

**John 3: 1-3; “To See the Kingdom of God”, Sermon # 11 in the series –
“That All May Honor the Son”, Delivered by Pastor Paul Rendall
on February 24th, 2012, in the Morning Worship Service.**

I cannot think of a more needful text to preach upon than this one which we have arrived at this morning. Jesus says, “Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God”. I do not want to simply preach once on this story of Nicodemus and the New Birth. I do not think that it will do the subject justice unless I can preach perhaps 3 sermons on this text and the subject of regeneration. The way that I would like to handle it will be as follows. This morning I will preach to you about the doctrine of regeneration from the vantage point of what it means to see the kingdom of God. Next Sunday I will preach to you about the doctrine of regeneration from the vantage point of what it means to be born again. And the following Sunday I will preach to you about the doctrine of regeneration from the vantage point of the wind blowing where it wishes. I think that this will be very helpful both for Christians and non-Christians alike. To be able to “see” the kingdom of God is a spiritual gift of God’s grace which is sovereignly bestowed upon the person whom God intends to save. Without being able to see the kingdom of God, you cannot enter the kingdom of God, and without entering the kingdom of God while you are still in this world, you will perish forever. Such is the importance of the subject that we are looking at this morning. 1st – I want to show you that very religious people must be born again or they cannot see the kingdom of God. 2nd – I want to show you that saving illumination of the mind to the truth of the gospel is essential for a person to see the kingdom of God. And 3rd – I want to show you that receiving the faculty of spiritual sight is essential to seeing the kingdom of God.

1st – Let us consider the truth that even very religious people need to be born again.

“There was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews.” Here was a man who was one of the Sanhedrim, one of the 70 elders of Israel. He was of the strictest sect of those Jews who believed the Old Testament scriptures. He believed in the resurrection of the dead and the immortality of the soul. He was one of the men who was responsible for teaching the whole nation the way of spiritual truth. Jesus says in verse 10, “Are you the teacher of Israel, and do not know these things?” (That is, the things related to the New Birth, or being Born Again.) A person can be very religious and yet not understand the truth that they must be born again to enter God’s kingdom. They can be totally blind to that fact that it takes a mighty work of God’s Holy Spirit in their heart to bring them to know God, and for them to begin to walk with Him in truth. They can be totally blind to the fact that God’s kingdom must be entered through the New Birth, while they live here upon the earth, or else it cannot be entered when they die. We are

given here a good indication of how a religious person acts when they first awakened to their need of this mighty work. It says here, "He came to Jesus by night..." He came to Jesus by night for several reasons. One was that, the vast majority of the Sanhedrim did not approve of Jesus' ministry because He would not submit to their false and legalistic teaching, and therefore they could not believe in Him as their Messiah. Nicodemus knew this and he did not want to lose his position in the Sanhedrim because of his coming to see Jesus in a more public fashion. A person who is being awakened to their need of Christ and the New Birth will desire to know more of God's ways and His truth, but they may be afraid of what other religious people will think, if they change. But when God's purpose is to save, the curiosity and desire to know more of God's will and God's ways will prevail. A 2nd reason for his coming by night was that he was somewhat ashamed of the fact that even though he was the teacher in Israel, he had to admit that he did not know or understand many of spiritual truths related to the salvation of the soul. Still, he was eager to learn them. How could he teach others what he did not know himself? And 3rd, his coming to Jesus for counsel in the darkness of the night is a good representation to us who are here this morning, of the spiritual state of his soul. He was still in darkness, even though he was a very religious man. Before being born again, the state of the soul of any person, religious or not, is one of spiritual darkness. God must take the initiative by shining His glorious light into the darkened soul of a man, or he will remain in that darkness. We will see more of this in our 2nd point.

