

Born From Above **John 3:1-8**

We'll read this evening John chapter 3, verses 1 to 8. And I think this evening our particular attention is going to be on verses 6 and 7; perhaps only verse 6. John chapter 3, verses 1 to 8. Before the reading well pray. Please join me in prayer.

Our Father in heaven, we do pray that you would now bless the reading of your word to us. We pray that by your Spirit, you would make the word come alive in our hearts. We pray that from your word, we would come to know and to understand you better. We ask these things in Jesus' name. Amen.

John chapter 3, starting at verse 1: “¹ Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. ² This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, ‘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.’ ³ Jesus answered him, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.’ ⁴ 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?’ ⁵ Jesus answered, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. ⁶ That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.’ ⁷ Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’ ⁸ The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.’” Amen.

Well by now, this will be the third time we've looked at this passage, and I'm sure we're familiar with the set-up. A man named Nicodemus comes to Jesus. Nicodemus is a Pharisee and a leader among the Pharisees. Later on, Jesus says that Nicodemus is “the teacher of Israel,” implying that amongst his peers, it would seem that Nicodemus is something of a leader, something of a standout. And yet, Jesus' words to Nicodemus were, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.” As I've pointed out a number of times, that “born again” could also be translated, “born from above.”

Nicodemus, for all his good works, for all his zeal as a Pharisee, for all of his very diligently learnt Bible knowledge—and believe you me, the Pharisees learnt their Bible like no one you've ever met. They could basically, at the drop of a coin, recite books from the Old Testament—whole books, without an error. They studied the Scripture, as it were, through a magnifying glass, again and again and again and again. They were wrapped up in the word of God and the law of God.

And yet, what Jesus said to Nicodemus was, “Your pharisaical behaviour, your efforts at self-improvement, your works aimed at bringing you into a right relationship with God are all worth nothing. They are of no value, they amount to nothing, they gain you no advantage. They're all a waste of effort and time because you've got a problem, Nicodemus. The problem is you are still a sinner. The problem is you're still in the sins in which you were born, and no matter how hard you work, you can't leave them behind, because they're a part of your very nature, a part of your personality, your psyche, your makeup. If you, Nicodemus, were some kind of spirit, you'd be a fallen spirit. You'd be a demon.” That's what Jesus had to say to Nicodemus.

And Nicodemus is kind of “everyman,” in a way. He’s everybody in this world. You know, I heard a person ask a question just last week, right here. I didn’t ask the question, I was eavesdropping from across the room on a conversation. And the fellow was asked, “If you died tonight, do you think you’d get into heaven?” “Oh, yes, I think I’d get into heaven.” “Why do you think you’d get into heaven?” “Because I think I’m a pretty decent person. I think I’m a pretty decent person.”

Please don’t judge the man, if you’ve worked out whom I speaking of. He’s coming to us, he’s sitting under the word, he’s not here at this moment. He’s coming to us, he’s sitting under the word. We should be praying for that man, desperately praying. You see, he can come here and he can sit under the preaching of the word, whether I’m the preacher, or whether it’s someone else bringing the word. Last week, Peter brought the word, and I thought it was such a clear word. Peter spoke about the new creation, and he spoke of the desperate need that a person has of that re-creating power of God to be unlocked in a person’s life. You know, I thought it was so crystal clear, you couldn’t imagine that someone could sit under it and say, “I think I’ll get into heaven because I’m a pretty decent person.”

Apart from the work and the power of the Holy Spirit, that word, that teaching—even the greatest preacher on the earth today, whoever that may be—apart from the work and the power of the Holy Spirit, those words don’t hit the heart. They don’t come with light. They don’t come with power. So you have people imagining that somehow or other, they’re good enough. And when you ask them about the grace of God, here’s how they imagine the grace of God works: You do the very best you can. It’s kind of like a set of scales. You’ve got bad stuff on your left hand and got good stuff on your right hand. You do the very best you can, and hopefully, what’s on the right hand will balance with what’s on the left hand, and then the grace of God comes and says, “Okay, I can see you’re trying really hard, and I’ll accept your efforts as they are.”

