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Bridgeway Church  
Gospel of John #9  
June 30, 2019

## Sermon Summary #9

### Why You Must Be Born Again John 3:1-15

A major corporation in America recently re-structured its management team and embraced a new mission statement. This corporation then declared: “We are born again!” Because of urban renewal efforts, city leaders declared that the south side of Chicago has been “born again”! Civic leaders in Boston said much the same thing about its west end. In fact, you hear similar claims being made about virtually every movement, political party, educational institution, and most individuals when they make some life-altering decision. There is simply no escaping the fact that the world at large has co-opted the language of being “born again” from Christians and in doing so has thoroughly corrupted the true meaning of the term.

If you and I were to step outside this building and ask people at random here in OKC, “Are you born again,” 95% would say, “Of course!” If we then followed up by asking, “So, what does it mean to be ‘born again,’” an equally high percentage would likely say, “I don’t have a clue.” But if we then asked, “How do you *know* you are born again,” many would say something along the lines of:

“Because I’m an American citizen and a registered Republican!” or,  
“Because I pay my taxes on time every year!” or,  
“I know I’m born again because I believe abortion and homosexual conduct are sinful!” or  
“I know I’m born again because I attend church on a regular basis!”

We need to lay aside the modern corruption and misuse of the language of being born again and ask ourselves: What does the Bible actually say it means and why is it so important?

#### *Nicodemus*

These questions are brought to the forefront of our thinking by a dialogue between Jesus and a man named Nicodemus. There are several things about this man that will help us understand what Jesus said to him about being born again.

For example, we know from v. 1 that he was a *Pharisee*, a religious leader among the Jews. In v. 1 he is called “a ruler of the Jews.” It’s important to remember that not all Pharisees were stiff and legalistic. Some of them were godly and humble and were genuinely concerned for the authority of the OT Scriptures. Nicodemus was one of the good guys! As a Pharisee, he would also have been known as a *distinguished and highly regarded teacher*. Jesus himself refers to Nicodemus as “the teacher of Israel” in v. 10. He must have been a scholar of some note with a deep theological understanding of the OT.

Another thing that is helpful is that he is described as coming to Jesus “*by night*” (v. 2). This may simply be a reflection of the fact that rabbis studied and debated long into the night. Or it may be that he approached Jesus at night because he was afraid of what his fellow Pharisees would say if they knew he sought out Jesus. His coming to Jesus under cover of night may well have been to protect his reputation. Or it may be that the word “night” here refers not to the time of day but to *the condition of his soul*. In several places in John’s gospel (see 9:4; 11:10; 13:30) the word “night” is used metaphorically for moral and spiritual darkness. Perhaps Nicodemus came during the darkness but was also himself living in darkness.

#### *Why is the New Birth Necessary?*

Jesus comes straight to the point about why being born again is so urgent and necessary. He says in v. 3 that “unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God” (v. 3). To “see” the kingdom is our Lord’s way of referring to entrance into the kingdom or experiencing the blessings of the kingdom. If you aren’t born again, you won’t

understand the profound truths concerning the kingdom and you won't be granted entrance into it. Unregenerate people are excluded from the kingdom of God. Look again at how Jesus makes this point: unless you are born again you "**cannot** see the kingdom of God" (v. 3); "unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he **cannot** enter the kingdom of God" (v. 5); and this is why "You **must** be born again" (v. 7).

The new birth or being born again isn't just one more good idea among countless religious or spiritual possibilities. It is an absolutely essential requirement. And this extends to everyone, not just Pharisees living in the first century. Observe that Jesus in v. 7 shifts from the singular to the plural: "Do not marvel that I said to *you* (singular), '*You* (plural) must be born again.'" Jesus universalizes to include all mankind what he earlier said specifically to one man, Nicodemus. This applies to Americans, Australians, Jews, Gentiles, men, women, black and white, Buddhists, Muslims, everyone!

### *What the New Birth Is and Isn't*

So what is it that Jesus means when he speaks of being born again? Let's begin by ruling out a number of misguided beliefs about being born again.

(1) ***Being religious*** is not the same as being born again. How do I know this? I know it because Jesus was speaking to one of the most religious men in Israel, a Pharisee, and to that man he says, "You, Mr. Pharisee, you, Nicodemus, must be born again."

(2) ***Being well-trained in the Bible and able to instruct others*** in what it says is not the same as being born again. Nicodemus was one of the primary teachers of Israel, but he wasn't born again.

(3) ***Attending religious services regularly*** and being highly respected by your peers does not mean you are born again. Once more, Nicodemus was the paragon of virtue, but needed to be born again.

