

SERIES: Gospel of John: Seeing is Believing?
 SERMON: ***Grounded in God's Grace***
 SCRIPTURE: John 3:1-21
 SPEAKER: Pastor Josh Black
 DATE: September 25, 2011

To Know and Be Known

We had our annual staff retreat on Monday. We had a great time together; it was probably my favorite staff retreat in five years. Let me tell you why. Before the retreat, I asked the staff to let me know some topics they would like to cover. Most of the staff expressed an interest in getting to know me better. This made sense at first, but then I thought, "If I'm the main topic of discussion at this retreat, everyone is going to be bored stiff." So, I called my friend Chad Edwards who works for International Young Life. Chad has some experience leading staff retreats and I thought he could help. I explained my dilemma to him. Chad agreed that if the main goal at the retreat was to get to know me better, the staff might become bored very quickly. He then said something that really stuck with me. He said, "All people want to know others *and* they want to *be* known." The staff wants to know their lead pastor, but they also want to be known by him and by the others on the staff. So, we worked together to come up with some games and activities that helped the staff get to know me better, but also helped me get to know them better. As a result, we had a fun retreat and we all got to know one another better.

The reason we all desire to know others and to be known by others is because we were created in the image of God. We were created for a relationship with God who is in eternal relationship with himself as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (cf. Jn. 1:1-3). One of the main purposes of our lives is to know God and to be known by him.

We know God wants to be known because he has revealed himself to us. He speaks to us through his written Word and most emphatically through his Son, Jesus (Heb. 1:1-2), the Word of God who became flesh (Jn. 1:14). The Book of John also speaks of Jesus as light; he is the bright light who reveals God to us (1:18). God wants to be known.

But do we want to know God? Is it even possible to know God? And do we want to be known by him? Do we want the light to reveal God to us and to see into the depths of who we are? Our text this morning gives us the answer to this question in verses 19-20. "*And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed*" (3:19-20).

In our sin, we don't want to see God or be seen by him; we don't want to know God or be known by him. The reason is this – when we see him clearly we see that he is holy and pure. When he looks at us he sees that we are wicked. To know God and to be known by him is too much for us to take, in our sin.

If we were created to know God and be known by him, but we can't or don't want to, that's problematic. That's actually the main problem in our lives. But there is good news. Our text this morning addresses this problem.

John 3:1-21 (ESV)

¹Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. ²This 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." ³Jesus answered him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." ⁴Nicodemus 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?" ⁵Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. ⁶That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' ⁸The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or whether it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."

⁹Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" ¹⁰Jesus answered him, "Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things? ¹¹Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen, but you do not receive our testimony. ¹²If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things? ¹³No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. ¹⁴And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵that whoever believes in him may have eternal life."

¹⁶For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. ¹⁸Whoever 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. ¹⁹And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. ²⁰For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed. ²¹But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God.

This passage builds a foundation for knowing God. There are three levels to the foundation that all build on one another.

The top level of the foundation is found in verses 1-8.

KNOWING GOD IS GROUNDED ON REBIRTH. (1-8)

I want to answer three questions about rebirth at this level. Why is rebirth necessary? What is rebirth? How is rebirth possible?

Why is rebirth necessary?

John 2:23-25 (ESV)

Now when he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, many believed in his name when they saw the signs that he was doing. ²⁴But Jesus on his part did not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people ²⁵and needed no one to bear witness about man, for he himself knew what was in man.

Jesus knows what is in man. Over the next few weeks we're going to be introduced to a number of people that Jesus sees right through. The first of those people, we meet in our text this morning, Nicodemus. Look at verse 2. Nicodemus says to Jesus, "*Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God....*" Nicodemus thinks he *knows* something about Jesus. But listen to how Jesus responds to Nicodemus. *Jesus answered him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God."* The phrase "truly, truly" is a trump card. It's used three times in this passage. It indicates that Jesus speaks with authority and that he speaks for God; he knows what is in man.

Mike Bullmore tells a story of a man who went to the Louvre in Paris to look at the Mona Lisa. The man stood there for a long time studying the painting. Finally the man spoke to the guard who was standing there and said, "I don't like it." The guard gently replied, "Sir, these paintings are no longer being judged; the viewers are."¹ Jesus is the Son of God. What Nicodemus knows about Jesus is not nearly as important as what Jesus knows about him. What Nicodemus sees in Jesus is not nearly as important as what Jesus sees in him. The Son of God is not being judged, we are.