That’s not the way God works, that’s not the way God judges, that’s not the way God has revealed Himself to us in Scripture, that’s not the way salvation has been revealed to us. But people think, “I’m a pretty decent person. I do okay. I do the best I can. After all, I haven’t actually murdered someone.” And you know what the murderer’s thinking? The murderer’s thinking, “I do okay. I do the best I can. After all, I haven’t actually raped someone.” And you know what the rapist is thinking? “I do okay. I do the best I can. I’m not actually a pedophile.” And you know what the pedophile’s thinking? “I do okay. I do the best I can. I’m not actually a murderer.” It just gets nowhere. Everybody imagines that their particular sin, their particular wickedness—it’s not the worst. I’m one of those people at the beach—I’m never the furthest out from the sand. I’m never the furthest out into the deep water. I figure, “There’s a reason the sharks come from the deep part. So I figure the person who’s furthest out, they’re the target. And if I’m halfway between them and the beach, well, I’ll see them go under, and I should have a few minutes to get myself back onto the sand.”

And that’s the way people think about themselves as sinners. They always imagine, “I’m not the one who’s furthest from the shore. I’ll see the one who’s furthest from the shore get into trouble, and I’ll safely make it back.” No. It doesn’t happen that way, it doesn’t work that way. Scripture says it doesn’t happen that way. When God judges, He judges according to His own nature, and His own nature is holy and good and righteous. And what can stand in the presence of a holy, good, and righteous God, other than His own righteousness? What can you show God other than His own goodness?

So, my friends, go there in your own power, come to God in your own power, come to God in your own strength, come to God in your own what you feel to be goodness, what you feel to be your own righteousness, your own goodness, your own good works, deeds, however you want to put it—and I can tell you that the reply that comes from that throne of judgment will be, “Depart from me, I never knew you.” I never knew you. You didn’t have the life of God within you.

We can’t be any better than our parents. How could we be? Even on a purely biological standard, none of us can be any better than our parents. You know, research is showing that the human genome is actually in decline. Humanity is not getting bigger, stronger, better, faster, smarter. We’re not all on the way to becoming Six Million Dollar men, I’m sorry. (I know, I’m showing my age. Six Million Dollar, who? His name was Steve Austin, he was a good guy.) We’re not on the way to becoming the Six Million Dollar Man, or the Bionic Woman. Not happening. It’s on a decline.

If on a simple biological measure, we understand that things aren’t getting better, well how is that we think that on a spiritual measure we’re going to be better than those who came before us? How is that we think we, the offspring of generation after generation of sinners, generation after generation of people who sin—how is that we think that we might be better than they? We’re fooling ourselves if we think that. It’s nonsense. It’s rubbish.

We trace our lineage back through Noah to Adam. We’re all related and we’re all the outlaws. You’ve got in-laws and outlaws. Well my friends, in God’s family, apart from Christ, you’re all the outlaws. I’m the outlaw too. We’re all lawbreakers, covenant-breakers, unwelcome in that family, out of Christ, apart from Christ. Our natural birth is not enough.

There’s a little saying, and I’m sure many of you have heard it. “Born twice, die once. Born once, die twice.” We understand that one. Born twice—born into this world, then born of the Spirit of God, you will die once. You will pass through death from this life and go into the presence of the Lord. But born only once—born only into this world, not only will you die and depart this world, but Scripture calls the judgment of God the second death. Not only will you depart from this world, but you will come to God on the judgment day, and there you will suffer the second death, to be thrown, as it tells us in the book of Revelation, into the lake of fire, where burning never ceases—always suffering destruction, but never being destroyed. There is no relief for the wicked—none. We should never forget that. None.

People want to hang their eternal future on the idea that I’m not the furthest from the shore. There’s always someone swimming out a bit further than me. I’m not the worst criminal in the jail. I’m not the worst sinner in the town. There’s always someone a bit worse, we imagine. Therefore, I’ve got nothing to worry about. Foolishness. Nonsense.

What do we have to be—or, what can’t we be? Well if we just turn back to John chapter 1, looking at verses 12 and 13. ¹²“But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.” So what we need to be is children of God. You understand if you are a child of God, you would have the nature of God. Being a child of Adam, Adam the first, you have the nature of Adam.

“But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.” Let’s look at this thing about being born—¹³ “who were born, not of blood.” What does that mean? Not of any special family line. John here in this part of the gospel is making a point against the Jews. The Jews are imagining, they’re the biological offspring of Abraham, and therefore have nothing to worry about.

“No,” says John, “not of blood.” Lords, ladies, nobles, Jews, you name it—the blood doesn’t help. “Nor of the will of the flesh.” Nor of the will of flesh? What’s that mean? Nor of the will of desire. The “flesh” in the Bible is not just the skin. It’s the nature. Not born by the will of the flesh, not born from human desires, “nor of the will of man.”