(4) The fact that you ***believe true things about Jesus and speak highly of him*** to others does not mean you are born again. Nicodemus acknowledged that in some sense Jesus had "come from God" (v. 2) and that God was "with him" (v. 2) and that God had enabled him to perform many miraculous "signs" (v. 2). But to this man Jesus said in no uncertain terms: "you must be born again" (v. 7). How many people do you know who admire Jesus and even confess that he is in some sense divine? Probably a lot. But that isn't the same as being born again.

(5) Experiencing in your personal life some sort of ***moral makeover*** such that you abandon bad habits and cultivate good habits does not mean you are born again. Experiencing some form of ***emotional healing*** and joining a specific political party and always voting for the right candidate does not mean you are born again.

(6) The fact that you are ***trying harder in life to honor your commitments*** and to ***spend time with your family and to give more generously to the church*** does not mean you are born again. The fact that you ***believe in God*** and have memorized numerous worship songs does not mean you are born again. The fact that you have abandoned a theologically liberal belief system and have embraced a more conservative, biblically-based belief system does not mean you are born again.

So, if being born again isn't about changing religions or political party affiliation or doing more things and better things; if it isn't about building a reputation in the community or turning over a new leaf or rearranging one's moral values or showing up at church on a more consistent basis, what is it? The place for us to begin in answering this question is with the terminology Jesus uses. The word translated "again" in your English Bibles can also mean "from above". We see this in several texts:

"He who comes *from above* is above all" (John 3:31).

"You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given you *from above*" (John 19:11).

"But the tunic was seamless, woven in one piece *from top* to bottom" (John 19:23).

If this is what Jesus meant, he would be saying that the new birth originates from God, in heaven, not from men, on earth. But the response of Nicodemus in v. 4 indicates that he understood Jesus to be speaking of a "new" birth, not one from "above" (although, Jesus may well have meant both!).

Then there are numerous other verses in the NT that speak of the same experience, such as:

“But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God” (John 1:12-13).

“even when we were dead in our trespasses, [God] made us alive together with Christ” (Eph. 2:5).

“But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit” (Titus 3:4-5).

“Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures” (James 1:18).

“According to his great mercy, he [the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ] has caused us to be born again to a living hope, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead” (1 Peter 1:3).

“since you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God” (1 Peter 1:23).

“If you know that he is righteous, you may be sure that everyone who practices righteousness has been born of him” (1 John 2:29).

“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” (1 John 3:9).

“Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God, and everyone who loves the Father loves whoever has been born of him” (1 John 5:1).

“For everyone who has been born of God overcomes the world” (1 John 5:4).

“We know that everyone who has been born of God does not keep on sinning” (1 John 5:18a).

From these many texts we may say that when a person is born again the Holy Spirit sovereignly, freely, and graciously imparts new life to the human soul. He invades a person who is otherwise spiritually dead and causes them to come spiritually alive. He renews the *mind* so that we can understand the things of God. He renews the *heart* so that we will love the things of God. He renews the *will* so that we can choose the things of God. And he renews our *affections* so that we will treasure and cherish the things of God.

The new birth, then, is not a moral makeover of the old but a supernatural creation of something altogether new. ***Nicodemus didn’t so much need a new religion as he needed a new life!*** And the same is true of you and me. To be born again does not mean that you affirm something true about the supernatural but that you experience the supernatural personally in your own soul. The new birth does not mean the improvement of your old human nature but the creation of a new human nature. It is still you. But it is a new you, recreated and regenerated and indwelt by the Holy Spirit of God.

Of course, when I say that being born again means that spiritually dead people are made spiritually alive, I’m not suggesting that Nicodemus or anyone else was not physically alive. Clearly, Nicodemus was a living, breathing, thinking, choosing, feeling human being, created in God’s image. But in the most important sense, Nicodemus was dead. There was no spiritual life in him. He could see Jesus with his eyes and form an opinion about him, but he didn’t see the beauty and irresistible splendor of Jesus until such time as he was born again.

If you are struggling to understand what Jesus meant by all this, don’t feel too badly. Nicodemus was one smart, highly educated dude, and he didn’t get it either. When he heard Jesus speak of being “born again” he thought he was saying that even though he was old, he would have to “enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born” (v. 4).

*Where Does the New Birth Come From, or Who is its Cause?*

Jesus makes it clear, as do all the other verses cited above, that being born again is altogether and only a sovereign work of God the Holy Spirit. We know that it is not physical in nature, as Jesus denies that it has anything to do with the natural process of being born (see v. 4). There are several things Jesus says that tell us the new birth is from the Holy Spirit.

**First**, he says in v. 5, “unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.” Contrary to what many of you were taught growing up, *this has absolutely nothing whatsoever to do with water baptism*. Here is why.