If anyone could ever know God you would think Nicodemus could. He was an expert on the Bible. He was at the top of the religious food chain. But Jesus knows what is inside of each of us. Jesus knew that Nicodemus, the man who comes by night, loved darkness rather than the light (3:19), just like us. Nicodemus was full of evil and wickedness (3:20), just like us. Therefore, rebirth is necessary because we are sinful.

Even the most religious people are full of sin and unable to see God. And if Nicodemus couldn't see God without being born again, then I can assure you none of us can know God without being born again. In our sin, we can't see God. In our sin, we can't know God. The only way we can know God is if we are born again.

We have seen that we need rebirth because we are sinful. Now let us consider what rebirth is.

What is rebirth?

When Jesus tells Nicodemus that we can't see the kingdom of God unless we're born again Nicodemus doesn't understand what Jesus means. That's why he says, "*How can a man be born when he is old?*"

¹ Mike Bullmore. "Five Convictions About Preaching, Without Which You Ought Not Preach."

When Jesus speaks of rebirth and the kingdom of God he's speaking of eternal life in an eternal kingdom. And when Jesus speaks eternal life he's speaking of knowing the eternal God. In John 17:3 Jesus says, "*and this is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.*" If someone is going to come to know the eternal God they must have eternal life which can only come through rebirth.

Jesus reiterates this in verse 5, "*...unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.*" In this verse, Jesus is referring back to Ezekiel 36:25-27, which Judy read earlier in the service. Ezekiel 36 gives us the promise of the new covenant. God will make the people of the new covenant an entirely new people. For those who are born again, the old is gone, the new has come. The old sinful person is washed away. This is represented by the water. The new person has come and will have a new heart. This is represented by the Spirit. In our sin, we can't know God because sinful people cannot know a holy God. We must be made completely new by God (cf. Titus 3:5).

Rebirth is a completely new life. Look at verse 6, "*That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.*"

Eternal life is not simply life after death. Eternal life is available now, can be experienced now, and will last forever. But eternal life is a completely new kind of life. It is beyond the physical realm that we know and experience now (cf. 18:36). The flesh can only give birth to physical life. But spiritual rebirth is necessary in order to have eternal life and to be fit for the eternal kingdom. This kind of life only comes through rebirth.

I hear people say all of the time, "This changed my life." This phrase generally refers to a new program or a new product. This workout program changed my life. This new money management program changed my life. This new cleaning product changed my life. When someone says, "This changed my life" what they mean is the product or program gave them a new lease on life or helped them turn over a new leaf in their life. That is not what Jesus is saying here. He's referring to a whole new life. And eternal life can only come from God.

Rebirth is a work of God, not man. Look at verse 4 again. Nicodemus reveals a problem that we all have, when he says, "*Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?*" We all tend to think that change in our lives is a result of our own effort. You can't make rebirth happen; you can't be born again on your own effort. Jesus wants Nicodemus to see that the kind of change that is necessary to know God can only come from God. Look at verse 8, "*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.*"

We cannot understand the wind and we cannot control the wind. But we can see the effects of the wind. Tornadoes and hurricanes illustrate this. If we could understand or control the wind we would be able to prevent hurricanes and tornadoes from destroying people's lives, but we can't. However, we can see the effects of a tornado or a hurricane. The same is true with everyone who is born again. We can't understand it and we can't control it because it is the work of God, but we can see the effects of it.²

² David Vecchitto. "You Must Be Born Again."

Jesus wants Nicodemus to see that there is no way he can see or know God without the work of the Holy Spirit in his life. His religious credentials will never be enough to get him into a relationship with God. The same is true for each of us. Eternal life is entirely based on the work of God through his Holy Spirit in our lives.