You know there was a pseudo-science that’s still around. Back in the days, they called it eugenics. And by this thing called eugenics, for example the Nazis imagined that they were going to breed a super-race, a breed of genetically superior human beings. And they believed that to get this genetically superior human race, what they needed to do was they needed to sterilize, or kill the inferior. And they needed to control the match-ups, to try and get a genetically superior race.

Well, the gospel says that can’t work. “Nor by the will of man,”—you’re not going to get this life by the will of man—“but of God.” Now where it says “but of God,” you’ve got to understand that that “will of flesh, will of man,” that word “will of,” John is just basically using a convenient shortcut for “the will of God.” Born not by the will of the flesh, born not by the will of the man, *but* by the will of God. Born by the will of God, God granting life where He wants to see life; God granting the power of the Holy Spirit where He wants to see people who are obedient to His will. Born by the will of God, turning back to John chapter 3.

So we’ve got a problem. We’re born of blood. We’ve all got a bloodline that goes back to Adam the first. We’re born of the flesh. We’ve all got a sin nature. David said, “Behold, in sin did my mother conceive me.” He’s not saying his mother was an unrighteous woman, or an unclean woman; he’s simply saying that you can’t escape the consequence of sin in the human race. We’re born—blood goes back to Adam, flesh goes back to sinners—we’re born by the will of man. Someone decided they wanted to have a child. We’ve got to be born by the will of God. You’ve got to be born of, by the will, of God. God has to grant life.

Back at John chapter 3, verse 5: “Jesus answered, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.’” That’s where we finished up last time we were in John chapter 3. And if you remember, we traced out that idea of water and the Spirit back into the book of Ezekiel, where Ezekiel spoke of those who were going to be washed in clean water and granted life by the power of the Holy Spirit. Then we traced out that motif of water and living water, and we saw that water also stands as a metaphor for the Holy Spirit, and we found that water also stands as a metaphor, for example in the book of Ephesians, for the word of God. One must be born by the Spirit, through the word of God, *to* the word of God.

One of those aphorisms, or modern proverbs that’s often spoken in church circles: “What you win them with is what you win them to.” I think that’s true. That’s why we are trying here to win people with the word of God, because I want them won *to* the word of God. We want to see people won to the word of God, submitting to the word of God, learning from the word of God. If you win them with gimmicks, you have to keep the gimmicks coming to maintain the interest.

If you win them with the word of God, the word of God will do the work. And that person, a sheep feeding upon God's pasture, keeps coming back to where the pasture is best—and that's the word of God. And that's where we ended up last time we were here.

Now in verse 6, Jesus says: "That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit." That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Now Jesus here says "that which is born of the flesh is flesh," and many want to tell us that all He's saying there is, "That which is born naturally is natural, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit." I'm not so sure of that. I think John meant more than that. I think Jesus meant more than that when He said it.

I think this theme of the flesh and the Spirit is the very same theme that the Apostle Paul picks up and works with in the book of Galatians. For example, where he says that the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh, and these are contrary to one another, so that you cannot do the things you wish. Or, as we just read earlier in Romans chapter 8 in the first eight verses, where Paul speaks about how those who are in the flesh cannot please God. What's this state, then, of being "in the flesh"? Let's have a quick look at Romans chapter 8 again. We'll start reading at verse 1:

¹ There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. ² For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death. ³ For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do." Stop. What's Paul saying? Is he saying there's anything wrong with the law? No, the law is good. The problem with people in the flesh is that they cannot keep the law. The law spells out God's requirements. People in the flesh cannot keep the law. The weakness of the Old Covenant was not the law; the weakness of the Old Covenant is that those people, like us, could not keep the law.

³ God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, ⁴ in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit." Notice. What's the requirement of the law? Righteousness. "The righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us."

And this is what so many Christians either forget, or they've never heard, or they have never understood. Jesus didn't cancel the law. Jesus didn't abrogate the law. Jesus didn't nullify the law. The righteous requirements of the law are to be fulfilled in us, by the power of the Holy Spirit. We can't be justified by law-keeping. But I'm telling you, my friends, if you are truly a born-again, justified Christian, you do actually live in fulfillment of the requirements of God's law. That should be your new nature, your tendency. That's evidence of your new life. You live in accordance with the law of God.

"He condemned sin in the flesh, ⁴ in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit." Now what's this walking "not according to the flesh but walking according to the Spirit"? Well Paul explains it a bit further. ⁵ For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit."

