

10. Regeneration vs. Religion

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The most well-known tennis matches in the world happen in Wimbledon, England once a year. It makes me laugh just watching the audience in those great games. Because as the ball goes back and forth, so do the heads of the audience in the stadium turn side to side as they follow the ball.

As we listen to two people – Jesus our Savior who represents Regeneration and Nicodemus, Mr. Religion, our heads are going to go back and forth as we follow their conversation.

A. MR. RELIGION

John 3:1 There was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews.

In my opinion, religious people are the most difficult people to lead to Christ because of their false sense of religious security. They can be brilliant scholars, gifted leaders, or plain good folks. But since they have their concepts of religions – often vastly different from one to another, they don't see any reason why they should be saved through Jesus. After all, they are religious and good. Somewhere in their minds, they even think that God owes them a few favors.

Nicodemus has an impeccable resume, if you will. If heaven would allow only a handful of people in by their own merits, Nicodemus would be one of them without a doubt.

- 1) Nicodemus was a Pharisee, which meant he lived by the strictest possible religious rules.
- 2) Nicodemus was a ruler of the Jews which meant he was a member of the Sanhedrin – a court of seventy men who had religious jurisdiction over every Jew in the world.
- 3) Nicodemus was a very wealthy man. In chapter 19, after Jesus died on the cross, he brought one hundred pounds of a mixture of myrrh and aloes to embalm the body of Jesus. Those things were not cheap by any measure.

Nicodemus was equivalent to Dr. Billy Graham in our days – that much respect from others, that much status and reputation. This Mr. Religion came to Jesus because there was something lacking in his heart which he couldn't figure out yet.

B. NOT RELIGION, BUT REGENERATION

John 3:2-8 This man came to Jesus by night and said to Him, "Rabbi, we know that You are a teacher come from God; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him." 3 Jesus answered and said to him, "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God." 4 Nicodemus said to Him, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" 5 Jesus answered, "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. 6 That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. 7 Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.'

Nicodemus came to see Jesus by night. Some Bible scholars insist that he came to Jesus at night because he had so much to lose in case he was seen with this unorthodox man from Galilee who had enough audacity to overturn the money exchangers' tables and shooed out the animals of the temple.

I don't know whether Nicodemus came to Jesus at night because of that or he simply wanted to have one on one time without any interruption from the thronging people. What matters was that he came to seek the truth from Jesus.

I love the way Jesus handles the situation – no-nonsense, straight to the point, no religious mumbo jumbo.

No doubt, Nicodemus was deep in his religion, following every jot and tittle of the Law, Talmud, and Mishnah, yet he was still far from the truth.

The word 'born-again' can be translated "born from above". Up to this point, the Bible has never mentioned it. We get our word "regeneration" from the Latin rendering of the phrase "born-again."

'Born-again' is a divine initiated salvation process, not by human effort. Religion is a human struggle to approach God. It is our way to gain God's favor. However, regeneration is God's effort to reach us. It means God's demonstration of love based on grace without any participation of our merit or work.

The human plan of salvation involves a lot of external series of good work or thinking that oneself is good enough for the standard they themselves set. But God's plan of salvation is the internal gift from Himself to humans.

Since our ancestors, Adam and Eve, had sinned against the Lord – disobedience outwardly and pride inwardly, their spirits were dead.

Romans 6:23 For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Consequently, all of us were born with this sinful nature in our hearts, and our spirits were dead from the beginning even though our physical bodies may be just fine. There is absolutely nothing a human can do to make that change. It is way above our league. Only God could do something and He did.

In v5, we find the word 'water'. Time to time I think that some biblical theologians don't have enough things to do except argue with each other about unnecessary things. Clearly I am not smart enough to make the Bible complicated like them. Here are some examples:

- 1) Some have thought born of water means to be baptized. Water here may represent baptism, but there is no real Old Testament foundation for this.
- 2) Some have thought that born of water refers to our physical birth, since we come forth from a sack of water.
- 3) Some have thought that born of water means to be born-again by the Word of God. In other passages of Scripture, water represents the Word, as we are washed by the water of the word.
- 4) Some have thought that born of water means to be regenerated by the Holy Spirit, the living water according to John 7:38-39.
- 5) Some have thought that born of water means to receive the water of cleansing prophesied in Ezekiel 36:25-28.

As I have taught you many times before, the best way to interpret the Bible is using the Bible. Let v6 speak to us and explain what the Holy Spirit wants us to know.

John 3:6 That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.

I think it is rather clear. The 'water' Jesus mentioned obviously meant physical birth as Nicodemus understood.

