

Sermon Reading: John 3:1-17

Sermon Theme: It's Really that Simple

Asking questions is a good thing. It's how we learn. It's how we grow. It leads us to new discoveries and broadening our horizons. Asking the right questions can lead to cracking the case. Certain questions can lead to a better handle on the situation and clear the air for a better perspective. Questions are a good thing. Eventually, though, you reach a point when you just need to listen.

In John 3 we meet a man who has questions. He's a smart guy too. He belongs to the religious group known as the Pharisees. These guys are well-educated in God's Word and God's Law. He's a leader of the people and part of their court system known as the Sanhedrin. So, not only does he know the Law, but he also knows how to apply it. Like I said, he's a smart guy. He is also observant. He recognizes Jesus must come from God in some shape or form. **"No one can do these signs unless God is with him,"** Nicodemus said.

And so, this smart guy Nicodemus meets Jesus at night. Evidently, he has questions, questions that he feels Jesus is able to answer. From Jesus' response we understand that Nicodemus has questions about the kingdom of God, eternal life, what happens to us after this earth. As a smart guy he recognizes that we are meant for something more than *this*. So how do we get *there*? Jesus answered him, **"Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again"** (John 3:3).

But this doesn't make any sense to Nicodemus. **"How can someone be born when they are old?"** (John 3:4). You can hear his frustration in his question. What Jesus is implying is absurd. It's impossible. At the same time, he still wants answers. Jesus continues: **"Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. ⁶Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit"** (John 3:5-6). And still Nicodemus doesn't get it, or at least that's what it seems. On the other hand, perhaps this smart guy Nicodemus doesn't like what Jesus is implying.

We are smart people too. Sure, yes, there are many, many different things that we do not know. At the same time, there is a lot of stuff that we do. From engines to animals, people to construction and everything else in between, we have a lot of knowledge. You think about the advancements in technology and what we are able to do today. Consider how much more of the world, of diverse cultures, places we

have seen and discovered. We are smart people who, if we don't have the answer, we have smart devices where in a matter of seconds you can type it in and find your answers.

Like the smart guy Nicodemus, we also have questions. But the most important question we can ask is what Jesus gives the answer to in John 3. What Jesus says really isn't all too difficult. Each and every one of us has an end date. Whether that comes with Jesus' return or it is death, this world, everything, and everyone has an expiration date. If you want to have any hope of life after this world, you must be born again. If you want to be part of God's kingdom along with all of its blessings and promises, something must be done to you. When a baby is born it is completely dependent on mom, her health, her immune system, her nutrients. Babies do not make it easier on mom but, rather, often make it more difficult. You are born not by your own power or initiative; you were completely passive. It is something done to you.

When Jesus says we must be born again, he's telling us this is something done to you not by you. This means that having a place in God's kingdom, a home in the place he has made for you, it's not coming from you. This is entirely God's work for you. It's completely in his hands. The thing is, the work is already done and now God just gives it to us. No one is left out of this. This doesn't just apply to a certain group, nationality, culture. No one can enter God's kingdom unless he or she is born again. Flesh gives birth to flesh. The sin of your parents is handed down to you. We are by nature born outside of God's kingdom. We are by nature incapable, unable, unwilling to be part of God's kingdom. We are hostile against God's will. We push against what he says. So, we must be born again. It's not something you do. It's God's gift to you that is not dependent on you in any shape or form. It does not depend at your potential for the future and is independent of your past. It's 100% a gift. It's really that simple.

But how can this be? The problem isn't so much the difficulty with what Jesus is saying. For us smart people, it's too simple. This goes against every fiber of our natural being. It's foolishness! Shouldn't we have to do something? What if someone takes it for granted? Won't they just abuse the gift if there are no expectations and demands to change? My being a good person to other people, my good turn for the day, my hard work and effort should count for something, shouldn't it? My suffering, my endurance, what I've faced, puts me in some of God's good graces, doesn't it? You need to prove or at least show you are thankful

for the gift to keep it, don't you? You need to show you are truly dedicated and serious about it, don't you?

But if God's gift becomes something you have to work for, it stops being a gift. If it's something that you have to prove to earn, it becomes payment for a job. If the gift is received because of you doing, choosing, gaining, deserving, **faith means nothing and the promise is worthless, because the law brings wrath** (Romans 4:14-15). If you being saved depends on even a fraction of percent of you doing something, why would Jesus need to come to this world? Just try harder. Do better. But we can't do enough and try hard enough. We are lost on our own. There is no hope. You have rejected God's good gift and, therefore, will not be part of his kingdom but perish.

Nicodemus still has his questions; you might too. But at this point it is not time for more questions; it's time to listen. **“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him”** (John 3:16-17). It's really that simple. God does not wait for humankind to make a decision or find him, God goes to him, he goes to her sinners and lost as we are and he gives his good gifts. He's more aware than we are how much we don't deserve it. He knows better than we do no matter how often we promise to do better, try to improve, even achieve our best, it comes woefully short. No one can enter his kingdom unless God does something. And this is how he does it.

You might have heard it before with this passage God loved us “SOOOOO much...” speaking to the immense love God had for the world. That's not Jesus' point or the word he uses. No, Jesus' point is the answer to our question, “How?” This is how we come into God's kingdom: he gave his one and only Son. Here's the evidence of God's love for you: he gives you Jesus. I wouldn't give up my girls to save the inmate on death row. I wouldn't give up my girls to save my brothers. But God loved the world in this way: he gave his own Son to us who were his enemies. He gave Jesus to us who had no hope of life but sentenced to eternal suffering and death. This is why Jesus came into this world. He's not here to be just a good teacher who answers questions or model for life. He came to be lifted up on a cross that was his curse so that we would be blessed. He was lifted up to protect us from God's wrath and bear the punishment for your sins and mine so that we have peace with God. He came to be lifted up to be forsaken by God so

that you would be welcomed into his kingdom. Jesus, true God from eternity and also true man, is lifted up so God dies, God bleeds and his blood pays the debt of sin we owe and washes you clean of the sin you have done and has been done against you. There is nothing for you to do. It is finished, Jesus says. And whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

But how can this be? **The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit** (John 3:8). The wind blows wherever and works however it pleases. So, the Holy Spirit works wherever and when he pleases. And Jesus tells us how he works and where he does it. He makes us born again through water and the Spirit. We weren't there at the cross where Jesus won us forgiveness and life with him. But through water and the Word, God takes us there where we are united with Jesus in his death and we rise with him; we are born again. There in baptism Jesus rips us from Satan's grasp and put God's name on you. You are his child clothed with Jesus' sinless life. You are no longer a slave to sin and its desires. You are born again! You have been set free and made heir of all God's possessions. You are not bound for hell. You are born again with eternal life and a place prepared by Jesus waiting for you. We will not die but live. In Baptism God uses our hands, speaks his word through our mouths, and he works so that you are born again. It's all God's work for you which you receive and believe.

How? Because God says so and God neither lies nor deceives. And we see the results. We see that faith at work in you and through you as you love and serve one another. And even those good works are gifts from God. We are poor beggars who come before him; all we have to offer him is what he has gave to us in the first place. And through this faith he creates he lifts our eyes to looks up at my Savior lifted on the cross and believes Jesus died for me, especially me. We have the promise from the one who gives life to the dead that all who believe in the Son he gave for all the nations, clans, people of the earth, for you, especially you, shall not perish but have eternal life. Amen.