So it's a way of thinking. It's actually a way of thinking, it's the way your mind works. If you are in and of the flesh, your mind is thinking in a fleshly way. Your desires are fleshly. Even your good desires are fleshly. The desire to justify yourself by works is a form of idolatry. And it's against the law, because the law says you're a sinner, and you can't fulfill the law. You're a lawbreaker, your mind is set upon the flesh. *But* you can have a mind upon the Spirit. They set their minds on the things of the Spirit.

Now what are the things of the Spirit? Well, the God-breathed word, the Holy Spirit-inspired word of God. For example, the praises of God, obedience to God, all of these things are things of the Spirit. Personal holiness, prayer, all of these things come from and by and through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Verse 6: "For to set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace." Now here's the kicker: "⁷ For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot. Those who are in the flesh cannot please God." Cannot. Those who are in the flesh *cannot*. It means are unable to. It means, no matter how hard they try, the don't. They cannot please God.

So who are the ones that are pleasing God? Those who have life in the Spirit; those who have life in, from, and by the power of the Holy Spirit. Apart from the Spirit of Christ, we are dead. People might be walking around, people might appear to be alive, they're talking. But they're dead. Outside of Christ, they are dead. Their minds are set upon the things of the flesh. And they *cannot*—cannot please God. It's an absolute statement. They cannot please God.

So how can a person be saved? What can be done? How can it work? How can a person be brought into the kingdom of God if they're dead and they can't do the things that are required? The Lord Jesus Christ—He came to earth, He lived amongst humanity, God amongst man, wearing flesh—truly God, truly man, pleasing God in all that He does. Miraculous power, healing, He died, He was crucified in front of hundreds of public witnesses.

It wasn't a secret thing. As the apostles say in the book of Acts, this wasn't done in a corner. This was done out in the open. Everybody knows what happens when the Romans crucify a man and they kill him—he's dead! You don't get a little bit dead. He's dead! Dead, dead dead! Heart not beating, blood not moving, brain not thinking, lungs not breathing. Whatever measure you want to put on it, when a man is crucified by the Romans, he ends up dead!

Three days later, the tomb is empty. And a whole pack of disciples—who before this were confused and fearful, and understanding nothing—Scripture makes it plain, when they went to that tomb, they expected to find a dead body. They expected to find nothing other than a dead body, but they found a living Saviour, raised from the dead, before many witnesses—reliable eye witnesses. What more is needed?

If to become a Christian was only a matter of making the right decisions, if it was only a matter of coming to the right conclusions, if it was nothing other than a matter of sheer logic, understanding, why isn't the whole world Christian? And why doesn't every preacher preach to a revival? If all it is is a matter of understanding, why is that the most persuasive Christian in the world can't make somebody become a Christian, like our friend, whom I mentioned, who last week was relying on his own goodness? He'd just heard a great message about the need of the

new creation, and he thought he was good enough, he was a decent person. Don't judge him—I say it again. Pray for the man. He's coming to us. Praise God. I pray he keeps coming, and the seed that is the word finds the good soil.

Do you get what I'm saying? If it's a matter of persuasion, all we need to do is find the most persuasive people in the world, and persuade them to be Christians, and then set them free. Let them go out and persuade everybody else to be a Christian. If it's a matter of sales, we just need to find the best salesmen. If it's a matter of popularity and skill, we just need to find the best sportsmen, the best musicians, the most attractive actors—you name it! That's all we need to do. Target the most high-profile influential people, convince them of the truth of Scripture and of the life and the work of the Lord Jesus Christ—convince them of those things, and then let them go out and do the convincing, because they're so smart, clever, and persuasive.

It doesn't work, does it? You know it doesn't work. It can't work. People don't just make a decision. It's not just changing your mind. You know my favorite example. Becoming a Christian's not like walking into the coffee shop and deciding that you feel like a latte instead of a cappuccino. "You know, I think I'll have a latte today. Just feeling a little bit different—forget the chocolate sprinkles." That's not what's involved in becoming a Christian, is it? You need life from God. The thing is, Scripture tells us that without faith, it is impossible to please God.

Now let's have a look here at Romans chapter 8, verse 8: "Those who are in the flesh cannot please God." What do you need to please God? You need faith to please God. Without faith, it is impossible to please God. Those who are in the flesh cannot please God. So is it a matter of just getting a person to make a decision? Is it a matter of laying out the gospel in all its inexorable logic, in all its clarity, its historic witness? Is that all you need to do? No. No. Those who are in the flesh cannot please God, so what do they need? Life. From whom? The very Spirit of God.

