

Children of God | Living with God as Your Father

New Birth

John 2.24-3.1

6.28.15

Now when He was in Jerusalem at the Passover, during the feast, many believed in His name, observing His signs which He was doing. But Jesus, on His part, was not entrusting Himself to them, for He knew all men,²⁵ and because He did not need anyone to testify concerning man, for He Himself knew what was in man.

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 have come from God as a teacher; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him." ³ Jesus answered and said to 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? He cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born, can he?" ⁵ Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter into 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 be amazed that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' ⁸ "The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going; so is everyone who is born of the Spirit." ⁹ Nicodemus said to Him, "How can these things be?" ¹⁰ Jesus answered and said to him, "Are you the teacher of Israel and do not understand these things? ¹¹ "Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know and testify of what we have seen, and you do not accept our testimony. ¹² "If I told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things? ¹³ "No one has ascended into heaven, but He who descended from heaven: the Son of Man. ¹⁴ "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up; ¹⁵ so that whoever believes will in Him have eternal life. ¹⁶ "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life. ¹⁷ "For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him. ¹⁸ "He who believes in Him is not judged; he who does not believe has been judged already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. ¹⁹ "This is the judgment, that the Light has come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the Light, for their deeds were evil. ²⁰ "For everyone who does evil hates the Light, and does not come to the Light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. ²¹ "But he who practices the truth comes to the Light, so that his deeds may be manifested as having been wrought in God."

Last week we started a series on what it means to have and to know God as one's Father. In theology, this is called the doctrine of Adoption or Sonship.

Last week we said that this is a neglected teaching and ONE reason FOR that neglect MAY be addressed by today's teaching... There's a kind of prevailing idea in our democratic, equal opportunity, egalitarian society (all good values, BTW!) but when we project our democratic ideals onto God... we'll find that those ideals DO have their limits.

So today, we think about HOW one becomes a child of God. And to even PUT the question seems strange to many people... because, it strikes them as the most basic, elementary premise like, "how does one become a child at all? – you're just BORN that way!" and THAT IS the conventional wisdom, the almost universally held understanding in our inclusive society...so why even ask the question?

Well, as we'll see, every society has its assumptions, its preconceived notions, its foregone conclusions, things we take for granted about questions like, "How does a person get to know God?" OR "What makes a person related to God, embraced by God, acceptable to God?"

This very famous interview (John 3) is a clash of conventional wisdom and the view from OUTSIDE... the interruption of otherworldly truth... It gives us opportunity to reflect on ideas WE assume to be true about spiritual things (our OWN conventional wisdom) and recognize that AS WITH THIS spiritual man from of old, WE TOO MAY NOT HAVE IT RIGHT?

- 1) Conventional Wisdom About Knowing God
- 2) The Unconventional Cure from Above
- 3) The Counter-Intuitive Response/Results

In our day and IN our place, we all take a lot for granted. I'm not talking about assuming there'll be food at Publix when we go shopping...though THAT assumption is a PART of a whole complex of assumptions that make up the view of life in S. Florida 2015.

In many parts of the world, they assume that there WON'T be food in the local supermarket because there IS NO LOCAL SUPERMARKET. And we have to remind ourselves that many of the facts and realities we take for granted HERE and NOW are not simply assumed in other parts of the world.

One of our own cultural assumptions is access. People should have access to whatever they want as long as their access doesn't harm anyone else. People should be able to choose and not be excluded because we are all human beings and all valuable and unique and "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights (U.S. Declaration of Independence).

And those ideas become a grid for looking at the world... and so far so good (I like the emphasis on access! I like accessibility!) and we easily make a kind of jump...and apply these presuppositions to God.

We assume that as our society is broadly accessible to everyone and radically INCLUSIVE that God is the same way...it becomes conventional wisdom. We assume everyone knows God (i.e. if you WANT to) and that everyone has equal access to God and that as we are all citizens and equal that WE ARE ALSO ALL CHILDREN OF GOD – our inalienable right!

Now, in many other cultures and societies, the emphasis is NOT on radically inclusive spirituality but on exclusivity. And this was the conventional wisdom in which our man Nicodemus was living.

In his circles and his society, it was assumed, it was “common sense” that there were certain qualities and credentials and virtues that proved that a person was a good and valuable and spiritually acceptable person and Nicodemus had them all!

