

Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council. <sup>2</sup> 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.”

<sup>3</sup> In reply Jesus declared, “I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.”

<sup>4</sup> “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!”

<sup>5</sup> Jesus answered, “I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. <sup>6</sup> Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. <sup>7</sup> You should not be surprised at my saying, ‘You must be born again.’ <sup>8</sup> 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.”

<sup>9</sup> “How can this be?” Nicodemus asked.

<sup>10</sup> “You are Israel’s teacher,” said Jesus, “and do you not understand these things? <sup>11</sup> 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. <sup>12</sup> I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things? <sup>13</sup> No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of Man. <sup>14</sup> Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, <sup>15</sup> that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.

<sup>16</sup> “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. <sup>17</sup> For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. <sup>18</sup> Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son. <sup>19</sup> This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. <sup>20</sup> Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. <sup>21</sup> 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.” (John 3:1-21)

### Nicodemus: You Must Be Born Again

Have you ever wanted to just talk to Jesus? Imagine the wisdom we could get! Imagine the questions we might get answered. Well, on this side of heaven, we won’t get to do that. But the gospel of John records quite a number of conversations that Jesus had with various people. This summer, we’re going to listen in on some of them in order to know our Savior better. Today, we’re going to start with a conversation that Jesus had early in his ministry, the conversation with Nicodemus.

Who was Nicodemus? John tells us he was a Pharisee and a member of the Jewish ruling council, the Sanhedrin. So, Nicodemus was obviously a pretty important guy in Jewish society. We know that later, he and another member of the Sanhedrin, Joseph of Arimathea, buried Jesus. That tells us that the conversation he had with Jesus on this particular night was not wasted breath. John tells us that he came to Jesus at night – when no one else would be watching. So even though he was a leader of the Jews, he was still a Pharisee. He was concerned about his own righteousness and what other people were thinking of him. Some of his peers were probably already attacking Jesus and Nicodemus didn’t want to get on the wrong side of those guys. But he had questions. Jesus’ answers to his questions surprised and puzzled him: **You must be born again.**

#### I.

Nicodemus started his conversation with Christ with a complement: **“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.”** That statement speaks volumes about the opposition of the Jewish leadership. They knew that Jesus had to be from God, but they still refused to accept him. That’s when Jesus, **“I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.”**

Of course, for you me, that statement isn’t terribly surprising. We’ve heard it all our lives. But Nicodemus had never heard anyone say that before and he asked Jesus a fairly obvious question: **“How can a man be born when he is old? ... Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother’s womb to be born!”** That question has always conjured up a fairly comical picture in my mind. And Nicodemus was

deliberating pushing the expression to the absurd. But he did that because he didn't get Jesus' point. So, Jesus said, **"I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit."**

I wonder if that clarified things for Nicodemus. I wonder if it's clear to us what Jesus meant. If you do a quick internet search, you'll find a fair amount of debate about what Jesus meant by this. But Jesus was talking about baptism. Remember, almost the whole city of Jerusalem had already gone down to the Jordan River to be baptized by John. Throughout Jesus' ministry, he encountered people who had heard John and been baptized by him. That baptism prepared the people for Jesus. But it also prepared them for the far greater baptism that Jesus himself would institute after he rose from the dead – the baptism that you and I have all experienced. Jesus pointed Nicodemus to water and the Spirit to take our sins away. He pointed to what God does in that sacrament as the path to eternal life.

Jesus explained why we all need that baptism. He said, **"Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit."** What did Jesus mean? From my parents, I inherited the color of my eyes – as well as my receding hairline. I inherited whatever raw talents I have in academics and music and sports. Many researchers today believe that a huge part of our emotional make up is actually inherited, so in many ways I am the person I am today because of who my parents are. And I passed so much of that on to my children. But above all else, from my parents and grandparents and ancestors going all the way back to Adam and Eve, I inherited my sinful nature and I passed that right along to my children and any grandchildren God should see fit to give me. It's the most significant thing they will ever inherit from me. That's just as true for you as it is for me.

We are all born sinners. Anyone who doesn't believe that hasn't spent any time with small children. We don't have to teach them to be selfish. We don't have to teach them to say no, or to throw temper tantrums. They know how to do that all by themselves. It's built into them. We have to teach them to share. We have to teach them to respect other people and obey their parents. We have to teach them to deal with life in a positive and healthy way. You know what? None of our children learn those lessons perfectly any more than we parents did. We are all still selfish and self-serving by nature. Even if we've managed to adopt a discipline that minimizes and limits that truth, the very fact that we need a discipline to do that shows what we are by nature. Flesh gives birth to flesh. Sinners give birth to sinners. God says that all sin – all selfishness, all temper tantrums and defiance and egotism – deserves his punishment with death and hell.

