

## **Born of the Spirit** **John 3:1-8**

Please join me in prayer. Father in heaven, we indeed ask that you would bless your word to us by your Spirit. We ask that we would be given ears to hear, eyes to see, and hearts that understand and obey. We ask these things in Jesus' name. Amen.

John chapter 3, starting at verse 1: “<sup>1</sup> Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. <sup>2</sup> 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.’ <sup>3</sup> Jesus answered him, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.’ <sup>4</sup> 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?’ <sup>5</sup> Jesus answered, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. <sup>6</sup> That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.’ <sup>7</sup> Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’ <sup>8</sup> 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.’”

Well, as you're probably aware, this is the fourth time we've looked at John chapter 3, verses 1 to 8, or at least it's the fourth time we've looked at the beginning of John chapter 3. The very first time we came to John chapter 3 from the end of John chapter 2.

We've looked at the fact that Nicodemus, who came to speak to Jesus, was representative of those who saw the works that Jesus did and reasoned their way through to a reasonable conclusion—and that is, that the works that Jesus was doing were an indicator that God is with Him. But they had not submitted to the authority of Jesus.

What Jesus demanded of everybody, and what Jesus demands to this very day, is not just some kind of agreement. You know, a lot of people are very happy to say that they like Jesus, that they think Jesus was good, that they think Jesus was a great teacher. I remember the lead singer of Midnight Oil, Peter Garrett, saying he thought that Jesus was an outstanding teacher, and that the Sermon on the Mount was wonderful stuff. I wouldn't be surprised if he only knew one line or two lines from the Sermon on the Mount. I would expect that from the Sermon on the Mount, all he knew was the very brief lines, “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you,” and “Judge not, lest also you be judged.” I expect those would have been the only things he knew.

Jesus demands more than just some kind of agreement, some kind of human-level praise, some kind of human-level recognition. He demands more. You know, if Australia was still under a genuine monarchy, with the full power and the full authority of a king or queen upon a throne over us—not just a constitutional monarchy, I mean a genuine monarchy—the king or the queen would be absolutely the final word and the ultimate power in our nation.

Well Jesus demands more than the loyalty that any king or queen has the right to demand. Jesus demands that those who would come to Him must bend the knee and worship. They must recognize that He is indeed God incarnate, that He is indeed God the eternally begotten Son of God, that He and the Father are one. Jesus absolutely demands that we bend the knee and confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.

There's a problem. As we've worked our way through John chapter 3, I'm sure you're at least somewhat aware of the problem. What's the problem? Mankind is born in sin. We heard the words there: "That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit." There's a requirement. The requirement is that you recognize Christ for who He is, and worship Him as the Son of God. And yet man in sin is not seeking God.

Turn quickly to Romans chapter 3. Let's just get the summary of what a person in sin is like. Now this is God's summary of human character. Romans chapter 3, start reading at verse 10: "<sup>10</sup> As it is written: 'None is righteous, no, not one; <sup>11</sup> no one understands; no one seeks for God. <sup>12</sup> All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one.' <sup>13</sup> 'Their throat is an open grave; they use their tongues to deceive.' 'The venom of asps is under their lips.' <sup>14</sup> 'Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness.' <sup>15</sup> 'Their feet are swift to shed blood; <sup>16</sup> in their paths are ruin and misery, <sup>17</sup> and the way of peace they have not known.' <sup>18</sup> 'There is no fear of God before their eyes.'"

That's a sinner. That's the description of a sinner. That's the description of any person, apart from the goodness and the righteousness of the Lord Jesus Christ. That's the description of me, if you'd met me when I was 20 years old. That's me. That's the description of anyone who is apart from Christ.

Now what's Paul saying? Well, if you're that person, can you do good? And I don't mean human good. Most people have the ability to do some kind of human good. Most people have the ability to do some kind of human good, and in human terms, of course there is a certain goodness that is better than a certain wickedness. It's better, for example, to be a nursing sister than it is to be a professional burglar. Of course, in moral terms, in human terms, you are doing better or good.

But here's the thing. God requires good works that are good like *He* is good. He's the standard, He's the measure of goodness. If you want to know what good is, look to God, and God's goodness is the guide to *all* goodness. All true morality, all true goodness, all true ethics, don't come from within the heart of the person; they're imposed upon a person by the authority and the word of God. They come from *outside*.

I'll say this one more time: If you want to do good works and be saved by good works, it's easy. It's easy. You keep the law of God, but you keep it with a pure heart. And every good thing you do, you do it not for your own benefit, but only for the glory of God, purely motivated by your love for God. Because what did Jesus say was the chief commandment? There it is—"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, with all your strength." You should be utterly consumed with love for God.