He was a man. And that word is repeated in the first verses of this passage. He was a Pharisee – the strictest sect in ancient Judaism, the Orthodox and Fundamentalists. He was a ruler – belonged to the Sanhedrin, the equivalent of the US Senate mixed with the Supreme Court. He was in the Inner Ring! And he was... the kind of person...who could rule and judge and evaluate other people to determine whether they were IN or OUT... conventional wisdom WAS that THESE Jewish men, Pharisees, the Sanhedrin...they could determine that.

And coming to Jesus Christ, with these assumptions, Nicodemus is deferential, he’s very courteous toward this hillbilly from Nazareth...calls Him “Rabbi”. That’s very nice...and says, “We see that you have come from God because of the signs you do...we have made a determination...and feel like you have some real potential, Kid! And I’m here to interview you to see if you might fit with our organization! We think, if you play your cards right you might be IN!”

Now, before I look at the Unconventional Reply of Jesus Christ...let me head off one potential objection to what we’ve said and that is – “why does it have to be one way or the other?” Why either radically inclusive (like in OUR place/age) or radically exclusive (like in Nicodemus’ day)? Why can’t we just be sensible and non-extremist? It’s not about being “so open-minded that your brain leaks out” and it’s not about being a “fightin’ fundamentalist” – it’s about all trying to be good, respectable, fair and kind and also knowing that no one is perfect. Be MODERATE!

Well...that’s probably better than extremism (of some kinds, anyway!)... but it may be just another word for APATHY. Isn’t it a kind of “live however you want as long as it doesn’t bother anyone...and when I say anyone, I really mean, as long as it doesn’t bother ME!” ?

Maybe, being moderate is, as C.S. Lewis said in *The Screwtape Letters*, “The safest road to hell is the gradual one – the gentle slope, soft underfoot, without sudden turnings, without milestones, without signposts.” Be careful, lest what you call moderate is actually a form of conviction-less selfishness.

So, Jesus Christ the un-credentialed outsider from the sticks gets called “Rabbi” from this upper-crust, elite insider and rather than act flattered He takes the discussion IMMEDIATELY off the grid. If OUR society’s NON-JUDGMENTAL inclusivity is red and Nicodemus’s STRICT EXCLUSIVITY

is BLUE, Jesus Christ doesn't go to purple in the MUSHY MIDDLE – He takes the discussion to YELLOW! Off the continuum all together!

“Truly, Truly...” He says. I think this is His way of saying, “OK – let's quit fooling around!”

“Nicodemus, you ‘SEE’ that I'm from God – the TRUTH is YOU DON'T EVEN SEE the way God does things at all! “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.”

Nicodemus then engages Jesus, “How can an old man enter a second time into his mother's womb?”

And Jesus Christ says, “It's not being born of a Jewish mother that makes you know God – it's being born of a Heavenly Father” - Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.”

I take it to mean (in context) that being born physically (through the waters of physical birth) is not enough to make you a child of God. Flesh gives birth to flesh but only the Holy Spirit can make you spiritually alive. Physical birth by the right parents DOESN'T MAKE YOU SPIRITUALLY ALIVE!

This is the upshot to that original consequence in the Garden: “In the day you eat of it, you shall surely die”. It wasn't an exaggeration or a hyperbole or metaphor: when humanity turned from God, we became spiritually dead. Not messed up; not really sick; not uneducated/unenlightened --- dead... and therefore unresponsive and totally insensitive to God. The wire is cut.

When Jesus Christ, the True Son, full of life and fully alive to God as His Father, when Jesus looked down from the Cross...He was looking at humanity without life, without spiritual awareness, perception or response, and ... ‘alienated from the life of God’ (Lovelace, p.108). And from the Cross, He is bleeding out life, giving spiritual life for the world that God so loved... in order to bring a new race of humans to New Life.

Jesus is saying to Nicodemus, “You have credentials with your friends and with your society...you have learning, awards, appearance, importance, status with people... but YOU ARE DEAD TOWARD GOD...and you can't even see your own deadness!”

“But I have come...down from above...not to simply help a somewhat capable and determined human race and tell them how them to shape up and KNOW God ... I've come for a dead humanity, helpless, hopeless, alienated, estranged and with NO LIFE IN THEMSELVES – I have come to bleed life into the world and to RISE VICTORIOUS OVER DEATH. I've come to raise the dead.”

