

Christian Life Sermon The Newness of Our Journey

Introduction:

Previously we examined how the journey of the Christian life centers in one's heart. Now we turn to another important idea, that the journey we are on as Christians is entirely different from the journey of life that we were on prior to our conversion. So, in this lesson we will examine how our lives have been made new.

I. We have Received a New Birth:

When we think of a Pharisee we normally think of someone who was a hypocritical and unreasonable adversary of Jesus; a religious leader whose only concern was to maintain the status quo. And though this was certainly true of the majority of the Pharisees we read about in the Gospels, there were exceptions. One particular Pharisee recognized that Jesus had been sent by God. This Pharisee's name was Nicodemus, and one night he went privately to meet with Jesus. When they met, Nicodemus said, "*Rabbi, we know that You are a teacher come from God; for no one could do these signs that You do unless God is with Him.*" This statement initiated a short conversation between Nicodemus and Jesus, wherein Jesus sought to give the Pharisee an insight into the nature of God's New Covenant promise to Israel, a promise that was being fulfilled through His arrival:

"Jesus answered and said to him, 'Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God'. 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?' Jesus answered, 'Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.'"

John 3:3-6

Jesus' initial statement to Nicodemus was not in response to anything the Pharisee had said, it was a response to the expectations that the Pharisee had about what would happen when the Messiah arrived. Jesus made reference to entering the "*kingdom of God*", because the prevailing belief among conservative religious Jews of that day was that when the Messiah arrived, He would establish the kingdom of God on earth. The kingdom of God was understood to be God's active rule over the earth that would be administered by the Messiah. It was generally believed that this kingdom would automatically include all faithful Jews. Therefore, Jesus' initial instruction was intended to correct Nicodemus' false expectations, so he could be taught what Jesus actually had come to accomplish in God's name.

Jesus stated that no one (including faithful Jews) could enter the kingdom of God unless he or she was born again. As a Pharisee, Nicodemus would have been considered a Biblical scholar in his time. So, he would have been expected to understand what was taught in the Hebrew Bible. But, as the text reveals, Nicodemus did not understand Jesus's declaration. This would have been because

the expression “*born again*” does not appear anywhere in the Hebrew Bible, and there was nothing in accepted rabbinic interpretations about needing some sort of birth to enter the kingdom of God.

So, in response, Nicodemus (who was assuming that Jesus’ words related to a physical re-birth) asked how it was possible for a person to be re-born (Nicodemus’ second, clarifying question reveals that he found Jesus’ statement perplexing, if not absurd). Jesus’ second statement should be understood as Him saying basically the same thing He had said previously, but using different words to express it. He said, “*I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God*”. After Jesus elaborated a little further, we read that:

“Nicodemus answered and said to Him, ‘How can these things be?’ Jesus answered and said to him, ‘Are you the teacher of Israel, and do not know these things?’”

John 3:9-10

Nicodemus did not understand Jesus’ clarification any more than he had understood His original statement. His question reveals that he was still thinking in physical terms, and that he found it incomprehensible that such a second birth could ever take place. Finally, in response to Nicodemus’ bewilderment, Jesus gave him a mild rebuke, asking how it was possible that one who had the role of teaching theology to his people could not understand what he was being told.

Clearly, Jesus was saying that Nicodemus should not only have understood what it meant to be “*born again*”, he should have been anticipating that such a birth would have been necessary when the Messiah came. But why should Nicodemus have known these things? The answer is that though the expression “*born again*” is not used in the Old Testament, the phenomenon that Jesus was speaking about here had been foretold in prophecy centuries before:

“For I will take you from among the nations, gather you out of all countries, and bring you into your own land. Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean; I will cleanse you of all your filthiness and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh, I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do them”.