So if you're utterly consumed with love for God, your good works will be perfectly acceptable to God—perfectly acceptable to God. But if I said, "Raise your hands if you do those good works," I'm pretty sure there won't be many hands being raised. You know, "Come to the front of the church and get a special blessing for your good works." I don't think many would come to the front. None would. Why? Because you can't do those good works.

Now here's the thing. It's a good work to worship the Lord Jesus Christ. It's a good work to give Him the glory due to His personage. It's a good work to have the faith that God requires. In the Garden, God required Adam and Eve to have the faith to practice and cling to His word. Eve should have known, and Adam should have known to step in. The moment Satan asked the question, "Is it true you're not allowed to eat any of the fruit in the garden?" They should've said, "Hang on. Hang on. God spoke to us. God spoke to us. God said we can eat all of the fruit of all of the trees of the garden, bar the one in the center, which is the knowledge of good and evil."

Adam and Eve should've known from the moment the serpent came to them with twisted words, and at that moment, they should have rejected the conversation, out of hand. They should have exercised their dominion and authority. Adam was set up as the king of the world, and he should've said, "No. Be silent. I'm not having this conversation. God has given me a word. I stick to the word of God." Instead, he allowed his wife to be deceived, to be beguiled, to be tempted.

Ever since, all God has been looking for is faith—true faith that clings to His word, no matter what comes at you, no matter what is thrown at you by the world, by the Devil, by His servants. True faith clings to the word of God, in obedience to the word of God. And that's what God requires. That's what He wants. But who can do it? Who can do it?

Turn to the book of Second Peter. There's one problem in the world. Second Peter gives it to us in one line. I love this beautiful little summary that you find in Second Peter. Why is there corruption in the world? I'll ask you the question. We'll start reading at verse 3. Second Peter chapter 1, verse 3: "<sup>3</sup> His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness," he's speaking of God, "through the knowledge of him," that is Christ, "who called us to his own glory and excellence."

Notice that. We've been called to His own—Christ's, God's own—glory and excellence "<sup>4</sup> by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature,"—now here's the answer to my question, What's the problem with the world?—"having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire." The corruption that is in the world because of what? Sinful desire—the desires of the human heart, that sinful, wicked, human heart.

Now when I talk about the heart, I'm not talking about the muscle in the middle of your chest that moves the blood. When we read about the heart in Scripture, it's talking about the very center of your human will, where you make your choices, where you measure one thing against another, where you decide the way that you're going to go. That heart. That heart, the conscious heart, the heart that is expressed in our will. The problem with that heart is it is inclined to evil. It's filled with what? Sinful desire—the desire for things that are not given by God, the desire for things that we ought not want, the desire for things that we know are going to kill us.

I'll bet you every single one of us knows at least one person, probably some of us know more than one person, and in that one person's life, it is blatantly obvious that they are destroying themselves through their desires. They are absolutely destroying themselves, whether it's alcohol, drugs, crime, lust, porn, adultery—you name it. You look at them, it may well be someone you love, and you can see their desires are destructive, they're fatal, they will put them

in the grave, and they won't turn away from them. And though their life just careens from one disaster to another, though their life just charges from one cesspit to the next, they won't change. They can't step back from it. They just won't give up on that which is destroying them. Sinful desires.

Well here's the problem. We have this habit of thinking that that must be talking about "those people"—"those people." Because we all know somebody who is so obviously destroying themselves through their sinful desire, we often tend to think that they're sort of specially wicked, or specially sinful. The problem is, it's all of humanity. It's all of humanity. The person who appears to have their life totally under control—they're big in business, or they're big in their career, every post is a winner, they're going forward every day of their life, they don't appear to have a chemical addiction. You know, they've got the trophy wife, or the trophy husband. They've got the children that are cute, they've got the expensive car, etc., etc., etc.

Here's the thing. If they don't know, if they don't have Christ, if they don't have the life of the Holy Spirit in them, their sinful desires are killing them. Their sinful desires are burying them under a weight of sin. Because the only desires that are good in the sight of God are the desires that give glory to God. And so although that person may not be physically destroying themselves, they're still destroying themselves, because they won't bend the knee to God. And they are being weighed down under their burden.

Think of the rich young ruler who came to Jesus. Jesus said, "Keep the commandments," and he said, "I keep them all." Jesus didn't say, "You know what? No, you don't. You're an absolute mess. You're a loser." That's not what He said to him. He said, "Oh, really. Really? You keep them all. How wonderful. Sell everything you own, give it to the poor, and follow me."

What was his burden? What was he under? He was under a desire for worldly wealth and comfort. He was under covetousness, idolatry. Sure, his life wasn't a careening disaster of adultery, drunkenness, and dissipation, but it was still a life bearing the burden of sin. And Jesus confronted him with his sins on the spot. "Your sin, my friend, is that you are buried under covetousness. You've made an idol out of your wealth and your comfort."

