

Series: God Saves #1429

**Title: Romans 8.29b; John 3; Romans 8.7-9
Born Again By The Spirit of God**

Thank you for joining me today from wherever you are and by however you listen as we meet together coast-to-coast here in the United States and all the way around the world. Yesterday I had to sort of rush out. We were (rudely) interrupted by the clock in the middle of an exposition of John 3 and Romans 8. Sometimes that's how it goes. So let me pick up where we left off by reading the words of Jesus to the Pharisee and Jewish religious ruler Nicodemus. I will get right to Christ's point. If you want the full context and background, listen to yesterday's podcast from godisministry.org, that's godisministry.o-r-g.

In John 3, verse 3 Jesus says, **"Unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God."** And in John 3, verse 5 Jesus says, **"Unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter into the kingdom of God."**

The issue here is how does one enter the kingdom of God? For Jesus, the answer lies in being born again by the Spirit of God. (Being born again by the Spirit of God.) Jesus uses the emphatic necessary precondition for any person's ability to see and to enter the kingdom of God. This is the word "unless." Being a Pharisee Nicodemus assumed he would see and enter the kingdom based on his ethnicity (Jewish) and his religion (Judaism). Our Lord corrects him. The only way Nicodemus is ever going to see and enter the kingdom of God is *if* God changes his heart. He must be born again! This is what we call new birth or re-birth and regeneration. *Unless* we are born again we cannot see or enter God's kingdom.

Let's look at the key name here, not a word but a name, "the Spirit." That is capital S, meaning the Holy Spirit. Jesus tells Nicodemus he must be born of the Spirit. Think with me. What is the opposite of the Spirit? The opposite of the Spirit is the flesh. Listen again to the words of the Apostle Paul over in Romans chapter 8, verses 7-9. I am reading in Romans 8, beginning in verse 7.

"The mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God; for it does not subject itself to the law of God, for it is not even able to do so, ⁸ and those who are in the flesh cannot please God. ⁹ However, you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. But if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to [Christ]." Here, verses 7 and 8 describe Nicodemus in John 3. He has his mind set on the flesh, therefore (without realizing it) he is hostile towards God. Living in the flesh, Nicodemus was not subject to the law of God, notice, for he is not even *able* to be. Therefore (verse 8), living in the flesh Nicodemus cannot please God.

We must hear what Jesus says about the flesh in John 6, verse 63. He says, **"It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing."** Paul echoes Jesus. The flesh profits us nothing. *But*, the Spirit is a different story. Jesus says the Spirit gives life. And in Romans 8, verse 9 (that I just read) Paul says, "you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you." Remember that Paul is writing to Roman Christians. And as Christians, they are no longer living in the flesh, but living in the Spirit, because the Spirit of God dwells in them. This is what Jesus was urging Nicodemus towards back in John chapter 3.

Friends, the flesh and the Spirit are enemies. We do not please God by living in the flesh. The flesh profits us nothing. At the end of verse 9 Paul says something very sobering, "if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to [Christ]." In order to truly belong to Jesus Christ, we must have the Spirit of Christ living within us. The Holy Spirit takes up residence in our lives and conquers the flesh, defeats our flesh, and wins out over our flesh. Hence Christ's words to Nicodemus, "Unless one is born of the...Spirit he cannot enter into the kingdom of God." Nicodemus, the Spirit has to overcome your flesh for you to see and enter My kingdom. That's what Jesus is saying.

OK, but why have I brought up John 3 and put it in dialogue with Romans 8 now? Here is why. According to my theology, there is a biblical order to how we are saved from our sin. First, a person must be born again. Second, once a person *is* born again, *then* that person will choose Christ. And, the act, the work, the ministry of being born again comes from *God*.

Let me put it like this: *unless* we are born again, we cannot choose Christ. We will not choose Christ. *Until* we are born again, we will not have the Spirit of Christ. But once we are born again, then we will choose Christ and we will have the Spirit of Christ dwelling in us. And all of this is made possible by God's act in our will. He does the supernatural work of rebirth in our souls and makes it so that we can, using our will, choose Christ. This may be hard for us to understand because this is a mystery, but as I have said previously, this is a mystery that is true. Just because something is mysterious to us does not make it false. We have to live in the mystery of how we believe in Christ, but we will never believe in Christ *until* God helps us to believe.

I want to quote RC Sproul but first let me define a term he will use. The term is regeneration. What is regeneration? It is one word we can use to describe what Jesus means by being born again. Regeneration is the work of the Holy Spirit in creating new life in the sinner, by which act the sinner repents of sin and believes in Christ. Let me give that to you again. You might want to write this down. Regeneration is the work of the Holy Spirit in creating new life in the sinner, by which act the sinner repents of sin and believes in Christ. Regeneration is a great word that we can use to summarize what it means to be born again.

Now we can hear from Dr. Sproul, quote, "Regeneration precedes faith. Our nature is so corrupt, the power of sin is so great, that unless God does a supernatural work in our souls we will never choose Christ. We do not believe in order to be born again; we are born again in order that we may believe (*Chosen By God*, 198)." End quote.

That is a really important point. First we are born again. Then, second, we believe in Christ. A lot of Christians, it seems to me, have this the other way around. They have it backwards. They think: first, we believe in Christ, then second, we are born again. They argue that people have the moral ability to choose Christ, that still living in the flesh, without being born again, a person chooses Jesus. And after they believe in Jesus then comes the act of regeneration (or the act of being born again). But, if this view were correct, then Jesus would be wrong in his words to Nicodemus in John 3.

Note again Christ's order. First Nicodemus must be born again by the Spirit of God, then second, Nicodemus will see and will enter the kingdom of God. Regeneration comes first. An unregenerate person cannot see and enter the kingdom. Therefore, the order must be we are born again, then we believe in Christ. Regeneration precedes faith. We must be very careful that we do not have people choosing to believe in Christ while they are still living in the flesh. It is impossible to believe in Christ while in the flesh, because the flesh profits nothing. *God* must first give us spiritual rebirth, then we will have the ability to choose Christ by faith.

Bottom line: way too many Christians overestimate their ability to believe in Christ out of what (they imagine to be) their own free will. And so, tomorrow, I want to end the week by looking at the radical effect original sin and the Fall has had on us. On Monday I told you we would hear what Jesus had to say about moral ability and moral inability. We have done that. And on Monday I told you we would look more closely at the impact of sin *in* us. So, let me keep me promise next time.

It is *really, very* important that we grasp just how dead we are in our sin. We talked today about spiritual re-birth and life. Tomorrow we will look closely at spiritual death. I hope you will be with us because God Is.

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