But the Spirit gives birth to spirit. When God works through the gospel in holy baptism – or in the spoken word – he makes us new. God gives us faith and that faith trusts in Jesus and we live. Jesus points to the miracle of the gospel when he says, **"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."** Baptism seems like nothing. When I was in the army, I had a friend who was a member of the Church of Christ. Not only do they not baptize babies, they believe that you must be completely immersed in the water for it to be a real baptism. When he found out that I was baptized as a baby, and that the pastor did not shove my head under the water, he said in his South Carolina accent, "You weren't baptized. You just had water thrown on you!" It didn't make sense to him that God could or would work through something so simple as water and the word. But that's what he says. Jesus compares it to the wind. When you're standing outside and a breeze blows across you, you can't tell where that wind started or where it's going to stop, even if the weatherman thinks he knows. When you're standing in your backyard, all you know is that it's blowing. That's the way the Spirit works. God doesn't bother to tell us why this works. He says that it does. You must be born again of water and the spirit to enter eternal life. But that new birth is totally the work of God. For most people, God does that work first in holy baptism.

My friends, you were baptized. The Holy Spirit worked for you. Even if you don't remember that day – I don't – it was still real. The gospel promise that Jesus connected to that sacrament worked. God washed all your sins away. God gave you new birth. God made you his, today and forever. That is what we learn from this conversation with Christ. **You must be born again, born of water and the Spirit.**

## II.

You've probably heard people talk about being "born again Christians." It's not as popular as it once was, but you still hear it. What does that mean? Many people use it to mean that they have a personal relationship with Jesus. They're more than just Christians, more than just believers. They're born again Christians. But the Bible never uses the expression that way. When Jesus spoke of new birth, he meant simple faith in him. To enter eternal life, you must be born again. You must be alive spiritually. You must have faith.

After pointing out that we all are born unbelievers, Jesus went on to talk about how we get that faith. His conversation with Nicodemus got a little critical. Nicodemus was supposed to be Israel's teacher, and yet he and his fellow members of the Sanhedrin did not understand how God works through the gospel. Jesus called that work "an earthly thing" because it's something God does here on this earth. What happens in heaven is simply beyond us. Jesus is the only one who can speak of "heavenly things" because, as he says it, **"No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of Man."** And he used that statement to refocus Nicodemus on how our sins are taken away.

How does God deal with that flesh that we're all born with? How does God deal with that sinful nature that's so good at being selfish and that's so hard to train? Jesus says that Son of Man must be lifted up – he must be crucified – and everyone who believes in him will have eternal life. Then comes the most famous scripture passage of all: **"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."** That passage tells us exactly how God dealt with our sin: he gave his one and only Son. He sent Jesus to die for us. God's punishment for all that ego and selfishness is death and hell. So, the Son of God came down from heaven and took on human flesh. He lived a life of perfect obedience to God. Jesus was the one person in all of human history who had no sinful pride, no egotism, no selfishness at all. Everything that he did, to include being conceived in the womb of the Virgin Mary, was for us. Then he died and paid for all our sin. He suffered the death and hell that God demands as payment. He did that for the world – for you and me and everyone.

Now, all of us who believe in him have eternal life. All of us who have faith. All of us who are born again. And how are we become born again? We truly can't enter again into our mother's wombs when we're old. We can't even do that when we're seven or eight. We're born again through the gospel. The Holy Spirit comes in the good news about Jesus and he reaches into our sinful hearts and he gives us the faith that trusts in all that Jesus did for us. That gospel comes in two forms – both of which have the power to give us new birth. It comes in the spoken form: the word. And it comes in the visible form: the sacraments.

The sacrament that Jesus focuses on here is baptism, because that's the sacrament that brings us into the church. Communion is a sacrament, too. It's also the visible gospel and the very power of God. But the purpose God gave to communion is to sustain our faith, now that we believe. He specifically tells us that only people who understand it should commune. But baptism is sometimes called "the sacrament of initiation." What is an initiation? When I was in high school and then in college and even at the seminary, we had initiations. Today, those things are gone because of anti-hazing laws. But our initiations weren't hazing. Nobody was forced to drink until we passed out or anything like that. But we did go through a number of unique activities. At the seminary, one of them was jumping into the pond that used to be there and finding golf balls. When it was all done, you were one of "us." You had been initiated.

Baptism isn't a funny practice we do to have a shared experience like that. It's a far greater initiation. The Holy Spirit works through the gospel connected to the water and he forgives our sins and gives us faith. For those who already have faith when they're baptized, the gospel still works. It renews and strengthens that faith because it still gives the promises of God. But for our children, especially our babies, baptism gives a new birth. It gives faith and makes those kids truly "born again." With that new birth comes the promise of eternal life. That's the point Jesus was making in this conversation. **You must be born again, born to saving faith.**

Baptism is not the end of our spiritual journey. For most of us, it's the beginning. Now, several times in my ministry, I have baptized people just days or hours before they died. But that's not the way it usually goes. Baptism makes us part of God's people. But then comes years of life on this earth. Jesus talks about that life in the last part of his conversation with Nicodemus. He talks about Light coming into the world and everyone who does evil hating the Light of Christ because that Light shows all that's wrong with their lives. But he says that those who live by the truth come into light so that everyone can see that what we do is really done by God. You see, we are now new people. We have indeed been born again. Now, by the power and grace of God, we live a new and holy life. Live that life by faith in Christ. Amen.