Ezekiel 36:24-27

The above quotation was a foretelling of the coming of God’s New Covenant with His people. The rabbis acknowledged that the coming of the New Covenant and the arrival of the Messiah would both take place at the end of the age. If these rabbis had properly understood the promise made through Ezekiel and other prophets, they would have been anticipating that God would do a powerful work of transformation in the lives of His people in the messianic age. However, this aspect of God’s promise had been ignored, because the focus at the time was on the hope that God would send a military leader to defeat the Romans. Because the prevailing idea at the time was that they needed political deliverance. Because of this, they had lost sight of the fact that they needed spiritual and moral

transformation in order to receive the spiritual deliverance that was their true need. Nicodemus should have understood what Jesus was talking about. He should have recognized in Jesus' re-statement "*I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God*" that Jesus was referring to the coming of the New Covenant as it was described by Ezekiel. And the promise of God giving His people a "*new heart*" in Ezekiel should have enabled Nicodemus to understand the important distinction Jesus was making when He said, "*That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit*". Jesus was saying that God's people needed what would be given in the New Covenant, if they were to receive entrance into God's kingdom.

This conversation should remind us that it is easy to focus on how we want God to change our lives. We tend to want Him to make things easier and more pleasant for us in the here and now. However, God's plan is more profound. God's plan is to reverse the Fall and make all things new. The first step in making human beings new is giving them a new birth.

Earlier in the Gospel of John, we read:

"But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name: 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

In the verses above we are given two parallel truths. In verse twelve we are reminded that becoming children of God results from accepting Jesus Christ as one's Savior by faith. And throughout the New Testament, becoming children of God is part of the spiritual salvation a person receives when they are saved from eternal damnation. Then in verse thirteen we read that we are born again (given an entirely new life, another way of referring to what results from spiritual salvation). John went on to write that this new birth does not come to people because of anything we do, or because of any inclination within us, but because it was God's will that we should receive the new birth. Therefore, in these verses we learn two important and complementary truths. First, the new life we have is ours because we chose it (we recognized that it met our most profound need and so with Divinely enlightened self-interest we embraced it). But at the same time, it represents a supernatural act of God that took place only because of His gracious will. Therefore, the implication is that living this new life will also require supernatural enablement (Gal.3:3). Since the new birth results in salvation, a second implication from this verse is that the new birth is something we both need and want (demonstrated by the choice to accept Christ so that we might be saved).

In the following verses we read that there are two defining characteristics of those who have been born again:

"If you know that He is righteous, you know that everyone who practices righteousness is born of Him."

I John 2:29

*“Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God;
and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God”*

I John 4:7

John was not saying that a person who is righteous, and who loves others causes themselves to be born. That can't be the meaning, because John wrote in his Gospel that the new birth is not a result of anything we do. Instead, it defines for us the main characteristics that manifest themselves in those who have received the new birth by the grace of God. This in turn helps us understand that righteousness and love for others are key traits of the new life we have been given.

Finally, in regard to the new birth, Paul wrote:

“not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit”

Titus 3:5

In this verse, Paul gave a brief description of God's saving work that results in new life. This saving work is our new birth (the meaning of the Greek term translated as *“regeneration”*). Paul taught that it involves a *“washing”*. The imagery indicates that the new birth results in a life that is no longer characterized by continual sin. The idea is not simply that one has been forgiven, rather it conveys that a radical moral change has been accomplished in those who are reborn. Second, that as the Holy Spirit accomplishes this rebirth, it involves a renewing, wherein God restores us to a state similar to that of the original creation, before the Fall. Both ideas stress again that the new life that is given at salvation is one that is intended to be free from sin.