By way of application, these are all very good reasons why you should immediately come to Jesus Christ, even if you have been a religious person all of your life. You may be from a Roman Catholic background and you have attended the mass all of your life. You may have been an altar boy when you were young. You may be a priest even now, and have been for many years, and yet you do not have a personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ. It has all been religious rituals and your doing what the Pope and what your church has told you to do. It is good to come directly to Jesus and inquire about the meaning of the Bible and the work of the Holy Spirit. Don't be ashamed to ask. This was the case with a man named Richard Bennett whose testimony is on-line and you may see it and read it for yourself. He was very religious, but he did not know the first things about the gospel or needing to be saved until God began to open his eyes. What he needed to understand was that the Bible is God's means of giving us the light of absolute truth. He had not been born again yet, but he needed to understand a very foundational truth, and the Holy Spirit was going to show this to him. The Holy Spirit of God is the revealer of the truth of the Bible. These illuminations of the mind to the authority and truth of the Bible precede (they go before) and lead up to that person's being born again, in the time and the through the circumstances which God ordains. He says this: "First, I discovered that God's Word in the Bible is absolute and without error." "I had been taught that the Word

is relative and that its truthfulness in many areas was to be questioned.” “Now I began to understand that the Bible could, in fact, be trusted.” “With the aid of Strong's Concordance, I began to study the Bible to see what it says about itself.” “I discovered that the Bible teaches clearly that it is from God and is absolute in what it says.” “It is true in its history, in the promises God has made, in its prophecies, in the moral commands it gives, and in how to live the Christian life.” “All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: That the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works” (II Timothy 3:16-17).”

“This discovery was made while visiting in Vancouver, B.C., and in Seattle.” “When I was asked to talk to the prayer group in St. Stephen's Catholic Church, I took as my subject the absolute authority of God's Word.” “It was the first time that I had understood such a truth or talked about it.” “I returned to Vancouver, B.C. and in a large parish Church, before about 400 people, I preached the same message.” “Bible in hand, I proclaimed that “the absolute and final authority in all matters of faith and morals is the Bible, God's own Word.” “Three days later, the archbishop of Vancouver, B.C., James Carney, called me to his office.” “I was then officially silenced and forbidden to preach in his archdiocese.” “I was told that my punishment would have been more severe, were it not for the letter of recommendation I had received from my own archbishop, Anthony Pantin.” “Soon afterwards I returned to Trinidad.” “He says a little later: “I continued to pray Philippians 3:10, “That I may know him, and the power of his resurrection....” “But to learn more about Him, I had first to learn about myself as a sinner. I saw from the Bible (I Timothy 2:5) that the role I was playing as a priestly mediator -- exactly what the Catholic Church teaches but exactly opposite to what the Bible teaches -- was wrong.” “I really enjoyed being looked up to by the people and, in a certain sense, being idolized by them.” “I rationalized my sin by saying that after all, if this is what the biggest Church in the world teaches, who am I to question it?” “Still, I struggled with the conflict within. I began to see the worship of Mary, the saints, and the priests for the sin that it is. But while I was willing to renounce Mary and the saints as mediators, I could not renounce the priesthood, for in that I had invested my whole life.” This is very typical of what the Holy Spirit shows a religious man when he is going to save him; he shows him that being religious is simply not enough to know God, indeed the works of false religion confuse and deter a person away from coming to know God through Jesus Christ. Richard Bennett went on to come to know the Lord and has been for many years preaching and witnessing to the truth of the absolute necessity of the New Birth in order to see the kingdom of God, and the falseness of Roman Catholic teaching.

