



The Gospel of John

“The Word Became Flesh”

John 3:18–21

January 12, 2014

Introduction

It has been a few weeks since we last looked at John’s gospel, so part of this message will involve a review of Jesus’ discussion with Nicodemus. First of all, we must recognize the imperative command in this passage: “*unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God*” (v. 3). The implied command in this statement is that “*you must be born again*” (cf. v. 7). In previous studies we saw that being born again meant being born *from above* by the Spirit of God. The shorthand term we use for this is “salvation.” We also saw that this command includes two key ideas which Jesus refers to as “earthly things” and “heavenly things” (v. 12). The *earthly things* refer to the first part of the command — things which happen on earth (i.e. being born from above / salvation). The *heavenly things* refer to the second part of the command — things which are heavenly in origin (i.e. the future kingdom of God). Jesus’ discussion with Nicodemus focuses primarily on the former (*earthly things*) because Nicodemus could not even begin to make sense of the kingdom of God without first understanding the nature of being born from above (v. 12).

The “How To” of Salvation

In verses 13–21 Jesus goes on to explain *how* a person can be born from above. In a nutshell, we can boil the whole thing down to one word: *belief*. Another synonym we commonly use for this idea is *faith*. But we must be careful not to run amok by failing to properly qualify the term. Indeed, there are many false teachings on salvation out there including one that is commonly referred to as “easy believism.” This is a view which says a person must simply make a profession of faith in order to be saved — even if it’s as simple as mouthing the words, “I believe in God.” It is true that genuine Christians hold to this belief. But unlike the teachings of easy believism, true Christians continue to not only believe in God but also follow Him throughout the rest of their lives. True Christianity is not a “say one prayer and you’re done” kind of thing. True Christianity involves an ongoing belief and trust in the Lord.

Another way we need to qualify *belief* is to make sure we have the proper object for our faith. This passage makes it clear that it is only by looking to the crucified Christ that a person can be saved. A generic belief in God will not save. Nor can a Jew be saved by claiming to believe in the God of Israel. Since God has sent His Son into the world, it is only by the name of Jesus Christ that a person can be saved (John 14:6; Acts 4:10–12). Faith is only as good as the object of that faith, and if our faith is not in the Lord Jesus Christ, then the object of our faith is powerless to save — even if we claim that object to be God! In other words, any “God” who does not go by the name Jesus Christ is powerless to give us eternal life. The only answer God gives us for the problem of unbelief is His Son Jesus Christ!

The Results of Unbelief (vv. 18–21)

Jesus already declared that His purpose in coming to the world was not one of condemnation (v. 17). God sent Jesus to the world to be a Savior because He loved sinners, and that same love is being shown today. Anyone who genuinely believes in Jesus Christ for salvation will be given eternal life. But the fact is, most people in the world will reject this most gracious offer. And the end result of failing to believe in Jesus will be condemnation. In the last few verses of this discussion, Jesus explains why it is that unbelief will result in condemnation.

The beginning of verse 18 makes it clear that those who believe in Jesus will not experience condemnation and are not in view in the following statements. Rather, these verses deal with unbelievers. When Jesus refers to Himself as the “only begotten” Son of God, this again reinforces the idea that He is God’s *unique* Son (cf. 3:16; 1:14). Salvation is found *exclusively* in Jesus Christ because He is God’s only unique Son. Throughout this discussion with Nicodemus, Jesus is repeatedly telling the truth to Nicodemus both positively and negatively. On the positive side, those who believe in Jesus will not be condemned and will receive everlasting life (v. 16). On the negative side, those who don’t believe in Jesus will be condemned and endure an everlasting death.

So what is the nature of this unbelief that results in such an awful condemnation? Is it simply an intellectual rejection of the fact that Jesus is God’s Son? No! Verses 19–20 clue us in to the heart motivations of the unbeliever. The text tells us that without even seeing the light of the gospel, the deeds of both men and women were evil! This is the state in which all people begin their lives. If a person has not believed in

Christ, then his deeds are evil. But when the light of gospel truth comes into their lives, they reject it because they love their evil deeds more than God. In other words, their evil deeds *are* their god — a god which cannot save! During the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus put this another way:

“No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money.” ~Matt 6:24

Money is not the only false “god” that mankind can worship. Evil deeds, wickedness, pride, lust, power, fame, etc. — all of these are idols of the heart and will fail to save our souls in eternity. Indeed, unbelievers serve masters such as these. But not so with God’s people. Those who truly believe, love God above all else. This also helps us qualify what it means to be a believer. Those who believe in God also love Him and serve Him as their Master. He is not simply their Savior, but also their Lord!

At this point we should be careful not to err in our understanding of unbelief. Verse 20 makes it clear that unbelievers continue to *practice* evil and do not come to the light. In Greek, the word *practice* occurs in the present tense, meaning it is an ongoing activity. The truth of the matter is that they don’t want to go anywhere near the light because they fear having their evil deeds exposed. Some of you may have experienced this while sharing the gospel. Certain people will instantly clam up or go out of their way to avoid any “religious talk.” Others will be blatantly hostile toward the gospel message. In the end, what all this amounts to is a love for evil.

But when a person crosses the threshold of salvation and moves from the category of unbeliever to believer, that person will cease their ongoing practice of evil. Another word we use for this cessation of evil is *repentance*. This is not to say that believers will never again commit any sins. But they will cease to live in a *pattern* of evil deeds. Here is another way of saying this: a believer *does* the truth (v. 21). Once a person has crossed that threshold and moved from unbelief to belief, he will begin to walk in a way where he is practicing the truth. The term “does” in verse 21 is also in the present tense in Greek. In other words, once a person becomes a believer, he will engage in an ongoing practice of truth and righteousness. Again, this doesn’t mean we somehow

attain a level of perfection once we become a believer. Every true believer still struggles with sin this side of glory. But true believers also strive to please their Master by practicing the truth and doing righteous works in ever increasing measure. Believers also recognize that none of their good deeds and righteous works would be possible apart from the work of Jesus Christ on the cross. It was Christ who accomplished our salvation, not us! And it is Christ who enables us to walk in truth and righteousness. For this reason, true believers are drawn to the light of God's word and fellowship with God's people — the church. As believers, we come into the light because we desire that God's word would be displayed in and through us!

Conclusion

The apostle Paul reminds us in the book of Ephesians that salvation is a gift from God, and is obtained through simple faith:

“For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast.” ~Eph 2:8–9

But God is not simply handing out fire insurance, or giving us tickets into heaven. Notice God's purpose in the following verse:

“For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.” ~Eph 2:10

Because of His love, God is calling out a people for His name — believers who will walk in the truth, display the light of the gospel through their good works, and live eternally in His presence. The only alternative is to continue in unbelief, practice evil deeds, be condemned by the light of truth, and ultimately suffer everlasting destruction in the second death. This was the choice that lay before Nicodemus. And the same can be said for every person today. If you have never come into the light of the truth by believing the gospel, then trust in Christ today while there is still hope. Our fate is not sealed until the curtains of death overtake us. Believe in Jesus Christ today and He will most assuredly save you!

~AWB