Where did life first come into that man made of clay? You know, you've got that picture in the book of Genesis. I've always got this picture in my mind, God modeling in the dirt. Got some very beautiful soil. I grew up on a farm. I love fertile soil. You know, I look at good farms where the soil is well-worked, and I just think I'm looking at something beautiful. I'm imagining the Garden of Eden, and God has the best soil that this earth has ever seen anywhere, at any time. And it's shaped perfectly into the likeness of a man, perfectly. And it says that God breathed His breath into the man's nostrils, and he became a living being. His breath is another picture or a metaphor for the Spirit of God. So the first life in that first man came from where? It came from the Spirit of God. But then came death, through sin.

Well if there's got to be life again, where can it come from? Who can be the re-creator, other than the Creator? Just as Adam needed the breath of God to bring him to life, we, the children of Adam, need the breath of God to bring us to life. We need to be born from above; we need to be born again. The truth is, Scripture says, Jesus says, we can't even see it. One can't even see the kingdom of God unless one is born again, or born from above. Scripture says we can't enter it, unless we are born again, born from above, born by water and the Spirit. You can't even enter it. I've said to you before, I'll stress it again. If you want to summarize reformed theology in one sentence, Regeneration precedes faith. Three words: Regeneration precedes faith.

Look at what it says in Romans chapter 8: “Those who are in the flesh cannot please God.” Is faith and repentance a thing that’s pleasing to God? Answer: Of course. Of course, we know that. What’s the message of the gospel? Believe and repent, or repent and believe. Two sides of the one coin. That’s conversion—repentance and believing. What does it say? Those who are in the flesh cannot please God. They just cannot. They just cannot, apart from the work of the Holy Spirit, apart from the effectual call of God—that call which gives life in the very calling, the call that comes from God.

Now God can use us Christians to make that call. Our words can be the effectual call, through the work and the power of the Holy Spirit. But it has to be God making His effectual call. “Effectual.” What does that mean? It works. It has power. It is effective. It makes something happen. When God calls someone to life, my friends, they’re alive. That’s it. When God says, “That one lives,” they live. They come to life. They have life in the Spirit, and suddenly, what’s their nature? Suddenly, they can do the things that please God. Suddenly, they have the power of God.

What did Jesus say back there in John chapter 1? To them He gave the right to become children of God. I’m looking at John chapter 1, verse 12: “But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, [to them] he gave the right to become children of God.” Power. The right, the power, the authority. To them He gave the power to become children of God. That’s the power of God’s effectual call, which as I’ve said, can come through us, it can come through our sharing of the word, our sharing of the gospel, our love for our neighbour. God empowers His church to do His works.

Why is the flesh in this state? That’s a fair question. Why is the flesh in this state? In a general way, it’s pretty simple. If Adam and Eve were made to bear children in their own image, well what was their image after they had sinned? It was sinful. Now Adam and Eve, all sinners, we’re still all bearing the image of God. But it’s like a cracked mirror. You look in a cracked mirror, you can still see the outline and the shape of the person in the mirror. It’s blurred, it’s distorted, but the image is there. That’s the sinner. We’re all still bearers of the image of God—blurred and distorted.

But Adam and Eve gave birth to children after their own likeness, and after sin, what could they give birth to, or what could they parent but sinners? If you want perfect children, you must have perfect parents. And if you have imperfect sinners for parents, you cannot have anything but imperfect sinners for children. That’s the judgment of God.

I want us to turn to Romans chapter 1. We’re going to look from verse 18: “For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth.”

First of all, I’ll ask you a question. How well do you understand what you’re reading? What’s the tense of that sentence? Future? The wrath of God *will be revealed*? No. Past? The wrath of God *has been revealed*? Or is it present? “The wrath of God *is revealed* from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth.” Present tense. God even now is revealing His wrath against ungodliness and unrighteousness.

Let's keep reading: "¹⁹For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them." What does that mean? I've told you before, the truth is, there's really no one who's truly an atheist. There are rebels against God, there are those who hate God and will not, under any circumstances, acknowledge God. But they're not atheists. They're just suppressing the truth, because God has shown it to them. God has revealed Himself. Creation reveals God. Everything that God does is a revelation of God.

Let's keep reading: "²⁰For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse." Stop. "They are without excuse." Is there any excuse for any person who comes before God on the day of judgment? They are without excuse. God judges righteously. He does no wrong in judging. He has every right to judge. And even now, He judges. They are without excuse. Even now God judges, and remember as I said, this is present tense. He's judging now.