If you follow sports at all, you probably heard that Perry Ellis committed to KU this week. What you may not know is that our youth pastor, Jeremy Krause, is actually a really good basketball player too. I've heard he can hang with the best of them in a game of pick up ball at the Y. But suppose Jeremy went with Perry up to KU and said to Bill Self, "Coach Self I'm really good friends with Perry, and I'm pretty good at basketball too; I'd like to join the team. I've got a pretty good shot, my ball handling skills are good, and I know the game like the back of my hand. Also, I'm in pretty good shape with the exception of this bum knee. I know I'm not very tall and I can't jump very high, but I'll work harder than anyone on the team. And don't forget I'm a pastor. I think it would be a good decision to allow me to play on the team."

What would Bill Self say? I think he would say something like this. "Jeremy, I appreciate the fact that you're a man of God and all, and I'm glad that you're a friend of Perry's. I also appreciate the fact that you would work hard, but the problem is not really your skill level. The problem is you. I mean look at you. There's no amount of work that's going to get you on the team. There's no amount of prayer that's going to get you on the team. The fact is you'll never be able to play on this team. The only way you could possibly play on this team is if you became someone entirely different than you are now. Sorry."³

It doesn't matter how much you know about God and it doesn't matter how hard you try to be a good person. The problem is not knowledge. The problem is not a lack of good deeds. The problem is you (and me). We will never be good enough. Unless you are born again, you can't know God; you can't see the kingdom of God. That brings us to our third question.

How is rebirth possible?

This is essentially the question Nicodemus asks Jesus in verse 9. "*How can these things be?*" Or another in other words: "*How can these things happen?*" How is rebirth possible?

At this point you may be wondering if there is anything you can do to be born again. Does eternal life have anything to do with us? Well the answer is yes, and no. On the one hand, eternal life is completely dependent on the work of the sovereign God in your life. There is nothing you can do to get eternal life. We have established that. But on the other hand we are responsible; we have a choice. We either reject Jesus or receive him (1:12). Look at verses 17-18, "*For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. 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.*"

³ This is an adaptation of an illustration given by Vaughn Roberts in "Meeting Jesus."

What must we do to be born again? On the one hand, there is nothing we can do; God is sovereign. On the other hand, we must believe the gospel; we are responsible. And that brings us to our next level in the foundation of knowing God, found in verses 9-15.

REBIRTH IS GROUNDED ON (BELIEF IN) THE GOSPEL. (9-15)⁴

In response to Nicodemus' question in verse 9 Jesus gives a lengthy answer. But we are simply going to get to the heart of his answer. Please direct your attention to verses 13-15, "*No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.*"

Jesus is referring to the gospel in these verses. John 1:1 says, "*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God.*" Jesus was exalted in the beginning. After all Jesus is God and was with God in the beginning. But 2000 years ago Jesus descended. John 1:14 says, "*And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us...*" Jesus became a man. And the reason Jesus became a man was to die.

John refers to Jesus as "*the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world*" (1:29). Jesus died for our sins. Jesus was lifted up. John intends a double meaning when he uses the words "lifted up." Jesus is lifted up on the cross *and* he is exalted. Jesus was also lifted up from the grave at his resurrection and lifted up into heaven at his ascension. The death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus refer to his exaltation. "He came from heaven to earth to show the way, from the earth to the cross my debt to pay, from the cross to the grave, from the grave to the sky, Lord I lift your name on high." That is the gospel. That is good news. We must believe this gospel if we are to have eternal life.

Jesus reference to the serpent being lifted up in the wilderness may seem bizarre if you're unfamiliar with the story he's referring to. Let me share it with you briefly. In Numbers 21 the Israelites rebel against God. They became impatient and complain about being in the wilderness and the food that God had provided. Their rebellion may seem petty in your mind. But no sin is petty in the eyes of a holy God. God always judges all sin and rebellion. So, in this case God sent poisonous snakes into their camp. The snakes were biting many of the Israelites and many of them were dying. The people confessed their sin and asked Moses to pray to God for deliverance. So, God commanded Moses to make a bronze serpent and set it on a pole. Then Moses was commanded to lift up that serpent in the desert. If the people whom were bit by the snakes would look to the bronze serpent they would live.

We, like the Israelites, all stand condemned in our sin. No matter how petty our sin may seem in our eyes, it is a big deal in the eyes of a holy God. We all love darkness, we are all wicked, and we all deserve eternal death. But Jesus was lifted up on a cross so that we wouldn't have to die. The Son of Man was "*lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.*" How is rebirth possible? We must believe the gospel. We can't look to our own works. We have to look to the work of God in Christ. We have to look to the One who was lifted up. We have to believe the gospel; that Christ died for our sins and that he was raised on the third day.