That's all of humanity. That's all of humanity, everybody. Everybody you've ever met is buried under a burden of sin. Ephesians chapter 2 starts off with three words, "You were dead." You were dead. It doesn't say you were alive. It doesn't say, You were really very sick, but not quite dead yet. It says, You were dead! Dead. What does a dead man do? Nothing. A dead man goes rotten. That's what a dead man does. We know that. The problem is that a dead man can do nothing. And so for a dead man to do something, he must have life. He must have life from above. He must have life from God.

Jesus' teaching to Nicodemus was, "You, my friend, a Pharisee who knows the Scripture so well, who is the teacher of Israel—you, my friend, don't have that life from above. You don't have that life from God. You yourself are buried under the burden of your sins. Your good works, those things that you think are so wonderfully good, as a Pharisee, your studious law-keeping—they're not good works. And you're not saved. And you don't have the life that you need."

We've looked at the fact that Jesus used a phrase, "Unless one is born of the water and the Spirit," John chapter 3, verse 5. He used a phrase Nicodemus should have picked up.

Remember, it referred him back into Ezekiel chapter 36, where God said He would wash His people with clean water, put a new spirit within them, give them a living heart. He'd take out the heart of stone, He'd give them a living heart. Not only that, He would put His own Spirit within them. Nicodemus, Jesus was expecting, would pick up that cue, or that pointer to Ezekiel chapter 36, and he didn't. "That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit."

And that sort of brings us up to where we are, John chapter 3, verse 7: "Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again' [or, 'You must be born from above].'"<sup>8</sup> "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." "Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again,'" or, I would prefer, "You must be born from above." "<sup>8</sup> "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."

What's Jesus teaching? What's He saying to Nicodemus? What's the Scripture saying to us in reporting to us these things that have been said? Well the first thing we need to know, to get a handle on this, if you're looking at verse 8, is what Jesus says: "The wind blows where it wishes." The word in the Greek behind "wind" is *pneuma*. That's the Greek word for wind. But then if you look at the last word of verse 8: "So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit," the word in the Greek behind "Spirit" is *pneuma*. Exactly the same word. Why? It's a play on words. There's a deliberate double meaning going on here. It's not really a riddle, it's a double meaning meant to give us a clearer understanding.

"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." Jesus is comparing the working of the Holy Spirit in granting life to a person as being similar to the working of the wind. We could almost say, "The Spirit blows where *He* wishes." What's this saying? It's saying that God is sovereign. It's saying that God, the Holy Spirit, is sovereign, that no one rules over Him, that He does as He pleases.

Remember, one God, one being of God, three persons subsisting as that one being—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—all three persons being truly, holy, and completely God. Co-equal, co-eternal, co-sovereigns. When I say the Holy Spirit is sovereign, I'm not saying that He does things independently of the Father or the Son, but that nobody makes Him do anything other than that which is His will to do, for He is truly God. Just as much divinity resides in the person of the Holy Spirit as resides in the person of the Father, as resides in the person of the Son, and they are pure divinity.

The old theologians used to like to say, "God is a pure Spirit," or a simple Spirit. And when they said "simple," they didn't mean it the way we mean it these days. When we say "simple" we think it means someone is thick. No, when they said "simple," they meant pure, absolutely pure. And the Holy Spirit is God.

Think about the wind. It's interesting, isn't it? Do you like to know what the weather predictions are? I like to know what the weather predictions are. I have a couple of weather apps on my iPad here, and I like to look at the predicted weather for the coming week. It's amazing how often they don't know the direction that the wind is coming from.

I'll show my age here—Who remembers the Goon shows? Spike Milligan, Peter Sellers, Harry Secombe. And who remembers the episode where Neddie Seagoon—was it Neddie Seagoon who was training to become a weather reader? And he had to say, “Winds, light to variable.” Winds light to variable. Now what does that mean? It means nothing. Winds light to variable. It was so important that he went to Weatherman School to learn to say, “Winds light to variable.” What was that all about? The wind blows where it wishes.

You know, we've got satellites and satellite tracking, and you can see your big map with the systems all on the map—there's low pressures, there's high pressures. And they'll predict, you know, “The wind's going to come from the west at up to 30 kilometers per hour.” And you get up tomorrow, and the wind's coming from the south at 60 kilometers per hour. And then in the afternoon, it turns, and it's coming from the northeast, it's a sea breeze. It's managed to make its way over the mountain ranges, and it's coming from the northeast at 10 kilometers per hour. With all of our science, with all of our understanding and science, we can't direct the wind. We can barely even tell where the wind's going or where it's coming from, with all of our science.