Keep reading. Verse 21: "For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. ²²Claiming to be wise, they became fools, ²³and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things. ²⁴Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, ²⁵because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen." God gave them up, surrendered them to their own lusts, let them suffer their own wickedness. God gave them up.

Let's keep reading. Verse 26: "For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; ²⁷and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error."

Well, that goes down well in today's modern age, doesn't it? That's pretty explosive—*their error*. "Oh no, perversion is natural. It's not perversion at all. It's the way we were born." No. You've been given up. You've been handed over. God gave them up.

Verse 28: "And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done. ²⁹They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, ³⁰slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, ³¹foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. ³²Though they know God's righteous decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them." Gave them up, gave them up, gave them up. Handed them over, handed them over, handed them over.

Why can't people just "make a decision"? Because the judgment of God has handed them over to the penalty of their sins. Even now in this life, even now in this world around, God is enacting His judgment against sin—righteously. He has the right to enact His judgment.

But even now, God is saving. These people who have been given up, given up, handed over—it says, “Given up, given up, given up.” You would think that having been given up three times, and having been victims of these sins three times, you would think that they’re lost, wouldn’t you? They’re finished. They’re given over. They’re condemned. There’s no good news for them. There’s no hope for them. That’s what you’d think.

Let me read to you First Corinthians chapter 6, verses 9 to 11. “⁹Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, ¹⁰nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God.” Hear this: “¹¹And such *were* some of you. But you *were* washed, you *were* sanctified, you *were* justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.” “Were.” “You were.” “Such *were* some of you.”

And so even though these people who have been thrice handed over to their sins, three times handed over to the hardening of their hearts by the righteous judgment of God—*Yet, yet even yet*, if they are called, they will be saved. They will be drawn out of their sins, they will be drawn into the kingdom of God, they will be drawn to Christ Jesus for salvation and sanctification and justification and cleansing. Amen!

So the judgment of God is being revealed, and so the mercy of God is being revealed. God is good. God is good. Always remember that. Is justice a good thing? Yes. We want to see justice. When people drive cars through crowds of people, killing bystanders left, right, and center—we sit there and think, “I wish they had the death penalty, because I’d like to see a hanging.” We want to see justice, and that would be just. According to the Scripture, I say that would be just. God said, “A man sheds a man’s blood; his own blood shall be shed.”

Because God created man in the image of God, we want to see justice. Justice is a good thing. Is mercy a good thing? Yes. I want to see mercy. Mercy is a good thing. If there was no mercy, I’d be condemned, you would all be condemned, none of us would have any hope. Justice and mercy—both of them reveal the goodness of God. Both of them reveal the holiness of God. Both of them reveal the righteousness of God. Both of them should cause men to fall to their knees and worship the living God, for He is good, and everything about Him is good! And He reveals His goodness through His actions.

And so even sinners who cannot inherit the kingdom of God in their sins, from amongst their number, God is calling people to salvation. Such *were* some of you! Granting life—a new life in the Lord Jesus Christ; granting the power to obey God; granting the power to enter into the kingdom of God; granting the gift of faith. Faith. Without faith, it is impossible to please God. What did we just read in Romans chapter 8? “Those who are in the flesh cannot please God.” They cannot do the things that God requires. But God grants life!

Books have been written—“Ten Steps to Being Born Again,” “How to be Born Again,” instruction manuals. “If you do these ten things, you will be born again.” And you know, there’s a whole false theology out there. “If you’ve walked to the front, if you’ve made a public profession, if you’ve signed a prayer card, and if you meant it at the time you signed it, you’ve got nothing to worry about. You’ve got your free ticket to heaven, punch it at the door as you go out, and live as you please.” What a lie. What a dirty, stinking, evil, rotten lie. Sugar-coating

the road to hell. You know, you can go to hell walking along a pathway strewn with rose petals. But when you get there, it's still hell.

If your life has not been changed, if you have not been dragged out of your sins, my friends, you have not been born again. God will save His elect where He finds them. He will save them in whatsoever condition He finds them. But He does not leave people in the dirt. He sets His love upon a person, then by the work and the power of His Holy Spirit, He makes that person lovable, in His sight. You're justified at the moment of faith. You're saved at the moment of repentance.

Works don't earn you salvation, but salvation makes you work, not because you have to, not because you're trying to earn anything, not because you're trying to pay back anything. You work because you love the God who gave you life. You work because you're thankful. You work because you've been given the very life of God and the life of the Lord Jesus Christ.