⁴ Andreas Köstenberger. *John*.

The Gospel is Counter-Intuitive

There is nothing we can do to be born again. Salvation is by grace alone. We must simply believe the gospel. But it is actually not that simple for us. This goes against everything we know. The gospel is counter-intuitive. The thought that we bring nothing to the table goes against everything that we know and experience in this life.

The world is based on a works-based, conditional system. If we work hard then we'll make good grades then we can make a lot of money and then we can buy nice stuff. If we're lazy then we won't make good grades and we won't make good money and we can't buy nice stuff. That is how it works in a works-based system.

If we're nice people then we'll make friends and earn the acceptance of others. If we're jerks then we won't have friends. If we eat nutritious foods, avoid too much bad food, and exercise then we'll be healthy and look good. If we eat poorly and don't exercise then you'll look like me. That's how it works in a works-based, conditional system.

This conditional, works-based system is also found in religion. Most people believe that in the end if their good deeds outweigh their bad deeds then they'll get into heaven. Or people believe that if they're not as bad as someone else they'll get in to heaven.

Christianity is entirely different. Knowing God is grounded on rebirth, not works. And rebirth is grounded on belief in the gospel, not works. And that brings me to the bottom level in the foundation of knowing God.

THE GOSPEL IS GROUNDED ON THE LOVE OF GOD. (16)

Look at verse 16, *“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.”*

There is a reason this is one of the most popular verses in the Bible of all time. It explains much of the Christian belief system. We're not saved by our own works; we're saved through faith in the work of God, in Christ. Even though we are sinful people who deserve eternal death, we can still know God and his eternal life. Our knowledge of God is not based on what we have done; it is based solely on the love of God.

We live in a world where the words “I love you” can seem cheap. But God's love for the world is not cheap. And we don't have to wonder if God loves us like we do when people tell us they love us. God demonstrated his love for us in this, while we were still sinners Christ died for us (Rom. 5:8). God's love for the world is amazing. But don't misunderstand what is being said here. God's love for the world is not amazing because the world is so big. God's love for the world is amazing because the world is so bad.⁵

If you have an ESV Bible you'll notice the footnote in your Bible says another way we could translate this verse would be *“For this is how God loved the world...he gave his only Son...”* I

⁵ Don Carson. *The Gospel According to John*.

think this is actually a better translation. The verse is not trying to tell us the degree to which God loved us (that is obvious); it's trying to tell us the manner in which God loved us. He loved us *by* sending his Son to die for us so that we wouldn't have to die, even though we deserve eternal death.

As sinners we need to be focused not on what we do, but on what God has done in Christ. We need to look to the cross as our only hope of eternal life; the only way we can know God. We were created for a relationship with God. We were created to know God and to be known by him. But the only way we can come to know God is by believing that Christ died for our sins. If we believe this message then we are born again. And only those who are born again can know God.

Sermon in a Sentence: We are saved by grace alone, in Christ alone, through faith alone.

In our sin, we can't know God and we don't want to know God. In our sin, we love darkness rather than light. But when the lights come on in our hearts, we see the gospel as our only hope of salvation and believe that Christ died for our sins. When the lights come on in our hearts then we come to love the light; we desire to walk in the light. How do you know if you have believed the gospel? How do you know if you have been born again? How do you know if you have a relationship with God?

Remember what I said earlier about wind? We don't understand the wind and we can't control the wind, but we can see the effects of the wind. We can't make ourselves born again, only God can, but we can see the effects of rebirth. Let me read verse 21 again, "*...whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God.*"

We aren't saved by good works, but we are saved for good works (Eph. 2:10). If we are born-again Christians we will desire to walk in the light, not in darkness and there will be evidence of the ongoing work of God in our lives. You can't make yourself a new creation. But if you are a new creation it will be clear that God is at work in your life. God's work of salvation is a transforming work.

If you are not sure of your salvation this morning, I urge you to believe the gospel. Don't put your trust in your works. And don't put your trust in a prayer you said at some point in your life. Put your trust in God. Let us continue to believe in the gospel. Let us be grounded in God's grace.

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