

**John 3: 4-6; “To Be Born of the Spirit”, Sermon # 12 in the series –
“That All May Honor the Son”, Delivered by Pastor Paul Rendall
on March 3rd, 2013, in the Morning Worship Service.**

I spoke to you last Sunday about the subject of regeneration from the vantage point of what it means to see the kingdom of God. You must be given the faculty of spiritual sight in regeneration to be able to discern spiritual things. Even the truth of the gospel requires the illuminating light of the Spirit shining into your heart in the preaching of the word or in the reading of the Bible in order to understand that you are a sinner who needs a Savior. Now, this morning I want to speak to you about regeneration from the vantage point of the New Birth. I want to describe for you what happens when a person is born again, or born from above, by the Spirit of God. 1st of all - When a person is born again God the Holy Spirit infuses a new principle of spiritual life into their heart, making them into a new creature. (verses 3 and 4, and 6b) 2nd – When a person is born again, the Holy Spirit washes and cleanses them, and sets them free from sin’s bondage. (verses 5 and 6a) And 3rd – When a person is born again, the Holy Spirit also begins to renew them to the image of Christ. (verse 6b) When we see and understand these things better, we will be able to draw near to the Communion table this morning with real confidence; knowing that our salvation does not rest upon us or our best efforts; it rests upon Christ and what He did for us at the cross, and the Spirit’s taking these good spiritual things of Christ and applying them to our hearts.

1st of all – When a person is born again the Holy Spirit infuses a new principle of spiritual life into the heart of a sinful person, making them into a New Creature.

Jesus said to Nicodemus: “Most assuredly, 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?’ “Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?” And Jesus says in verse 6 – “That which is born of the Spirit is spirit.” Nicodemus could not understand the phrase “born again”. He only could conceive of it in a literal physical sense. He asks Jesus how a man could be born when he is old. Evidently he was speaking about himself. He thinks that Jesus is speaking absurdly when He tells him that he must be born again. He thinks that He is telling him of things which are utterly impossible. A man cannot enter his mother’s womb and be born, can he? This is why, so often it is the case, that most unbelievers cannot understand spiritual things; they appear to them to be foolishness when they first hear about them. Nicodemus was used to thinking about spiritual things in relation to the writings of Moses in the law, in relation to ceremonial observances that he performed, and his being a teacher of moral and ethical truths. Nicodemus, no doubt, was a man who was intelligent and kind. He was a well-respected teacher of God’s Old Covenant people whom he loved. But

Nicodemus did not understand that something more than this was needed in order for him to truly come to know God. God is most interested in the heart of a man; that was what he needed to know. God is most interested in what is going on there in your heart; what the motivation is, for all that you are doing. Jesus was speaking to him about “heavenly things”; He was speaking to him about the spiritual realities of Nicodemus’ heart in relation to God; and this Nicodemus could not understand. C.H. Spurgeon says in one of his sermons: “The unregenerate heart can no more understand the gospel than a horse can understand astronomy; it is altogether beyond the comprehension of the carnal man.”

Let me try to explain this further to you. Turn over with me to 1 Corinthians Chapter 2, verse 11. “For what man knows the things of a man except the spirit of the man which is in him?” “Even so no one knows the things of God except the Spirit who is from God.” “Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might know the things that have been freely given to us by God.” “These things we also speak, not in words which man’s wisdom teaches, but which the Holy Spirit teaches, comparing spiritual things with spiritual.” “But the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned.” You should know from this verse that in your natural state, the state that you were born, that you are not able on your own to discern spiritual things. This continues on with you, as you grow up, and it stays with you all of your adult life, unless you are born again. You may not know it, but there is something there in your heart, which by nature, is opposed to the One and only True and Living God. This is the truth; that in the heart of every natural man; that is, in the heart of a person who has not yet been regenerated, there is a pride of knowledge related to their own observations on the meaning of life. Just being educated by a University will not help you come to right views of yourself or God. The carnal mind as it says in Romans 8: 6 is enmity (hostility) to God. Any unbeliever, whether educated or uneducated, is unwilling to come to Christ that he might find life. And yet, you here find here, Nicodemus was seeking Jesus out and wanting to know more about Jesus’ mission. That was grace at work in his heart. “Rabbi, we know that You are a teacher come from God; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him.” But Jesus cuts through all of the outward glory of His miracles to get right at what He knew that Nicodemus really needed. Jesus’ mission, to seeking sinners, is to open their spiritual understanding to the truth of their need of the New Birth. Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a man is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.