(1) Jesus rebukes Nicodemus in v. 10 for not understanding what is being said. But water baptism for salvation is nowhere taught in the OT. Jesus could hardly chide him for being ignorant of something that hadn’t even been instituted yet. Would Jesus have rebuked Nicodemus for ignorance of an ordinance about which nothing had yet been said?

(2) Nothing is said about water baptism in the rest of the chapter. The only thing mentioned as required for salvation and forgiveness is belief:

“whoever believes in him [in Christ] has eternal life” (John 3:15).

“whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16).

“whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God” (John 3:18).

(3) To say that the new birth only comes by water baptism does not make sense in view of the analogy with the wind – “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” (v. 8). Jesus clearly is saying that the Holy Spirit in causing the new birth is as free and unpredictable as the wind is when it blows. That is entirely inconsistent with the idea that the new birth and forgiveness are confined to or tied up with the ordinance of baptism.

(4) Observe that vv. 6-8 further develop the idea set forth in v. 5. But in vv. 6-8 “water” is conspicuously absent; there is mention only of the Spirit. The reason for this is that “Spirit” is fundamental and “water”, whatever it means, must be subsumed under or defined as an elemental part of the operative work of the Spirit in regeneration. Had our Lord regarded “water” as an independent agency in regeneration and important in itself (i.e., as distinct from the agency of the Spirit), he surely would have mentioned it again and given it more prominence. Instead, he describes the new birth as effected or caused by the Spirit alone and wholly outside the sphere of the “flesh” (v. 6).

(5) If Jesus had in mind the necessity of Christian baptism for salvation, it is odd that he never incorporated it into his proclamation of the good news, and even more strange that he himself never performed the ritual (cf. John 4:2). If baptism were indispensable for salvation, our Lord would have set the example by administering it (cf. also 1 Cor. 1:10-17).

If not water baptism, to what is Jesus referring? When Nicodemus heard the word “water” he would immediately have thought of the religious importance of water in the OT (more properly, he *should* have thought of it; his failure to do so evoked Jesus’ rebuke). The religious use or rather the religiously symbolic meaning of water in the OT pointed in one direction: *spiritual purification*. What Nicodemus ought to have thought of first was the indispensable necessity of purification from the guilt and stain of sin for entrance into the kingdom of God.

That “water” in the OT often signified washing and purifying from the pollution of sin is evident from numerous texts: Psalm 51:2-3; Isa. 1:16; Jer. 33:8; Zech. 13:1; Ex. 40:12; 30:20-21; Lev. 14:8-9; 15:5-27; 2 Kings 5:10; Numbers 19; etc. Born “of water” would therefore mean to Nicodemus that entrance into the kingdom of God could only be through *spiritual purification from the pollution and defilement of sin*.

Of all the OT texts dealing with this subject, Ezekiel 36:25-26 is surely the most fundamental.

“I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh” (Ezek. 36:25-26).

The two elements of John 3:5 (“born of water and Spirit”) correspond to the two elements of the OT counterpart. **Water in both texts speaks of purification. Spirit in both texts speaks of renovation or renewal.** These are not to be separated, however, but are to be taken as correlative aspects of the one experience of regeneration: it is a cleansing from sin and an impartation of spiritual life.

What does God mean in Ezekiel 36 when he speaks of a **“heart of stone”**? A stone is dead, lifeless, insensible, unfeeling, and unresponsive. Before you were born again you could think and feel and choose, but your thoughts about God were in error, your feelings for God were hatred and disdain, or at least indifference, and your choice was to repudiate him. In the new birth, the Holy Spirit does more than open heart surgery. **He doesn’t merely mend your heart. He replaces it.** He gives you a **“heart of flesh.”** The word “flesh” here doesn’t refer to our fallen sinful nature. It means a heart that is soft and responsive and spiritually alive. Unlike the heart of stone, the heart of flesh is enlightened to think truly of God, empowered with affections to love and delight in God, and given a will that voluntarily and freely embraces God.

What the Holy Spirit does in regeneration or in granting us the new birth is (1) to cleanse us from the guilt and stain of sin, much as water cleanses a dirty garment of whatever has soiled it, and (2) to grant us new life, a new “heart” if you will, a capacity to know, love, and follow Christ in joy and adoration.

**Second**, another way that Jesus points to the Holy Spirit as the origin and cause of the new birth is found in v. 6. Jesus says, “that which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.” In other words, like produces like. Or again, you can’t get a spiritual effect from a physical cause. The natural can only produce the natural. If you want a supernatural or spiritual effect you must have a supernatural, spiritual cause. No amount of human ingenuity or strength or good intentions or intellectual insight can turn what is flesh into spirit. The point is that when it comes to regeneration or being born again, human nature is wholly impotent and hopelessly sterile. The new birth is not in our power as fallen, sinful people to produce. We are helpless and altogether dependent on God for this to happen. Only the Holy Spirit can bring it to pass.