II. We have Become New Creatures:

Expanding on the idea that we have received a second birth, is the idea that because of that second birth, we have become something different from what we were prior to that birth. The Apostle Paul wrote:

*“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation;
old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new.”*

II Corinthians 5:17

Paul wrote that we are a new *“creation”*. Of course, a *“creation”* is something that was made by someone else, stressing the idea that our new nature is something given to us by God. That we are a *“new”* creation is meant to stress that we are entirely different from what we were before. A creation is distinct from something that is repaired. So, the idea is not that we are an improved version of what we were before. We are something that did not exist prior to this creation. These basic definitions are inserted because it is important to recognize the significant change that God effects in redemption, to protect us from having too low a view of what God is calling us to be. Then Paul explained what is new about the believer, *“old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new”*. Since Paul wrote that *“all things”* have become new, it means that the accompanying statement means that all

the old things have passed away. Therefore, Paul was stressing that the new birth results in a complete transformation in a person, they are entirely different from what they were before. The context of the passage indicates that the focus in Paul's words stresses the idea that because we are entirely new creatures, we no longer live for ourselves, but rather we live for God (vs.15).

Paul repeated this language in another epistle and wrote:

*“For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision
avails anything, but a new creation.”*

Galatians 6:15

Paul was arguing in this letter, that the Judaizers were wrong for trying to continue the emphasis on nationality and religious ceremonies as the marks of those who are the people of God. That pharisaical teaching was completely wrong. God had chosen Israel and given them the ceremonies He did in order to teach them (and by extension, others) greater principles about what was important to Him (holiness and righteousness). The pharisaical focus on ethnicity and religious ceremony demonstrated that they completely misunderstood the truth found in the Old Testament. In contrast to that false ideology, Paul asserted that the only real hope of gaining salvation is through experiencing the transformation that comes from being made new creatures in Christ.

III. We are to Live a New Life:

In light of us having been born again, and having become new creatures in Christ, the Scriptures teach that the implication of God's transformational work in our hearts is that we are to live entirely new lives.

In the epistle to the Ephesians, we read:

“This I say, therefore, and testify in the Lord, that you should no longer walk as the rest of the Gentiles walk, in the futility of their mind, having their understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God, because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the blindness of their heart; who being past feeling, have given themselves over to lewdness, to work all uncleanness with greediness. But you have not so learned Christ, if indeed you have heard Him and have been taught by Him, as the truth is in Jesus: that you put off, concerning your former conduct, the old man which grows corrupt according to the deceitful lusts, and be renewed in the spirit of your mind, and that you put on the new man which was created according to God, in true righteousness and holiness.”

Ephesians 4:20-24

In this passage, the Apostle Paul explained both the negative and positive aspects of our new life. The entire idea of being called to live a “*new*” life implies that one is leaving an “*old*” life behind. The “*old*” life that we lived prior to conversion was one that was in a general sense, similar to the lives lived by all the other unbelievers that surrounded us. Paul wrote that this former life exhibited the following characteristics (vs.17-19):

- It was lived in the futility of one's mind (meaning a person's thought life is given over to things that are devoid of worth, and which bear no true resemblance to reality)
- It involved having one's understanding darkened (meaning that one is incapable of properly comprehending spiritual truth)
- It also involved being alienated from the life of God (meaning that one has no true communion with God nor any inclination to live in harmony with their Creator)
- This lifestyle resulted from spiritual ignorance, being oblivious to spiritual things in general, and being insensitive to the feelings and situations of others.
- As a result, it was a lifestyle that was oriented around the desire for pleasure and material possessions.

Paul then turned to the positive and explained in which ways the new life that Christians are to live is different from that former life. First, this new life involves putting off the old man that is responsible for the conduct that characterized our former lives. The Greek word translated as "*put off*" refers in a general way to taking one thing off of something else. It can mean to lay something aside, rid oneself of something, or simply to put something away. The expression was regularly used in the first century to refer to the removal of clothing. And this is the sense in which Paul used the expression here, though he used it metaphorically. He was picturing the removal of one's former life as if one was shedding an unwanted garment.