A person has to be given spiritual life in order to have a spiritual birth to become a new creature by the grace of Christ. He must be given spiritual life, and this life comes from God Himself. Now you will notice here in our text in verse 6 that it says that the one who is born again has been given a new “spirit”, small “s”. “That which is born of the Spirit is spirit. That which is born of the Holy Spirit, is a

new spirit; even in an educated, thoughtful, moral man. The Holy Spirit must infuse a whole new principle of spiritual life into the heart of the person chosen by God. Ephesians 2: 1 – “And you He made alive, who were dead in trespasses and sins, in which you once walked...” The One who is doing the begetting is the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Divine Trinity. The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of our Lord Jesus Christ, and yet He is a separate person of the Godhead from God the Father and God the Son. But both the Father and the Son are also involved in the New Birth of this educated religious man who is about to receive this glorious gift of life. Together the Father and the Son have sent the Holy Spirit to do this glorious work of regeneration. Turn with me over to 1st Peter Chapter 1, verse 3. “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His abundant mercy has begotten us again to a living hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled and that does not fade away, reserved in heaven for you.” So we see here, that being born again is entirely a matter of God the Father’s mercy. In Election the Father chose Nicodemus to eternal life from before the foundation of the world. “Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow of turning.” “Of His own will He brought us forth; He begot us, by the word of truth, that we might be a kind of first fruits. Of His creatures.” (James Chapter 1, verse 19) The Father and the Son began this mighty work in Nicodemus in conjunction with the Holy Spirit, by first shining glorious illuminating light into his heart to awaken Nicodemus to his true need. Then in accordance with this illumination of the truth, He will cause Nicodemus to be born again. He will infuse spiritual life into Nicodemus’ dead heart; the Holy Spirit working with the same power that would raise our Lord Jesus Christ from the dead. This is how people have been saved in both Old Testament and New.

O what a glorious gift, this gift of spiritual life is, that leads immediately to the regeneration of the heart. Nicodemus was in the preparatory stage of this; the illumination of his mind to truth. He was confused about the New Birth, but the Lord would make it plain to him over time. He came to Jesus by night, as he was then, in his time of unbelief. But by the power of the New Birth at a specific point in the future, in God’s time, Nicodemus would be born again and by the power of the spirit, and eventually he would become very bold for Christ. Even though a Pharisee, and even though a member of the Sanhedrim, he would become a true and faithful disciple of Jesus Christ. Religious men who come to Christ are not born of blood, (that is because they have blood relations who know God, nor are they born of the will of the flesh, nor are they born of the will of man. They are only born of God, and by His will they are brought forth. And once they are born, then they have the life and the power to become children of God by believing in His name. A person does not cause himself to be born physically into this world. He has parents and he has a God who forms him in his mother’s womb. Neither

does a person cause themselves to be born again spiritually. They are dead in their trespasses and sins; they cannot make themselves alive. But God can, and He does, according to His own choice of them, and His own will and purpose concerning them. Ezekiel Chapter 36, verse 26 – “I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh.” The New Birth implants a tenderness in the heart of the one being regenerated. They are thereby made a new creature in Christ. Have you been born again by the Spirit of God? Then remember, dear Christian, that this greatest of miracles, the giving of spiritual life, has been done for you personally, individually, and particularly as an act of the mercy of God. As you come to the Lord’s table, remember that you have Christ and His life in your soul. Remember that everything that is good in you, everything that is righteous, everything that is holy, is there in you because you have been given a new life, a new disposition; a seed of righteousness has been planted within you. A fountain of living waters has been opened up in your heart, which will spring up to eternal life. You are a new creature in Christ because spiritual life has been infused into your soul. Rejoice and give thanks to your Savior for purchasing this for you with His sufferings and His death, and for applying it to you by the power His resurrection, through the work of the Holy Spirit.