Can you imagine what this meant in the day when Jesus said it? “The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound.” Nicodemus didn't have a weather map. He didn't have a chart telling him when the next low pressure system was going to blow through Israel. He had no idea. The wind was, you know, the most unpredictable thing that could be imagined.

That's what Jesus is saying about the work of the Holy Spirit. It's sovereign. The Holy Spirit goes where He wants to go, He does that which He wants to do, He regenerates according to the will of God. He is sovereign. He cannot be made to do anything, because He is God. He's just as much the sovereign God as God the Father and God the Son. He's the sovereign God.

Once again, I'd suggest to you that the books which claim there's ten steps to being born again are all rubbish. They're nonsense. Why? The wind blows where it wishes! So it is with the Holy Spirit. And so it is with anyone who is born of the Spirit. We've got no idea. We've got no idea. And that's actually the great hope of gospel preaching, my friends. That's the great hope of sharing the word of God. You've got no idea where the good soil's going to be that the seed's going to land in. You've got no idea.

No one is so lost that God can't save them, should He desire to. He will grant life when and where He wishes. We can't direct the wind. We don't know where it's coming from, we don't know where it's going to. All we can do is live with it. And that's what Jesus says to Nicodemus about those who are being born of the Spirit.

Now what does it mean to be born of the Spirit? What does it mean to be given the life of God? Well, we can find all these things in Scripture. We've only got to sort of work our way through various parts of the Scripture, and you'll see some indicators of what it is to be born again. Turn, for example, to Jeremiah chapter 32. This comes after the prophecy in Jeremiah 31, that God would write the law on the hearts of His people, that He would give them new life. Jeremiah chapter 32 becomes, if you like, an exposition of this, and tells us something about what happens to someone who has this law of God written on their heart by the Holy Spirit.

Move down to verse 39. We'll start reading at verse 38: "And they shall be my people, and I will be their God. <sup>39</sup>I will give them one heart and one way, that they may fear me forever, for their own good and the good of their children after them." Remember what it said in Romans chapter 3 about the fear of the Lord? It said, No one fears God. Not one. It said there is no fear of God in them. But what happens here, when the Holy Spirit is put into the heart of a person, when the law of God is written upon a living heart by the very finger of God? "They may fear me forever." It's not a temporary change, it's a permanent change—fearing God.

What does fearing God mean? It doesn't mean you're scared of judgment. It means you're scared of offending Him. It means, like Isaiah in Isaiah chapter 6, you have come into the presence of God, and you realize that you're in the presence of one who is holy and awesome and infinite and all-powerful. And I'm telling you, if ever you come into the presence of such a person—and there's only one such person and that's God—you will fear Him, because He is awesome. He strikes awe and reverence into our hearts. And that fear is a good fear. That's what we were created to do. We were created to know God, and if you're finite, and you know God who is infinite, you fear the power of the infinite.

We fear in the presence of a big, strong, dangerous person. Well, a big, strong, dangerous person is nothing, absolutely nothing, compared to the person of God. We're to fear God. And we're told here in Jeremiah 32 that to fear God is the work of the Holy Spirit. God puts the fear of Him in our hearts, so that our response to God is as it should be. We should tremble. Our knees should bend. We should tremble in the very presence of God, fearing Him, for He is mighty.

Let's move on. What else does this work of the Holy Spirit do? What's another effect that it works in the life of a believer? Go to Ezekiel chapter 36, and move down to verse 31. As I said earlier, this comes after God has spoken about the giving of a new heart and the putting of a new spirit within a person, taking out the heart of stone and giving them a living heart. God puts His Spirit within them and causes them to walk in His statutes.

Now look at verse 31: "Then you will remember your evil ways, and your deeds that were not good, and you will loathe yourselves for your iniquities and your abominations." What a change. "You will remember your evil ways, and your deeds that were not good, and you will loathe yourselves for your iniquities and your abominations." I said last week I'm not running self-esteem seminars. Well the Scripture here tells me that God is actually running self-loathing seminars. God the Holy Spirit is teaching us to loathe our own sinfulness and wickedness. What a change!

The things you used to love, the things that used to dominate your life, you now hate those things and you hate the weakness, the wickedness within yourself that is attracted to those things. You want to kill it. You loathe it. You abominate it. You've got a total change of heart.

Remember what we looked at in Second Peter—the corruption that is in the world due to sinful desires. Well now, you know you have sinful desires if you're filled with the Spirit. You know you have sinful desires, you hate those sinful desires, and you hate the things that once you loved. You hate their power to destroy you. This is the essence of true repentance. It's a heart-felt change, a complete change in desire. It's something that goes deep. It's something that is often painful.