This is also true of all religious backgrounds. Religious activities, if truly Biblical, in the church that you attend are intended for your instruction and for you to be saved. But if the truths of the gospel are not communicated along with them, you still will not come to know God through those means. You may be from

a Liberal Protestant church background. You may have grown up going to Sunday School, and even may even be teaching it now. You may be a pastor now, and yet you do not know God or have the power to lead a godly life, even though you have been outwardly moral since your youth. You may have come to question the fact that you know God because you do not have a good understanding of the word of God, the Bible. It is good to come to Jesus directly, for He will be able to tell you what you need. You may even be a child or a young person who has been raised in a Reformed Baptist Church or Evangelical church and have thought that just going to church was enough to give you the sense that you were saved from your sins. After all, you are a pretty good person; you don't engage in the sinful activities of the world, you love your parents and your church. But you do not sense the Lord's presence and power in your life. How good it is to know that when you come to Christ, that He will give you the answers that you are seeking. Even if you come secretly and privately to seek Him and to find Him in prayer, He will hear your cries, and direct you to a pastor or other Christians who will be able to give you the Bible's answer to your questions on the meaning of life. But let me explain it to you now. You need to understand this morning that being religious is not the same thing as being saved. Being saved from your sins comes about as a result of your being born again. Before you are born again, your soul sits in darkness as regards the truth of knowing God. The reason that your soul sits in darkness is because you were born into the world as sinner. And this leads me to say:

2ndly – You need to understand that saving illumination of the mind to the truth of the gospel is essential for a person to see the kingdom of God.

The kind of illumination that is necessary for you to be saved only comes through the Holy Spirit's convincing you of the truths which make up the gospel, and by your coming to understand that all of the Bible is the Word of God. This illumination of the mind to saving truth is the first step in God's working to bring you to Himself. It will then be coupled, at a particular time in God's good pleasure, with the power of the Holy Spirit's giving you the sinner, a regenerated mind and heart to perceive that you must do something about all this truth that is being revealed to you. And therefore, in regeneration, the Holy Spirit gives you the power to become a child of God. He renews your will to receive the truth of the gospel, and not resist His working. He takes away your heart of stone and gives to you a heart of flesh; a tender heart. Indeed, He turns your mind, your heart, and your will to behold the glory of Christ, and so works in your mind, that receiving Christ becomes desirable to you for the first time in your life. All of these workings are something which are mysterious in your own sight, but they are definite acts and workings of God's Holy Spirit. They are all a part of the effectual call of God bringing you to know Him. The illumination of the mind to truth is the first part of that effectual call. Then the actual giving of the faculty of spiritual sight to the mind and soul follows as an integral part of the regeneration of the heart in the

New Birth. There may be a considerable time elapse between the initial illumination of the mind and the actual act of the Holy Spirit's causing a person to be born again.

Saving illumination is beginning to come to you when the Holy Spirit shows you that you are a sinner who needs Christ to save you from your sins. You may not understand that He is doing this. The Holy Spirit convinces you of sin by using a preacher or one of your acquaintances, to show you the truth of God's law found in the 10 commandments. The Spirit uses the words of truth and by that means He reveals to the person whom God is intending to save, something of His righteous expectations of them. When the Spirit is working savingly, the person is convinced that they are guilty before God; that they have broken His laws, and they have fallen short of His glory. They become convinced that they have failed to do what is right in hundreds and perhaps thousands of past situations. The whole course of their life has not brought them to the true knowledge of God. If the Spirit is working to illumine you savingly, you may have never before seen yourself as a sinner, but now you do. You now begin to realize that you have not lived your life in a way that has been at all pleasing to God. Even if you have been very religious, you have always been very selfish about it. It was all about your supposed goodness, and your supposed righteousness. But God has not been truly honored with your worship, and you have fallen far short in giving Him the glory for the good things that you do.

Let's now pause and reflect upon how this could be, that you could be so very religious, and yet not saved. It is because you have never been born again. You were born into this world through your parents, but you have never seriously considered the inherent sinfulness of your nature. The reason that you were born into the world a sinner was because of Adam's sin at the beginning of the world. Every one of us here this morning is a descendant of Adam. And the Bible teaches us in Romans Chapter 5 that Adam was what theologians term "the Federal Head" of our whole race. He was created upright, with a heart that was inclined to do all that God commanded him. But he was also created mutable; that is, he was created with free will and he could fall from his original righteousness if he succumbed to the temptation to sin. He was given one commandment by God, a commandment which involved obedience on a very simply level. God said to Adam, "Do not eat the fruit of the tree which is in the center of the garden; the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die." God was giving to Adam what theologians call, a positive commandment. That is, he should keep this commandment, not because there was any intrinsic moral principle in it, but he should keep it simply because God said that he should keep it. And so the basic required duty given to Adam was, "If you do this, you will be confirmed in your own righteousness." You will never have to be tested again. Adam had free will, and a good heart, which was inclined toward God. But when Satan came into the garden, disguised as a serpent, and