I think so many of our problems in so many churches would be solved if people would understand one thing: When we talk about being Christ-like, we're not talking about being effeminate and nice and lovey-dovey. That's not what we're talking about. We're not talking about being soft-hearted, cooing, "That's not the way God would like it, and I'm a little concerned you're not quite doing it right." You've heard it all. I've heard that kind of nonsense.

When we talk about being Christ-like, what was Jesus like? Perfectly righteous. He fulfilled the law of God. You know those things called the Ten Commandments? He kept them! Each and every one of them, to perfection. He kept them. They're His laws. His laws. He's the eternally begotten Son of God. John has already told us, "No one has ever seen God. The only-begotten Son in the bosom of the Father, He has made Him known."

The God who gave Moses the word, the Ten Commandments, is the same God who, in the Son, took upon Himself flesh and came to earth to live a life of salvation for us—a redeeming, saving life, a perfectly good and holy and righteous life! It's His law!

If you want to be Christ-like, my friend, let me tell you something. One of the things that we'll know that you're Christ-like by, is the fact that you're living in obedience to the law. You're fulfilling the requirements of the law! If you're not, you're not Christ-like and don't pretend that you are. It's that simple. The righteous requirement of the law will be fulfilled in us. That's what the Apostle Paul said in Romans chapter 8. We just read it. Remember?

That law which God gave reveals *His* righteousness, and that law which God gave is the righteousness that He wants to see in His people. And by the power of His Holy Spirit, He gives it. He gives it. First of all, we're justified. We're counted as righteous in Christ. You don't earn that. You don't work for that. It's a gift from God. You're clothed in the righteousness of Christ. It's a gift from God, freely given upon faith and repentance. It all happens in a (snaps fingers), you know, in a split second—you're counted as righteous in the sight of God.

But you're also regenerated. You're given a new heart. You're given a new life. You're expected to be living evermore in Christ-likeness, growing in Christ-likeness, growing in the fulfillment of the law. We're supposed to be like the Jesus who saved us. He was no sinner. That's why He's our Saviour. You would think that is so patently obvious that it doesn't need

saying, but so many Christians just don't want to know about it, or at least so many who call themselves Christians just don't want to know about it.

They say they believe in Jesus. They say they're born again. And they don't want to know the truth, and they don't want to know the law of God, and they don't want to understand that God's requirement is righteousness—a gift which He gives! He declares you righteous, and by the power of His Spirit, He sanctifies, He sets apart. And then in an ongoing sense, He continues to sanctify and makes us more Christ-like.

And we should be growing, day by day, in our Christian life. All of us should be able to say, "I am not the person I once was." And all of us should also be saying at the same time, "But I am not yet the person that I should be. I'm not the person I once was; I'm not yet the person that I should be"—that constant tension of conviction and rejoicing.

As you come into the presence of God, my friends, you're coming into the light. The light shows up the darkness. The most holy Christian, a truly born-again, regenerate—you know, I roll off all the adjectives—Christian, the most holy person you've ever known is the person who knows that they're a sinner, saved by grace.

The Apostle Paul, remember, considered himself to be the worst of sinners. I'm sure if ever we had met him on this earth, we would have thought he was the most wonderful Christian man you could ever imagine. But he saw himself as the worst of sinners. Why? Because he's coming ever closer to the presence of God, coming ever more into the light, as God worked His work of sanctification in his life. And what happens when you come into the light? You see your own sins, and so you become more tender-hearted.

You see, something's happening to hearts, isn't it? What's happening to the hearts of sinners, the unrepentant? They're being handed over, they're being hardened, they're becoming worse and worse, people are going deeper and deeper into the slime. What's happening to the hearts of Christians? They're becoming more and more lively, more and more tender to sin, more and more easily convicted, more and more desirous of repentance. God's in the business of changing hearts. You need to understand, in judgment the hearts get worse; in grace the hearts get better.

We must have—we must have the power of the Spirit of God. You can't be born again by any other means. You can't be born again by any other power than the will of God. It's not up to convincing people. Now I'm not saying, Be a jerk. I'm not saying, Be an unpleasant fool. Of course you've got to be as winsome as you can. Of course we've got to be as convincing as we can. Just because God uses sinners doesn't mean that he wants sinners to sin.