Nicodemus was baffled at Jesus' comment that one must be born-again. It caught him off-guard. Why? Like most all Jews of his time, Nicodemus believed that they already had the inner transformation promised by their physical birth as Jews, God's chosen people.

Just as we must experience conception to begin physical human life, so we must experience a rebirth spiritually that is initiated by God from above.

Before we move on to the next verse, I must insert a very important point we should not ignore. There are some denominations which insist that you must be baptized to be truly born-again – a.k.a. baptismal regeneration. That is a completely unbiblical and wrong doctrine.

If they were right, Jesus should have been busy dunking people in the water as soon as they got saved. We don't see anywhere Jesus did that. Even apostle Paul scolded the believers of the Corinthian church about dividing the church with this baptism issue.

1 Corinthians 1:17-18 For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel, not with wisdom of words, lest the cross of Christ should be made of no effect. 18 For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

No matter how you look at it, baptism is a human effort. It is our declaration to identify ourselves with the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. If there is any other reason, it is nothing more than getting wet with cloths on.

For those who are in doubt about what I just said, please turn your Bible to Luke 23:42-43:

Luke 23:42-43 Then he said to Jesus, "Lord, remember me when You come into Your kingdom." 43 And Jesus said to him, "Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise."

If you have a red letter Bible, you see what Jesus said in v43 is in red. According to Him, the thief was saved. You see, the thief didn't have a chance to get baptized. He was between the rock and hard place, he was stuck – literally – on the cross.

C. THINK OUTSIDE OF YOUR JEWISH RELIGIOUS BOX, NIC

John 3:8-13 The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear the sound of it, but cannot tell where it comes from and where it goes. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit." Nicodemus answered and said to Him, "How can these things be?" 10 Jesus answered and said to him, "Are you the teacher of Israel, and do not know these things? 11 Most assuredly, I say to you, We speak what We know and testify what We have seen, and you do not receive Our witness. 12 If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things? 13 No one has ascended to heaven but He who came down from heaven, that is, the Son of Man who is in heaven.

Jesus illustrated His point by a play on words applicable both in Hebrew and Greek. The word for "spirit" – in Hebrew "ruah"; in Greek "pneuma" is the word for "wind" in both languages and can be translated either way, depending on the context.

Clearly Nicodemus was confused and having a hard time thinking outside of his Jewish religious box. It is not that Nicodemus didn't know which portion of the OT when Jesus was referring to when He said 'wind.' Nicodemus knew that it was from Ezekiel 37:1-14.

The prophet Ezekiel saw a valley full of dead bones. But when he prophesied to the wind, the Spirit of God came and gave the bones life. Again, it was the combination of the Spirit of God and the Word of God that gave life. The nation of Israel – including Nicodemus and his fellow Sanhedrin council members – was dead and hopeless; but in spite of the morality and religion of the people, they needed the life from the Spirit.

Just this week, I talked with a man who insisted that he didn't need to go to church, or do what the Lord Jesus said in the Bible to be saved. But he claimed that he is a Christian.

In my experience of witnessing, he was not the only one. I've met hundreds of people who came up with just about the same excuses. They all feel that they were religious enough to go to heaven without any problem in their own terms. They think that God should roll out the red carpet for them on the Golden Boulevard in heaven.

They don't like the idea that they should do what the Bible says. They want to do the things according to their ideas, not be told by the Bible. Do you think I am joking? No, I am not.

It is a lot easier to reach out with the Gospel of Jesus Christ to a person who knows himself and herself as a sinner – a spiritually bankrupted person than a snobby religious person who thinks that he has God in his pocket.

So whenever I come across those religious people who rejected my witnessing, I started to pray that the Lord makes them to be spiritually bankrupted and put them in the place where they cannot turn to anywhere except to the Lord. Some of you might be offended that I pray that way for those people. I am not doing anything the Bible tells otherwise. As a matter of fact, it is very biblical.

2 Timothy 2:25b if God perhaps will grant them repentance, so that they may know the truth, 26 and that they may come to their senses and escape the snare of the devil, having been taken captive by him to do his will.

1 Corinthians 5:5 deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.

I don't do this because I hate those people, but because I care about them and their eternal life. What good is it for a person to die in good health and to end up in hell? It is better to be with the Lord because we realize that we are spiritually bankrupted without the Lord.

Matthew 5:3 "Blessed are the poor in spirit, For theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

D. APPLICATIONS

- 1) If your religion doesn't change you for the better, it is time for you to change your religion for the better.
- 2) We must realize that we are not sinners because we sin; rather we sin, because we are sinners from the beginning.
- 3) No one goes to heaven any other way than through Jesus.