A repentant person isn't making up excuses, and a repentant person is not trying to blame somebody else. If you come from a troubled home, it's very easy to sit there and say, "Woe is me. I'm a bad boy because my Daddy was a madman, and my Mummy was a crazy woman. Woe is me, I'm a bad boy because I never had an opportunity in life. Woe is me. If I ever had a chance to do good, I might have been good." That's not the talk of a Christian. That's the talk of a sinner. The Christian, upon conversion, says, "Woe is me, I'm a sinner. I am the way I am because it's the way I wanted to be. I was just making excuses. No one else is to blame."

Understand something. When somebody sins against you, you have no excuse for sinning. When somebody sins against you, you do not have an excuse for sinning. No matter what happens to us—no matter what happens to us, God expects from us righteousness. The person lies, the person accuses, the person slanders, the person hurts, the person manipulates, the person bullies, the person physically abuses. You have no excuse to sin in return. You just do not.

Did Jesus sin in return? No, He did not. When the High Priest accused Him, did He sin in return? No. When the Roman soldiers flogged Him, though He was an innocent man, did He sin in return? No. When He was on the cross and He was being reviled—I mean, those people had no respect for death, even while death was happening before their very eyes, they were laughing their heads off, "Look at Him! Look at Him!"—Did He sin in return? No. Why? Because He was sinless.

The thing is, my friends, if you want to call yourself a Christian, face up to the fact that you have no right to sin in return. You have no right to sin in return. I'm not saying that we *don't* sin in return. You know, I'm a person who has to keep a very tight control on myself, because I can lash out very quickly. There are other people who have the same sort of issues. But we don't have the right to sin in return.

We are guilty of our own sins, regardless of who did what to us when. We are always guilty of our sins. We have not excuses, and we should be trying to make no excuses. "I did it, I own it, I'm a sinner, it was my sin. And I hate the sin and I hate myself for doing it." That's the repentant heart. The repentant heart owns its own wickedness. That's the change. That's the change the Spirit of God works in a person when they're born again.

Let's have a look at another one. Turn in the New Testament to Second Corinthians chapter 7. Now the context here is that Paul is speaking to the Corinthians, and he has previously rebuked them very harshly for their immaturity and for their failure to be obedient to the will of God, and to the word of God, and to the word of the apostles, and they have repented. Here's what Paul says about their repentance, Second Corinthians 7:10:

"For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret, whereas worldly grief produces death." Godly grief produces repentance that leads to salvation without regret. My friends, I'm telling you, unless you are indwelt by the Holy Spirit, unless you have been given and granted that living heart, you will not ever know godly grief.

We see the sports news on TV on a regular basis. Some testosterone-charged idiot of a sportsman has been caught out doing something utterly wicked and stupid in a public place. And what does he say? His public statement is something along the lines of, "Well, I regret if my actions have offended anyone in any way." What's his grief? His grief is that we know what he

did, and that's it. That's all his grief is. He got caught in the act, he wishes he'd never got caught in the act, and he feels sorry for himself that he got caught in the act.

Godly grief accepts responsibility. Godly grief knows that it is guilty of wickedness. Godly grief tells us to own our sins. And that godly grief produces repentance—repentance that leads to salvation without regret. Our sins should hurt us. They should cause us grief. Our wickedness should trouble us greatly. Why? Because it brings us to repentance without regret—repentance that leads to salvation.

Now even though you're saved—and I preach the assurance of salvation: a person who is born again in Christ can know for sure and for certain that they have been granted life from God, and you can know for sure and for certain that you've been granted eternal life—but still, every day, you should be feeling the pain of your sins and feeling the need and the requirement of repentance and restoration. Every day, the meek heart looks in the mirror and says, “O my Lord, forgive me. I'm a sinner. Forgive me.” You know you're forgiven, but you can't help but beg the forgiveness that you know is yours to have in Christ. Why? Because you love God, because you hate to sin against God, because you hate the wickedness that is within you, because you want to be righteous. You want to truly be Christ-like. You want to live in the presence of God.

My friend, you know, it was Spurgeon who said, “Show me a miserable Christian and I'll show you a sinner.” What was he saying? He was saying that the miserable Christian who can't rejoice in their salvation is someone who's hiding their sin—someone who's hiding their sin, and not taking responsibility for their wickedness.

We've always got to be tenderhearted before God, and only the born-again, only the born from above, only those born of and by the power of the Holy Spirit, have that frame of heart, have that frame of mind. It's a gift from God. It's a two-edged sword in a way, isn't it, because it hurts. But you've got to have it. You don't have it? You don't know it.