God wants us to be Christ-like, but understand something: You can't make a person come to life. You just can't do it. You can't cause a person to become a Christian. I don't care how much mental pressure you can apply. I don't care how good you are at winning arguments. I don't care if you've got logic on your side. I don't care if you're just a naturally outgoing and persuasive person. Apart from the Spirit of God, empowering your words and calling a person into life, granting life where there was nothing but death—it's not going to happen. When you understand that, I'll tell you something—You lose a burden.

You see, if preaching depended on my abilities, if preaching depended on my persuasiveness, if preaching depended on my skills, I'd be too scared to do it. You've all heard me fall over my own mouth up here. You've all heard the stupid things that sometimes fall out of my mouth as I'm trying to talk, and I get it wrong. You've all heard me correcting myself. Imagine if gospel power was reliant upon the abilities of the person serving. It would grind you into the ground. It would destroy you. I'd be too scared to speak. You'd be too scared to speak. Why? We all know who we are, we know what we're like. We all know what we're like. I know what I'm like. I don't even need you to tell me. Sometimes Lesa punishes me, and she makes me listen to one of my own sermons.

If it depended upon our skills and abilities, who would be good enough for the ministry? Nobody. And you would destroy yourself if you were truly trying to serve God, and you thought that it depended on your skills and abilities. It doesn't. It depends on your humble obedience. It depends simply on your humble obedience. What you've got is what God has given you, and He's given it to you to share. It doesn't matter who you are. It really doesn't matter how weak, how foolish. You don't have to be PhD, qualified genius.

Mind you, if you've got an academic bent, and if you can study in that way, and you've got the opportunity, the God-given opportunity—I've got nothing against seeking out education. If you can be the sharpest tool in the shed, by all means, be the sharpest tool in the shed. But, it doesn't matter. What matters is our humble obedience, as the people of God. He loves using fools. And I'm drawing us into this picture here as the fools—He loves using fools to confound those who are wise in their own eyes. He loves using little nobodies like us to put the principalities and the powers on display. He loves to do that. Why? Because it proves that He's God.

For example, go back into the book of Judges and you come to Gideon the judge. Why was it, when Gideon had tens of thousands of soldiers, and you would think how you need tens of thousands of soldiers to go against these Midianites, who were without number. God narrowed it down, didn't He—300 men. What did the 300 men have? They had loud voices and a pot with a light in it. What was their tactic? "Surround the camp, and when you hear me shout," said Gideon, "break your pot and shout, 'For the Lord and for Gideon.'" That was their tactic—"Shine the light and proclaim." And when they shined the light and proclaimed, the enemies were scattered.

What's the lesson behind that story? It's not in might, it's not in power. What's one of the Psalms say? "Some trust in chariots, some trust in armies. We will trust in the Lord our God!" We will trust in the Lord our God. It's not up to the power of men, it's up to the power of God. My friends, you've only got to be obedient. Where you are, who you are, what you are, in what you do—simply be an obedient Christian witness, and God will use you! He will use and empower you. He will use you to bring people into His kingdom.

You sit there and you say, "I'm nothing and a nobody." It's great if you understand that. If you understand, "I'm a nothing and a nobody," you're in such a good place. That's where you need to be. This isn't a self-esteem seminar. I don't want you to walk out of here with self-esteem. This is a *God-esteem* seminar. I want you to walk out of here esteeming and worshiping God the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, trusting and knowing that all things are in their hands, and that He can use a fool and a weakling like you and me—simple, humble, Christian obedience.

What are the means by which God has given us to go out and conquer the world with the gospel? Speak to people about God, speak to God about the people. Words. Preach, pray. Study the Scripture. And what's the Scripture? Words. What do you conquer the world with? Words. Whose words? God's words. Preach God's words, pray God's words, study God's words. And when I say God's words, I mean all of these ones in this Bible, which we call *the Word*.

Speak to people about God. Speak to God about the people. Simple, humble, Christian obedience, knowing that salvation, regeneration, being born again—these things come by the work and the power of the Holy Spirit. And who knows but that God won't use us? Because we're the kind of people He likes to use—a pretty ordinary lot. And that's the best place for us to be—to know that before God, we're nothing. We're not special, we don't claim any special privilege, we don't claim any special birth.

You know, Paul spoke about how not many of the mighty come to the Lord. That's us. God loves using people like us. Speak to the people about God. Speak to God about the people. Study the word. Let's close.

Father in heaven, we do pray that we indeed would be a humble and obedient people, used by yourself, that you by your Holy Spirit would enable us to do the works that please you, that you by your Holy Spirit would send us forth in the power of the Spirit, sharing the good news of the gospel—Salvation in Jesus Christ. Amen.