deceived Eve into eating the fruit of the tree, and then she gave some to her husband to eat, as though she had not died spiritually, and perhaps she said something like this to him: “You see, Adam, I haven’t died.” “I am going to become wise like God.” And the Scripture says, “Because Adam heeded the voice of his wife”, to eat this fruit when God had commanded him not to, he fell from his original righteousness and our whole race fell with him. Sin entered his nature and corrupted every faculty of his soul. And he has passed this sin on to us, his descendants, through natural generation, in the birth of children who are born in the image and likeness of their father Adam.

Do you see now, dear friend, why you must be born again to see the kingdom of God? It is because sin has brought darkness and blindness to your mind and heart. Sin has robbed you of the power to do what God would have you to do, if you do not know Christ. And so, many people try to cover up their lack of real power and wisdom in the way that they live their life, by being religious. They falsely think that all men have it in their natural power to know God and see and understand spiritual things. But the Bible clearly teaches that when you were born into the world, you were born with spiritual blindness of mind and heart. Even if you were born into a religious household with godly parents who taught you right from wrong and read to you the Scriptures, and gave you godly counsel on many different subjects of concern to you. Still, you do not come to know God unless you are born again. You bear the nature of Adam, and you must come see your need of the New Birth, and especially your need of the grace of Christ. This was what the Lord Jesus was trying to show Nicodemus, and truly he was astonished. Does it really take a mighty miracle of God’s giving you spiritual sight, for you to be able to see and truly appreciate spiritual things? Yes, it does. Listen to Thomas Scott – “Whatever be a man’s natural abilities, attainments, notions, or profession, our Lord assures us that he cannot see the kingdom of God: He can neither discern its spiritual nature, nor the excellence of its blessings and privileges.” “This is the unalterable appointment of God; but it has also its foundation in the reason and nature of things.” God is perfect in holiness, His law is holy; His gospel is holy: all things relating to true religion are holy and spiritual.” “This is their glory and excellency: but man by nature is unholy and carnal, and cannot relish, or even discern, that excellency.” “God and his law, with the nature of holiness and happiness, are unchangeable: therefore man must change, or he can never be conformed to them, or be happy in them.” That, my friends, is the reason that each one of us must be born again or we cannot see the kingdom of God. It takes saving spiritual illumination.

Now lastly - I want to show you that your receiving the faculty of spiritual sight is essential to your seeing the kingdom of God.

If being born again, part of which is your receiving the faculty of spiritual sight, is something that you cannot produce in yourself, which it is not; then is it still possible for any person to have a hand in doing things to promote the working of