**Third**, he reinforces this truth in v. 8 with an analogy. The work of the Holy Spirit causing us to be born again is compared to the mysterious, sovereign movement of the wind. In case you didn’t know, the Greek word for “wind” is also the Greek word for “spirit” (*pneuma*). Notice several things here.

(1) “The wind blows where it wishes,” by which Jesus means that the Spirit is free to do what the Spirit wills. He is not controlled or constrained by you and me.

(2) “And you hear its sound,” which is his way of saying that although you can’t see the wind or control it, you can discern its presence from certain effects: it whirls, whistles, causes leaves to rustle and dust to fly. Likewise, the Spirit in causing us to be born again: you can’t see him coming or observe him at work, but you know he’s been present by the spiritual effects or fruit he produces.

(3) Finally, “you do not know where it comes from or where it goes.” You and I aren’t the source or cause of the Spirit. His activity did not originate with us. And we can’t determine or dictate his destination, or where he goes. He is as sovereign and free in causing sinners to be born again as is the wind when it blows!

Our Lord is making it as clear as he can that neither Nicodemus nor you or I cause the new birth, any more than we cause the wind to blow. **We can no more control when and where and in whom the new birth happens than we can control or direct the wind.** The decisive act in causing someone to be born again is not ours, it is the Holy Spirit’s. Of course, when the Spirit cleanses and re-creates us in newness of life, our thoughts and wills and affections are changed and we think rightly, feel joyfully, and choose willfully. These are the perceptible *effects* of the Spirit’s work in bringing us new life in Christ, **not** the *cause* of it.

We don't initiate the action to which the Holy Spirit responds. The Holy Spirit initiates the action to which we, in his power and because of his presence, respond. The Spirit sovereignly enlightens our minds and stirs our affections and awakens our wills so that all of our sinful resistance to Christ is overcome and we freely trust him and love him and adore him.

The new birth, therefore, is something that happens *to* us. It is *not* caused *by* us. We are born again so that we may be enabled to believe in and follow Jesus. You and I cannot decide to be born again. We can only believe and trust in Jesus as a result of having been born again by the Spirit.

So, if someone comes to you or to me and says, "I'm broken by the reality of my sin. I can now see that I desperately need Jesus Christ and what he did for sinners like me on the cross. I want to be born again!" My response to that sort of person is to say: "You already are! If you weren't born again, you wouldn't be convicted by your sin or see anything in Jesus worthy of your trust and adoration."

Consider again how the apostle Paul describes it all in Ephesians 2:1-6.

"And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience—among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus" (Eph. 2:1-6).

Spiritually, we are like corpses. Dead! Preaching falls on deaf ears and spiritually lifeless minds until the Spirit brings life. The new birth is the infusion of spiritual life into a spiritual corpse, giving it the power of will and the sincere heartfelt desire to believe the gospel.

*Conclusion:  
What then shall we do?*

What, then, can we do? If people are dead in their sins and trespasses, is there anything at all that you and I can do? Yes! We can *pray* that the Spirit of God would be pleased to grant them new life, a new mind, a new heart, a new will, and new affections. And we can *proclaim* to them the gospel. But why should we preach to people who are dead? We preach the gospel to them because of what Peter said:

"since you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God; . . . and this word is the good news that was preached to you" (1 Peter 1:23,25).

Peter's point is that the way in which the Holy Spirit brings about the new birth and imparts spiritual life is by means of the gospel: the proclamation of the good news! St. Francis of Assisi is reported to have said: "Preach the gospel often. When necessary, use words." NO! *Always* use words! It is by means of or through those words that the Spirit grants life to otherwise dead and hell-bound souls.

So, direct them to Jesus. This is our Lord's point in vv. 14-15. We'll look at this passage in more detail next week, but for now I want you to know what you should do when you are with a non-Christian. Jesus didn't tell Nicodemus: "Sorry, fella. Since you don't get it, I've got nothing more to say to you. Come back after you've been born again, and I'll clear things up a bit." No. He tells him in v. 15 – "Believe in me that you may have eternal life." But why? Nicodemus is dead and spiritually blind. Jesus tells him this because *God has ordained to open the eyes of the blind by giving them something to see, namely a compelling picture of Jesus crucified for sinners.*

So tell them of Jesus. Tell them of his sinless life and substitutionary death and bodily resurrection. Tell them that eternal life is theirs and forgiveness of all sins is theirs and an eternal inheritance in the new heavens and new earth is theirs if only they will believe in Jesus!