2nd – When a person is born again, the Holy Spirit washes and cleanses them, and sets them free from sin’s bondage. (verses 5 and 6a)

In verse 5 Jesus says, “Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter the kingdom of God.” “That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.” This statement of the need to be born of water has led some commentators and pastors alike to think that the word “water” refers to water baptism. But this cannot be what it is referring to here, because every other time that baptism is spoken about, or commanded by our Lord Jesus in the Scriptures, it is spoken of in literal physical terms by Him. He does not speak of baptism using the metaphor of water. He speaks of water baptism literally. “He who believes and is baptized shall be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned.” He does not say, “He who does not believe and is not baptized shall be condemned.” Being baptized with water baptism is not being shown here by Jesus to be absolutely essential to regeneration or being saved from our sins in that place in Mark 16: 16. He said to the thief on the cross, who never was baptized, “Today, you shall be with me in Paradise”. No, it is only those who do not believe in the gospel who will be condemned. But this being born of water in our text here in John 3 is being said by the Lord Jesus, to be absolutely necessary to salvation. So we must conclude that the metaphor of water here means something else.

I think that I can show you what it is, if you will turn with me over to the book of Titus Chapter 3, verse 4. “But when the kindness and the love of God our Savior appeared, not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His

mercy He saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit, which He poured out on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Savior, that having been justified by His grace, we should become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.” This is what the metaphor of water means in John Chapter 3, verse 5. It means that a person must be washed spiritually speaking; their heart must be cleansed and purified in regeneration and the New Birth in order for that person to be saved. This washing and cleansing takes place in the act of the Holy Spirit regenerating the sinner's heart. The “washing” of this passage directly relates to being “born of water and the Spirit” in John 3, verse 5. This should be extremely helpful to the person who might be confused by Jesus' use of the term, “unless you are born of water and the Spirit”. Being born of water is an act of the Holy Spirit whereby He cleanses the heart and the conscience of the sinner to make room for His further work, His on-going work of cleansing and purifying the heart in progressive sanctification. There is an initial work of the Spirit, cleansing the sinner in regeneration, which sets them apart to holiness. This work of the Spirit is absolutely essential to salvation. Listen to the Apostle Paul says in 1 Corinthians 1: 6: 9 – “Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God?” “Do not be deceived.” “Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor sodomites, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, or extortioners will inherit the kingdom of God.” “And such were some of you, but you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God.” Notice the order in the salvation of a sinner. They are told about sin, and how they cannot inherit the kingdom of God if they hold on to it. Both their being convinced and their coming to believe in the gospel is as a result of the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit. Having been born of the Spirit they then believe in the gospel and are justified by God because their eyes and their heart have been opened to the truth. They are given the faculty of spiritual sight, they are given life, and they come to call upon the name of the Lord in prayer, and receive Christ, and they are saved.

But, there is something more that we need to speak about in terms of the regenerating work of the Spirit, and that is the will of man. Regeneration is not by the will of man. In the regeneration of the heart by the Spirit of God, a sinner, even a religious sinner as Nicodemus was, comes to see their inability to do what pleases God by the power of their own wisdom and determination. As the Father begins to draw them to Christ, they find their heart being turned to consider the truth of their need of the New Birth. The enlightened and sensible sinner knows that they cannot change themselves to free themselves from their sinful habits and their fear of what it might mean to leave false worship behind. They find themselves believing in their absolute need of Christ to set them free from their fleshly and carnal ways of thinking and doing things; thoughts which reject the will and word of God. They come to see that the principle of self-wisdom and their

own self-efforts at righteousness, which have formerly reigned in them, are wrong ways of thinking about God and themselves. And further, they see that their coming to know God and the meaning of life will only come when God delivers them from the controlling power of their fleshly mind. They come to see that “those who are in the flesh cannot please God”. (Romans 8: 8) They see that sin brings them into bondage to their flesh, the world, and the Devil; “He who commits sin is the slave of sin, and the slave cannot remain in the house forever”; even if they are a very religious person in that house, as Nicodemus was. That which is of the flesh is flesh, and that which born of the Spirit is spirit.