Let's have a look at First John, chapter 3, the epistle of First John, not the gospel of John. First John chapter 3, starting at verse 4: “<sup>4</sup>Everyone who makes a practice of sinning also practices lawlessness; sin is lawlessness.” So there, my friends, first of all is your guide to what sin is. What's the question in the Catechism? “What is sin?” I think the answer is something along the lines of, “Sin is any failure to conform to or perform the law of God.” Something along those lines. (I'll probably get someone sending me a letter telling me, You didn't get that quite right.) “Everyone who makes a practice of sinning also practices lawlessness; sin is lawlessness.”

You want to know what sin is? Go to the Ten Commandments. They should strip you naked, especially the tenth one. The tenth one—You shall not covet; you shall not covet your neighbour's house, or his wife—should be the one that gets you the hardest. You know why? Because that's a secret one. That's a hidden one, in the heart. People can see you murder; and when you're committing adultery, it's an outward act; and when you're committing idolatry, you've got an idol there in front of you. But covetousness—that's hidden in here. Covetousness is hidden within.

So that tenth commandment should always trip up every single Christian, because that's the one that tells us God's looking at the heart. He's not looking for just simple outward obedience, He's actually looking at the heart, to see where the heart is.

“Sin is lawlessness.” Verse 5: “You know that he appeared in order to take away sins, and in him there is no sin.” Now listen to this: “<sup>6</sup>No one who abides in him keeps on sinning; no one who keeps on sinning has either seen him or known him. <sup>7</sup>Little children, let no one deceive you. Whoever practices righteousness is righteous, as he is righteous. <sup>8</sup>Whoever makes a practice of sinning is of the devil, for the devil has been sinning from the beginning.”

Notice the ongoing tense. Now the New King James might not bring the ongoing tense of those words, of that sin, out quite so clearly, but it’s definitely an ongoing, present tense. “Whoever practices righteousness is righteous, as he righteous. <sup>8</sup>Whoever makes a practice of sinning is of the devil, for the devil has been sinning from the beginning.”

You know what “practice” is. You want to learn the piano, you’ve got to practice. You set aside a time, you’re there regularly at that time, you’re doing a repetitious thing. You’re learning your scales, you’re learning to read the music, you’re getting your fingers supple. You’re learning to play the piano. It’s a practice.

Well, what does it say? “Whoever makes a practice of sinning is of the devil.” Whoever makes a practice of sinning is of the devil. If you’ve got a regular place, if you’ve got a regular time, if you’ve got a regular means, if you’ve got a regular way of doing it, if it’s your practice, my friends—this is telling me that it is of the devil.

He’s not saying the Christian never sins. He’s not saying that. If we went back to First John chapter 1, we’d see that he says that there’s a propitiation for our sins, and that if we come to God and confess our sins, He’s faithful and just to forgive our sins. But what he’s saying is that the Christian is not a regular, ongoing, untroubled sinner. The Christian is not someone who can just repeat, and repeat, and repeat, and continue, and practice, and practice, and practice, and practice their sin without any qualm of conscience. He’s saying that the Christian is a person who knows repentance.

Looking there again, “Little children,” verse 7, “let no one deceive you. Whoever practices righteousness is righteous, as he is righteous. <sup>8</sup>Whoever makes a practice of sinning is of the devil, for the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil.”

So what’s the warning there? “Whoever makes a practice of sinning is of the devil... The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil.” Who’s going to destroy the one who’s making a practice of sinning? Who’s the judge? Jesus Christ. He came to destroy the works of the devil. And if your life is an ongoing, continuous work of the devil, fulfilling the desires of Satan, sinning, sinning, sinning, sinning—my friends, I don’t care if you call yourself a Christian, don’t care where you raised or how you were raised, don’t know if you know the Shorter Catechism better than I do—don’t care. Don’t care. My friends, if your life is an ongoing practice of sin, the Son of God has come to destroy the works of the devil, and you will be destroyed. You will be destroyed. We’ve heard it so many times—“Love the sinner, hate the sin.” That’s okay. That’s okay, I understand what people are trying to say: It’s not for us to judge. Fair enough. But understand this: The sinners are the ones that God judges and casts into hell, into eternal destruction. In the end, the sinner is the one that pays the price of their sins.

What's the born-again person like? What's the person like who is born from above? Well let's keep reading. Verse 9: "No one born of God makes a practice of sinning." It's not a practice. A Christian may sin, a Christian may fall to temptation, but it's not a practice. Why: "for God's seed abides in him; and he cannot keep on sinning, because he has been born of God." <sup>10</sup> By this it is evident who are the children of God, and who are the children of the devil: whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is the one who does not love his brother." *No one born of God makes a practice of sinning, for God's seed abides in him; and he cannot keep on sinning, because he has been born of God.*

That condemnation, that description that we read in Romans chapter 3 of sinful people, incapable of doing any good—they don't even have the desire to serve God or to know God, let alone the desire to do what is right. That can't be descriptive of a Christian. God's word abides in a Christian. God's seed abides in a Christian. And he cannot keep on sinning, because he has been born of God! Notice how strong that is: "He CANNOT—CANNOT!"

