, who was a Pharisee. The Pharisees were Bible scholars, typically narrow and judgmental but Nicodemus is different. He is open and teachable.

He is a teacher. He is in the upper echelon of the Pharisees as a member of the exclusive Sanhedrin. Jesus says to him, "**You** have to be born again." He was saying to him, "All of your Bible knowledge, all of your career achievements, all of your religious prestige adds up to zero. If you want to have relationship with God, you have to start over."

Does Jesus' comment to Nicodemus seem a little abrupt to you? Nicodemus says complimentary things, "*Rabbi...teacher who has come from God...God is with you.*" And he scarcely has the words out of his mouth before Jesus replies, "*No one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.*" Why so abrupt? Because he sees where Nicodemus is going. Nicodemus thinks Jesus is simply a great teacher. Jesus says, "I am not simply a teacher. I have something far greater to do than adjust your beliefs." Every other founder of every other religion came as a teacher and nothing more. Jesus says, "You have to have a miraculous re-birth or you will never even see the kingdom, let alone enter it. Just listening to my teachings won't get it done. You have to be born again."

Imagine you have a peach orchard and you want to go into the applesauce business. What do you have to do? Somebody suggests, "Prune the peach trees." You can prune peach trees all you want and you will never get apples. Somebody else says, "Mulch and fertilize the peach trees." You can mulch till your mulcher breaks and you still won't get apples from peach trees. You have to completely dig up the peach orchard and re-plant it with apple trees. People are always trying to come to God by pruning their lives rather than totally digging up and re-planting their lives. People attempt coming to God by reading the Bible more, praying more, attending church more, attending a support group, getting involved in a ministry at church, even dropping a sin or two from their lives. And that never works.

What happened with Nicodemus that made him change? Jesus became more real to him than his money and his religion. When you see the King, you don't respond by changing a habit or two or changing your attitude in a few critical areas. When you see the King you don't respond with, "Lots of folks are getting baptized, so I guess I should too." When you see the King you see the need to be made completely new.

How do you know if you are born again? Jesus says the Spirit is like the wind. You can't see it but you can hear it and feel it. The wind is invisible but you can see its effects. If I said to you, "There is a really strong wind blowing through this auditorium right now." you would not believe it because you cannot see any effect of wind blowing. The papers are not whipping around. Your hair isn't being messed up. We all know there is not strong wind blowing in here because there is no evidence of it.

I want you to think beyond the time you walked down a church aisle and went through the process of baptism. Some of you may have been told to just say the sinner's prayer. Others of you may have some kind of certificate given to you saying you officially became a Christian on a certain date. Many of you would say, "I know I am a Christian because I know how I felt on that day." Let me ask you a very tough question. How is it possible for the awesome power of God to come into your life like a strong wind and not

muss a hair on your head? How is it that your neighbors do not see evidence of the Holy Spirit in your dealings with them? How is it that you have been born again but continue to be just as negative as anybody else in the world, just as uncertain about the future, just as anxious about your money as those you seek to convert? Think of it in terms of the fruit of the spirit, the evidence of the Holy Spirit in your life. Is there depression in your life? The fruit of the spirit is joy. Is there prejudice against others? The fruit of the spirit is love. Is there dishonesty? The fruit of the spirit is faithfulness. Do some people get on your nerves? The fruit of the spirit is patience. Is there an area of your life that is out of control? The fruit of the spirit is self-control. What am I suggesting here? I'm not suggesting that everybody run down the aisle and get baptized again. I'm suggesting that you bow your knee before the God of this universe and acknowledge to him every area of your life that is not a clone of Jesus Christ and admit your need, not for reform, but rebirth.

Don't you love Nicodemus' questions? "*How can a man be born when he is old?*" What he means is, "I don't get it." So Jesus uses the metaphor of the wind. Knowing the Holy Spirit dwells in you is like knowing the wind is blowing. Nicodemus asks the question I always ask when I hear something that is a bit beyond my reach. It's in vs. 9, "*How can this be?*" The way I ask that is, "Huh?" So Jesus responds with this strange story from the wilderness wanderings of Israel. It's a story about a brass serpent on a rod being held up for people to look at and be healed of snakebite.

Nicodemus asks 2 questions. He asks in vs. 4, "How does the new birth work?" The answer is, "Like the wind." Then he asks in vs. 9, "How can it work for me?" The answer is, "By looking to me when I am lifted up."

Let's look at Jesus' answers. Nicodemus, the literalist, asks if Jesus is suggesting a man re-enter his mother's womb. Jesus replies he is not talking about physical birth, "*being born of the water*", but spiritual birth, "*being born of the spirit.*" Jesus' analogies are water and wind. You know a baby is about to be born physically when the mother's water breaks. You know a baby in Christ is born when you see the effect of the Holy Spirit in a person's life as obvious as the effect of the wind blowing in their hair.

What was Jesus driving at with this comparison between a blowing wind and the Holy Spirit? The new birth is of a supernatural origin. Just as you cannot make the wind blow, you cannot make yourself a Christian. Nor can you produce the fruits of the spirit in your own life. If you put a bowl of oatmeal and a bowl of meat in front of a lion he will always choose the meat because he is carnivorous. A thousand times out of a thousand the lion will choose the meat. If you put in front of a human being an opportunity to serve God and an opportunity to serve self, a thousand times out of a thousand he will serve self. Human beings are by nature selfish. If you are to be a Christian something miraculous has to happen to change your nature. Born of the wind, born of the spirit, it's of supernatural origin.

Nicodemus' question in vs. 9 is, "How?" Jesus' answer in a word is "believe". He says in vs. 15, "*...everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.*" What is it that one is

supposed to believe about Jesus? Listen to vs. 14, “*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.***” In Numbers 21 the children of Israel rebel against God and God sends poisonous snakes to bite people causing death. When Israel repents God provides grace to heal them of snakebite in the form of a brass snake on a pole that, when they look on it, results in healing. Jesus says, “I am going to do something like that for you. One day if you look at me lifted up on that cross and believe I did it for you, then you will find forgiveness for your sins.”

The people who looked on that brass snake knew they were dying. So people who come to Jesus seeking to be born again, do not come saying, “I have a couple of areas in my life that are out of control.” They come saying, “I am dying spiritually and cannot heal myself. I understand you died in my place. I believe in you. I believe your blood atones for my sins. I believe!” And the moment you are baptized into Christ you become vividly aware of what Jesus’ blood was for. Paul said, “*All of us who were baptized into Christ were baptized into his death.*”

Will you today say to him, “There is venom in my soul. It is killing me. I don’t need to be better. I don’t need to make a few changes. I need to be born again!”

Unless there is air, there can be no fire. Unless there is rain, there can be no crop. Unless you are born again, there can be no Christianity.