“I’ve not come to condemn the world...that was done by the First Adam...I’ve come that the world should be saved through Me.”

This is the truth of regeneration, New Birth. It speaks to the Traditional Conventional Wisdom of Nicodemus AND to the MODERN/POST-MODERN, Progressive Assumptions of our own society. It lumps us ALL into ONE category – we are all DEAD IN ADAM. And the very best of us, like Nicodemus and the very worst of us, the most notorious, despicable narcissists – unless we get the LIFE FROM ABOVE that God sent into the world by Jesus Christ – we are NOT the children of God... we’re only spiritually dead.

He had to come to us, “No one has ascended into heaven, but He who descended from heaven: the Son of Man.” And coming down from ABOVE, from God to us, He was then lifted up.

“As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up; so that whoever believes will in Him have eternal life.” – It’s a reference to the ancient Israelites disobedient and rebellious, bitten by snakes. And Moses is commanded to put a symbol of their problem, a bronze snake on a pole...and whoever looks to the symbol is healed. So, Jesus Christ, becomes the embodiment of our DEATH...a picture of our guilt and everyone who looks to Him COMES ALIVE, New Birth...as Sons of God...born for a new creation.

Now, the Counterintuitive Response to which this truth calls us and a few results for those who respond:

The LIFE that Jesus Christ gave for lifeless humanity is applied by the agency of the Holy Spirit. What I mean by that is God, Himself, mysteriously and wild (not in a way we can coerce or control by magic or by emotional music or slick sales-techniques) the very heart of the untamed God moves like the wind (uncontrollable) and breathes life into some people when they hear about the bad news of our guilt and the Good News of Jesus Christ taking our guilt.

He, the Spirit of God, the Lord and Giver of Life, does just that, HE RE-GENERATES and gives life, enabling people to believe. That’s the difference. It’s not good people and bad, Pagans and Presbyterians, red and yellow black and white...we are LIFELESS IN HIS SIGHT until the Spirit gives us life and enables us to believe. The Spirit gives life and then we believe.

To use a physical analogy: we have no lungs until God’s Spirit gives us lungs and enables us to inhale the air of spiritual life and grace. In theology, the act of giving life is regeneration or the new birth and the initial act of believing/repenting is called conversion.

Notice how often the word “believe” shows up in this passage. Looking to Jesus Christ, depending on Him, receiving His claims, believe, believes, “He who believes is not judged, he who does not believe is already judged...” In other words, we are all spiritually dead and guilty

because of our sin... but Jesus Christ has come to rescue those who trust Him from that guilt. To believe is to spiritually breathe IN the grace/life of God...and it's repeated like respiration.

Notice also, if you're trying to grasp what it is to HAVE NEW LIFE, to be regenerated and to walk in the Newness of Life, notice that it has something to do with stepping into the light.

At the end of chapter 2, John said people were seeing the signs Jesus did and were all excited and even (in some way) were believing Him but He wouldn't give Himself to them "for He Himself knew what was in man."

Then it says, "There came a man..." This man, Nicodemus also believed the signs and Jesus knew what was in HIM. He came at night...out of the dark and into the True Light (the presence of Jesus Christ).

The passage ends with a return to this theme of coming OUT of the dark and into the LIGHT, "For everyone who does evil hates the Light, and does not come to the Light for fear that his deeds will be exposed." But Nicodemus...with his mixed motives...was willing to be exposed...coming out of the dark and into the Light.

God was at work in old Nicodemus and he was beginning to come alive – I think God's Spirit had conceived life in Him...even though he was only starting to believe. But in time...he shows more and more that he's drawn to Jesus Christ (I hope to look at the rest of the story in the winter series). But the point is – it hurts to come into the light and be exposed, but one way you can know that LIFE has entered you is that YOU come into the light...with other fellow sinners...into this community of truth.

The same writer who recorded this interview with Nicodemus also wrote these words near the end of his life: but if we walk in the Light as He Himself is in the Light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin. (1 John 1.7)

Point is: the spiritually alive don't necessarily look good or even act better... but they begin to get honest in the company of others...they begin to repent...and believe together with others...in the company of other honest sinners who together stop hiding in excuses and self-justification and begin to repent and believe, repent and believe, repent and believe...and in time...their new lives become more and more obviously permeated with God...