A Christian cannot live a life controlled by sin! Why? There's two reasons. If they're truly regenerate, if they're truly a Christian, there's two reasons. One, God won't let them. That's one part of the "cannot"—God will not permit it to be so. One of His people cannot live in sin. He's God, and He saved people to be born into Christ-likeness, to live in the imitation of the Lord Jesus Christ, who was sinless. So there's one reason: The Christian *cannot* remain in sin because God will not allow them to.

The second reason that a Christian cannot keep on sinning is because, having been born of God, he should not have the desire to keep on sinning. The very heart, the desires of the heart, should be utterly changed. And if your desires are changed, it has to work out into your actions. No one's ever done anything other than what their strongest desire was at that moment. No one's ever done anything other than what their strongest desire was at that moment.

You understand something. If someone puts a gun to your head and tells you they want you to do something, they're not actually making you do anything. What they're doing is making you sort out your desires. What is my desire? Let's say the gun is to your head, and the person says, "I want the contents of your wallet." You're now down to a choice of desires—Do I desire the contents of my wallet, or would I die for it? What's your strongest desire?

"I only came to church today because someone dragged me along." No. You came to church because you desired to keep somebody happy more than you desired to stay at home. You came according to your strongest desire at that moment.

It's happened. One of the mass shootings in the USA, the fellow went into this place—we would probably call it a "TAFE." He went into this place with a weapon, put the gun to people's heads, asked them, "Are you a Christian?" It's sorting their desires. Do you desire eternal life more than you desire to live on this earth? And the people who said, "Yes, I am a Christian," he shot them. He didn't force them to die. He didn't force them to own Jesus. What he forced them to do was to weigh up their desires, and their strongest desire came forth at that moment. Being born again, being regenerate, being filled with the Holy Spirit of God, even when faced with the choice of death, their strongest desire was to own their allegiance to the Lord Jesus Christ. Their strongest desire was to confess faith. And they were prepared to die.

Again, the born-again Christian has been given a whole new set of desires. Now there's going to be struggles and stumbles and falls. No one's perfect. There's no such thing as sinless perfection in this life. But the strongest desire for a Christian is always to be Christ-like, and Christ was sinless. So the Christian who is struggling with sin, if they are truly Christian, in the end, those true Christian desires win. They must. It can't be otherwise. Their whole nature has been changed. Their very desires have been changed. They have new inclinations. Everybody was once a sinner, trying to escape from God. When they're granted life, they become a worshiper trying to draw close to God. That's their strongest desire.

So you cannot keep on sinning for two reasons: God won't allow it. You're His person. "I own that person," says God, "I'm not allowing this to continue." And you, having renewed desires, must live out those desires. They must be expressed in action. So a Christian has the desire to repent, to part from sin, to turn away from their own wickedness. The Christian has the desire to confess their guilt in the presence of God and receive forgiveness. And so, they cannot keep on sinning, because they have been born of God.

What's the weapon here? What's needed here? Turn to Second Corinthians chapter 10. Let's start reading at Second Corinthians chapter 10, verse 3. "<sup>3</sup>For though we walk in the flesh, we are not waging war according to the flesh." Now I better stop. This is one of those instances where Paul has used the word "flesh" and he's not using it to simply describe the sinful nature. What he's saying here is simply, "though we have a body and we walk in this physical world, we are not waging war *according to* the flesh." We're not waging that kind of warfare.

Verse 4: "For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds. <sup>5</sup>We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ, <sup>6</sup>being ready to punish every disobedience, when your obedience is complete."

The weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds, to destroy arguments, to destroy lofty opinions that are against the knowledge of God, taking every thought captive to obey Christ. What is this? What are the weapons? Well, we could think of Ephesians chapter 6, the whole armor of God. It finishes off with the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

We've got the word of God. We've got the very word of God. Not only do you have the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit, being born again—you have the Spirit-breathed word of God. The very thoughts and desires and the very mind of God are revealed to us, here, in writing, on paper. Read it! Read it! Submit yourself to it. Drink deeply from it. And let every thought be brought captive to Christ. Take every thought captive to obey Christ. That's what we need to do. We need to train ourselves to think God's thoughts after God. And God's thoughts are revealed to us in Scripture.

My friends, once again, as I draw this to a finish, I say to you, Is this *you*? You know, have I been talking strange, odd stuff? Or do you actually understand what's being said here? Is this *you*? You're either the sinner that we read about earlier, or you're the born-again, born-from-above Christian, growing in Christ-likeness. And there's no middle ground. There's nothing in the middle. There's not a line to walk down. There's no mutual ground in this question.