God in this regard? The answer is a most definite “yes”. Even though being born again is not by works of righteousness which we have done, yet there are certain things which we can be doing, and which we should be doing to promote such a work in ourselves and others. We should read and listen to the preaching of the Word, and we should share the gospel and pray for ourselves and others. We should read the Bible ourselves and we should sincerely pray to receive its truths, and the Christ of whom it speaks. Turn with me over to Titus Chapter 3, verse 4. “But when the kindness and the love of God our Savior toward man appeared, 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, whom He poured out on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Savior, that having been justified by His grace we should become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.” Note carefully that the kindness and love of God are that which appeared in the giving of Christ to mankind in His incarnation. Christ’s righteous life, His sacrificial death and His resurrection from the dead are what purchased, for all of God’s Elect, the New Birth; the working of the Holy Spirit in the sinner’s heart unto salvation. But the New Birth is not given to people in a vacuum. They should not be waiting for some perceived sense of the Spirit’s working in order to be saved. Neither should Christians neglect evangelism because they believe in the sovereignty of God. Indeed it is quite the opposite. God’s sovereignty establishes the Christian’s responsibility to be a worker together with Him in spreading and sharing the gospel and helping people to understand it. God works His sovereign purpose to regenerate and to save in relation to the declaration of the gospel by loving and concerned Christians. It is the gospel which is the power of God unto salvation. The preaching of the gospel and the Spirit’s working always go hand in hand. When Christ and His finished work is faithful preached and shared, then God will own it with the working of His Spirit, in the illuminating of the minds of sinners with the precious truth of Christ.

God has given Christ in order that all people might consider both the gift and the giver. When He saves a person it is entirely of His mercy. You can see from the text that I just read to you that salvation is all of His mercy; and regeneration, being born again comes first, before justification. This means that it is the New Birth which gives spiritual life, and out of the gift of life comes the power to believe and exercise faith. And it is faith being exercised in Christ which results in a person’s being justified by God’s grace. They are forgiven of all of their sins, and Christ’s righteousness is imputed to them. There is a most certain and definite order in salvation, and every step in that ordering is of God’s working. If a person is lost, or is resisting the kindness of God in the gospel, and perseveres in that resistance all of their life, it is entirely their fault that they perish. The answer to your questions regarding the sovereignty of God and the responsibility of man is this. You are responsible to live up the light that you have received, whether you are a believer or an unbeliever. It will not be a problem for God to determine on

the Day of Judgment whether you have or not. He who knows the heart, knows whether you are living up to the light that you are being given, or whether you are neglecting it, or rejecting it. But you will not be able to blame God for not giving you enough light to be saved by, for the gospel has been, and it is being declared and preached in all the world.

Let me conclude this message with a quote from W.G.T. Shedd's Systematic Theology. He says this: "While regeneration is a sovereign act of God according to election, it is an encouraging fact both for the sinner and the preacher of the word that God's regenerating grace is commonly bestowed where the preparatory work is performed." "This is the rule, under the gospel dispensation." "He who reads and meditates upon the word of God is ordinarily enlightened by the Holy Spirit, perhaps in the very act of reading, or hearing, or meditating." "While Peter yet spake these words, the Holy Spirit fell on all them which heard the word," Acts 10: 44. "He who asks for regenerating grace may be regenerated perhaps in the act of praying." "God has appointed certain human acts whereby to make ready the heart of man for the divine act." "Without attentive reading and hearing of the word and prayer, the soul is not a fit subject for regenerating grace." "By fitness is not meant holiness, or even the faintest desire for holiness; but a conviction of guilt and danger, a sense of sin and utter impotence to everything spiritually good." "Such an experience as this 'breaks up the fallow ground,' to employ the Scripture metaphor." Jeremiah 4: 3 and Hosea 10: 12 "When the Holy Spirit finds this preparation, then He usually intervenes with His quickening agency." "The effect of prevenient grace in conviction is commonly followed by special grace in regeneration; the fact of the outward call is a reason both for the sinner and the minister of the word, for expecting the inward call." "Yet regeneration, after all the preparation that be made by conviction and legal illumination, depends upon the sovereign will of God." (Shedd's Dogmatic Theology, Vol. 2, Page 525) This is so well said. Prayer, reading of the Word, listening to good preaching, all of these are good, and can be promoted by all Christians in relation to those whom they would see saved, and given the New Heart. Yet, all in the final analysis depends on God who alone can shine the light into the darkened soul, and regenerate it so that that person can see spiritually. 2nd Corinthians 4: 6 – "For it is the God who commanded light to shine out of darkness, who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ." This saving illuminating light must shine in the heart of the sinner so that they can see the kingdom of God.