You need to understand this morning that the flesh is the sinful nature in a person. This sinful fleshly mind, this way of thinking, rules all of your thoughts and activities until Christ comes and sets you free from it. When you believe in the truth of the gospel, you are released from the ruling reigning power of the law of sin, and you are free indeed. Christ breaks the chains that bind you. To think about these words, “the flesh” in a more noble light from the standpoint of the unbeliever, the flesh is the self-principle in you. It says this within your heart: “I am self-sufficient in my own wisdom”. “I can justify myself in the sight of God by own goodness.” “Really, I do not need the truth of the Bible, or the work of the Spirit in order to be pleasing to God.” “I can figure out life on my own.” “I will go to a church and join a church which most suits my own thoughts and desires about worship.” “I will be religious in my own way.” “I do not need to be changed in my nature to serve God.” “I do not need to be guided and governed by the truth of the Bible”. “I do not need preaching; I am smart enough to decide these things for myself.” “I do not need to repent of my sins; my sins are not bad enough to condemn me.” That is fleshly thinking, my friend. That is the fallen nature which you have inherited from Adam, which is always evaluating both God and people and all religious things by the light of your own fallen understanding. There is just enough of Adams’ original righteousness in each and every one of us, before we are born again, to reject everything related to the gospel. There is more than enough fleshly pride to make us think that we know better than God, and better than Christians who are trying to get us to see our need of Christ and the New Birth,. This is why we need to be set free from the flesh, this law of sin and death, which is so very much a part of us. This is why we needed Christ. This is why we are remembering Christ’s death and resurrection in the Lord’s Supper once again. God has had mercy. He has broken the chains which held us in fleshly thinking. Let us come down front now and I will give you my final point on the New Birth.

3rd – When a person is born again the Holy Spirit also begins to renew them to the image of Christ.

We need to look more carefully at the mercy of God, once again, in what God does through the Spirit’s work in the New Birth before we partake of this Supper. Turn over to Ezekiel 36 once again. Verse 25 says, “Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and

from all your idols.” “I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh.” The word “flesh” in this verse is not sinful flesh, but rather it refers to a tender, submissive heart and mind. That is, that when you are regenerated by God in the New Birth you begin to see things in an entirely different fashion from what you once did in your sinful fleshly ways of thinking. The heart of stone, your coldness, your hardness, your deadness towards God and His will and His word and His ways, is taken away. When you are born again, there is no more resistance to God and to His expectations of you which you find written in His word. You begin to realize that now that God has begun a good work in you, in regeneration, that He will perfect it in you until the Day of Christ. You now see that your problem, all along, has been that you needed your heart re-born and renewed by grace so that you would want to do all that you do religiously, for God’s glory. Do you see now that the work of the Holy Spirit after He causes you to be Born Again is to conform you to the image of Christ? His mission is to bring you into increasing conformity to image of Christ. This precious work could not be done without Christ having gone to the cross for you, dying for your sins there, so that He could purchase for you a New Heart, and give to you, a new spirit. And this conformity to Christ cannot come about unless you are going to receive, each and every day, an on-going work of the Spirit’s imparting grace to you in your life day by day, all the way through this life, until you die and come to eternal glory. Christ died for both; the regeneration of your heart, and so that you could become increasingly holy and more like Christ. I think that there is a lot of confusion out there in Christendom about the work of the Spirit. Some believers have mistakenly thought that the work of regeneration only began in the New Testament, for didn’t Jesus say in John 7: 38 – “If anyone thirsts, let him come to Me and drink.” “He who believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.” And the Apostle John comments on this by saying: “But this He spoke concerning the Spirit, whom those believing in Him would receive; for the Holy Spirit was not yet given, because Jesus was not yet glorified.” How could Nicodemus, or any other Old Testament person be regenerated by the Spirit before the resurrection? It is because John is not speaking of regeneration in that verse. He is speaking about the indwelling of the Holy Spirit which would come on the Day of Pentecost to every person who had believed. The Apostles and others like Nicodemus that had believed in Christ had already received the Spirit, as a spirit of regeneration and sanctification; as a spirit of illumination and conversion; as a spirit of faith and adoption. On the Day of Pentecost were going to receive a larger, even an extraordinary measure of his gifts and grace, to qualify them for greater work and service.” (John Gill on John 7: 39) But you and I need to understand as we come to partake of this Supper that the indwelling of the Holy Spirit always comes to believers, following their conversion, not before it. All the work of the Holy Spirit that is taking place in the heart of a person in regeneration sets the stage for the

Holy Spirit coming to dwell with them forever. It is after you believe that you receive the Holy Spirit. Ephesians 1: 13 – “In Him you also trusted, after you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation: in whom also, having believed, you were sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise.” Before you believed you were illumined and regenerated; after you believed you were sealed and indwelt. Now can you rejoice that such a wonderful and powerful work not only once took place in you, in your regeneration; but can you not also rejoice that such a wonderful and powerful work of giving you grace will bring you more and more to be like the Savior whom you love?