Is this *you*? Is this your experience? Do you know the conviction of sin? When you look into your heart, can you honestly accept that your heart has been evil and wicked, and you are responsible for your own sins? Have you felt that conviction? Because if you haven't, I'm not sure you have the right to be calling yourself a Christian. If this is not your experience, I'm not sure you have the right to be claiming to own the name of Jesus.

Do you hate the wickedness that you see within yourself? Does the wickedness within yourself dominate your thoughts? Or does the word of God dominate your thoughts? Are you forever struggling and fighting to leave off your sin and walk in righteousness? Or do you find your sins quite satisfying and comfortable?

There's no in-between! There's no middle ground, my friends. The picture that Jesus gave of the rock, which is His church—"Upon this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." Get that picture in your mind. The rock must be against the gates. Either the people are on the rock, or they're behind the gates! You get what I'm saying? There was nothing between the gates and the rock. Either you've been dragged out from behind the gates of hell and set firm upon the rock, that is Christ, or you're still behind the gates of hell!

Either you're a servant and a possession of the devil himself, or you've been made a servant and a possession of God by the power of the Holy Spirit. There's no in-between ground! There's no neutral ground! Judgment doesn't come on the last day, it's now! Even now, God is hardening and softening hearts. Even now, the gospel call goes out, and all who refuse it are hardening their hearts against the will and the conscience of God.

I've spent a whole lot of time here telling you that you can't be born again, but by the power of the Holy Spirit. So I'm asking you, Are you born again by the power of the Holy Spirit? Can you feel it? Do you know it? Do you understand? Is Scripture your very life? Do you love God? Do you honestly love God? I won't ask, Do you love Him with all your heart and soul and mind and strength? I know you don't. I know I don't. But do you love Him at all?! Do you love Him at all? If you don't love God even a little bit, my friend, you're not born again. It's just a fact. Stop pretending. You're not fooling God. It doesn't matter if you can fool me or not, I'm just a fool. I don't have omnipotence. I don't see the human heart. I don't judge the human heart, and a good thing that is. But I'm telling you now, You're not fooling God!

And if you're under the conviction that you're not born again, that you don't have this life within you but you need it, my recommendation is that you start to beg. You start to beg and grovel to God. Beg and grovel to Christ. Beg for forgiveness. Beg for reconciliation. Beg for the spirit of repentance. Beg for life in Christ.

I'm reminded of a pastor from many a year ago, Robert Murray M'Cheyne—Presbyterian pastor in Dundee, Scotland. A woman came to him—and this is the difference between a man who pastors from and by the word of God, and a self-esteem seminar kind of guy, who wants everybody to walk out their church happy—a woman came to him, and she said, "You know, I feel so wicked, I wonder that God doesn't destroy me even now." What do you think he said to her? "Oh, dear, dear. Don't feel so bad about yourself. Oh, dear, dear. You're taking it way too seriously. Oh, dear, dear. No, no, no. God loves you just the way you are." No. Here's what he said to her: "You're right. You're a worm. You ought to be dead and in the ground already."

Now, you say that's harsh. That's terribly harsh. Here's the thing. She came to repentance. After those words, she came to repentance. She came to faith in Christ. Robert Murray M'Cheyne understood something. If you're not under the conviction of sin, you're not under the working and the power of the Holy Spirit. It's that simple.

So he didn't try to lift the burden. He left it right there. Why? Because he, being a wise pastor, understood something. He can't lift the burden. The only one who can lift the burden is the Lord Jesus Christ Himself. If a person is under the conviction of sin from God, the only thing that will lift that conviction is the work and the power of the Spirit of God.

I can't make you a Christian. I can't change hearts. I'm just a fool. I'm just a man. Here I am, I'm trying to preach the gospel. I can't do any of the things that I want to see done. But God by the power of His Holy Spirit, He can do the work. And my friends, it starts with the conviction of sin. I'm telling you, you cannot have conversion without conviction. You cannot have conversion without conviction.

It is my hope and my prayer that everybody who hears these words is convicted—be they born again, in which case it's good for us who are born again to be convicted again; be they not born again, it's good to be convicted now, by the power of the Holy Spirit. It is my prayer that the conviction of sin is heavy upon everybody who hears what I have to say. We'll close in prayer.

Father in heaven, I do indeed pray that you would be working a mighty work by the power of your Spirit. I do indeed pray that you would indeed be granting life by that same Spirit. The wind blows where it wishes. We do not know where it comes from, nor where it goes to. And so it is with the Spirit of God. Father in heaven, all therefore that we can do is ask and beg and plead that you indeed would be doing the work of salvation, even now. We ask in Jesus' name. Amen.