Superficially, in English, it might seem like Paul was exhorting his readers to do something on a continuing basis, specifically, to continually cease to live in harmony with the values and passions of one's former life. However, elsewhere, Paul made it clear that the individual does not have the ability to shed the old self and that this is a work of God's grace at conversion. Therefore, Paul was not instructing his readers about what they needed to do; rather he was speaking about something that happened when they were regenerated to new life in Christ. This interpretation is supported by the fact that the exhortations in verses twenty-five and following assume that the putting off and putting on have already taken place. Additionally, this interpretation is consistent with Paul's teaching elsewhere that the "*old man*" was previously done away with at conversion (Rom.6:6; Col.3:9). The exhortation here is to live in harmony with the new nature and new identity that is ours because of our re-creation in Christ. Since we have been re-created in the likeness God, we are no longer to live in a way that is characteristic of sinners, instead our lives should radiate righteousness and holiness as God Himself does.

In another epistle Paul wrote:

"Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. For if we have been united together in the likeness of His death, certainly we also shall be in the likeness of His resurrection, knowing this,

that our old man was crucified with Him, that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves of sin.”

Romans 6:4-6

In this passage Paul reminded his readers that their redemption was made possible by their being united to Christ. Because of that union with Christ, believers have died to their former lives and have been resurrected to an entirely new life in Christ. Paul explained that God’s purpose in our union with Christ was to set us free from the dominion that sin had over us prior to our conversion. Therefore, in these verses Paul taught that in order to live the new life, we must first understand what has happened to us. Then, knowing these things, and believing that this union with Christ is something real, we are to live life in light of the transformation that has been accomplished within us. A few verses later, Paul told his readers how to apply this spiritual truism to their daily lives:

“Likewise you also, reckon yourselves to be dead indeed to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Therefore, do not let sin reign in your mortal body, that you should obey it in its lusts. And do not present your members as instruments of unrighteousness to sin, but present yourselves to God as being alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God.”

Romans 6:11-13

In these verses we are taught that our new life is to be characterized by serving the will of God, rather than the impulses of our flesh. We are to seek to be used as instruments of God wherein He expresses His righteousness in and through us. To “reckon” oneself to be dead to sin and alive to righteousness merely means to be convinced in our minds that these things are true and then choosing to act on that truth. Paul makes the point that if a Christian sins, it is because he or she chose to, sin no longer has the power to control us, therefore, we can never be made to sin.

A little later, in that same letter Paul wrote about yet another important way in which our lives are new:

“For when we were in the flesh, the sinful passions which were aroused by the law were at work in our members to bear fruit to death. But now we have been delivered from the law, having died to what we were held by, so that we should serve in the newness of the Spirit and not in the oldness of the letter.”

Romans 7:5-6

In these verses Paul wrote about another contrast between our former lives and our present lives. Our new lives are empowered by a different dynamic than what was at work in our lives prior to conversion. In our former lives, our sinful orientation responded with lust when confronted with prohibitions in God’s Law. Prior to our conversion, knowing God’s Law did not stop the sinful inclinations of our hearts. Rather, it actually stimulated our sinful natures so that we sinned even more. Paul wrote that the contrast is that now we serve God “*in the newness of the Spirit and not in the oldness of the letter*”. What is new is the indwelling presence of God who

enables us to be obedient to God and to resist temptation. Prior to conversion we did not have God in us, so we were simply confronted with the written truth but were without the resources necessary to enable us to obey His commandments.

Conclusion:

These verses all stress the idea that the abundant life that Christ promises is a life rooted in change. Since in the present, the change in us is spiritual only, the transformation that has been accomplished in us is invisible. But in all ways, we are called to live our lives by faith in what God says, not by what is observable to our eyes (I Cor.5:7). However, the fruit of our transformation is intended to be visible. Christians are to live each day in the awareness that our thoughts, our words, and our actions are to be expressions of righteousness, holiness, and love. Such holiness will not come naturally to us. We have lived in the world too long, and the surrounding culture too easily influences us. The only way we will truly live holy lives is if we are determined to do so, while understanding that holiness is what we were born to express.