

YE MUST BE BORN AGAIN

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One often hears the aphorism, *Knowledge is power*. One does not often hear the aphorism, *Virtue is knowledge*, although many do believe it. For modern man, education leads to virtue. This is not a novel view, however. The Greek philosopher, Socrates, held it. In the *Meno*, he taught that virtue is knowledge. (*Meno*, 87e-89a) In the *Protagoras*, he taught that no one willingly does what is evil. (*Protagoras*, 352c, 358b-d) In that work, Plato records this dialogue between Socrates and his friends:

Then, I said, if the pleasant is the good, nobody does anything under the idea or conviction that some other thing would be better and is also attainable, when he might do the better. And this inferiority of a man to himself is merely ignorance, as the superiority of a man to himself is wisdom.

They all assented.

And is not ignorance the having a false opinion and being deceived about important matters?

To this also they unanimously assented.

Then, I said, no man voluntarily pursues evil, or that which he thinks to be evil. To prefer evil to good is not in human nature; and when a man is compelled to choose one of two evils, no one will choose the greater when he may have the less.

All of us agreed to every word of this.

“To know the good is to do the good.” Such is the pagan view of man. How different the Christian view! Saint Augustine, in his *Confessions*, wrote of his experience of sin as a pagan. He reflected on the time he and his companions stole some pears.

Fair were those pears, but not them did my wretched soul desire; for I had store of better, and those I gathered, only that I might steal. For, when gathered, I flung them away, my only feast therein being my own sin, which I was pleased to enjoy. For if aught of those pears came within my mouth, what sweetened it was the sin. (*Confessions*, 2.6 [Pusey translation])

Augustine knew all too well that a man sins, not always because he is ignorant of the good, but often because he desires what is evil. It is in man's nature to sin, and, if a man would do good, his nature must be changed.

When God created Adam and Eve, permitted them to eat from the tree of life, the symbol of their life with Him. He did command them not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and He told them that if they ate of it, then they would die. The serpent, however, told the woman that, if she ate of it, she would not die, and that she would become very wise. She believed the serpent, and so she ate. She gave to her husband with her, and he ate. Saint Paul writes that the woman was quite deceived when she ate. She was not deceived about what God commanded her. She was deceived about what was good for her to do. Saint Paul also writes that the man was not deceived. He knew full well what he was doing was wrong, but he did it anyway. (1 Timothy 2:14) Even in his state of innocence, he did that which he knew to be wrong. God made good on His threat. He expelled the man and woman from the garden sanctuary in which they had enjoyed union and communion with God, and so, without that fellowship, they became subject to death.

Adam's sin brought sin and death to all mankind. Since his fall, every man comes into the world guilty, and doomed to die. Saint Paul writes, “Wherefore, as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned.” (Romans 5:12) Moreover,

every man comes into the world completely corrupted by sin. After Adam's sin, men wicked. Moses writes, "And GOD saw that the wickedness of man *was* great in the earth, and *that* every imagination of the thoughts of his heart *was* only evil continually." (Genesis 6:5) They were so wicked, that God destroyed all of mankind, except for Noah and his household. Every faculty of man – mind, emotion, will – is corrupted by sin. Moreover, the corruption is so severe that it renders a man unable to do any spiritual good, including turning to God. Men are spiritually blind, and cannot see the truth for what it is. This was true even of God's people, Israel. Jesus said:

Therefore speak I to them in parables: because they seeing see not; and hearing they hear not, neither do they understand. And in them is fulfilled the prophecy of Esaias, which saith, By hearing ye shall hear, and shall not understand; and seeing ye shall see, and shall not perceive: For this people's heart is waxed gross, and *their* ears are dull of hearing, and their eyes they have closed; lest at any time they should see with *their* eyes, and hear with *their* ears, and should understand with *their* heart, and should be converted, and I should heal them. (Matthew 13:13-15)

This was as true of the religious leaders as it was of the common man. Jesus said of the Pharisees, "They be blind leaders of the blind." (Matthew 15:14) Even Jesus' disciples were not exempt. When they did not understand His warning about the leaven of the Pharisees and of the Sadducees, He said to them, "Perceive ye not yet, neither understand? have ye your heart yet hardened? Having eyes, see ye not? and having ears, hear ye not?" (Mark 8:17, 18) Now and again, a sinful man does understand a spiritual truth, but he cannot accept it. When Jesus told the Parable of the Two Sons, and the Parable of the Wicked Tenants, the scribes and Pharisees knew He was talking about them, but, rather than receive His rebuke, they wished to seize Him. (Matthew 21:28-46) Jesus, after He rose from the dead, encountered two disciples who did not understand that Jesus had risen. He said to them, "O fools, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken." (Luke 24:25) Saint Paul wrote to the Corinthians, "But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know *them*, because they are spiritually discerned." (1 Corinthians 2:14) He wrote of unbelievers that they "walk, in the vanity of their mind, Having the understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God through the ignorance that is in them, because of the blindness of their heart." (Ephesians 4:17, 18)

Clearly, the root problem is not intellectual. It is rather moral. People do not understand spiritual truths, neither do they accept the spiritual truths that they do understand, because their hearts are hard. The Proverbs say, "Keep thy heart with all diligence; for out of it *are* the issues of life." (Proverbs 4:23) The heart of man is the center of his willing and choosing, and the heart of man is thoroughly corrupted by sin. This is why Jesus said that it is not what goes into a man's mouth that defiles him, but what comes out, because what comes out of a man's mouth comes from the heart, and his heart is the source of all evil. He said, "For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies." (Matthew 15:19)

The sinner's heart is not merely weak; it is rebellious. This was even true of ancient Israel. God delivered Israel from bondage in Egypt, and He made a covenant with them. He promised to be their God, and they promised to obey Him. (Exodus 19) It did not take long, however, for the people to fall into sin. Although God had delivered them from their bondage in Egypt, they worshiped the golden calf. So God said to Moses, "I have seen this people, and, behold, it *is* a stiffnecked people." (Exodus 32:9) Through Jeremiah the prophet God said, "But this people hath a revolting and a rebellious heart." (Jeremiah 5:23) God regularly rebuked His people for their rebellious hearts, calling them stiffnecked. That is to say, His people refused to bow themselves before Him in humble obedience, but rather stood up straight and defiant. They had circumcision, the outward sign of their covenant relation to God, but the condition of their hearts did not match. Their religion was formal only, so God told them to have true religion in substance. They were to be in their hearts what marked their bodies. He told them,

“Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart, and be no more stiffnecked.” (Deuteronomy 10:16) The people faced a great difficulty: they had circumcision, which was the sign of the covenant, and they had the Law of God written on stone; however, their hearts were not circumcised, and they did not have the Law written on their hearts. In their covenantal relation with God, they promised to keep His Law, but they were powerless to do so. The children of Israel regularly failed keep God’s law, and so they needed regularly needed forgiveness. In the animal sacrifices, God granted the people forgiveness, but this was not real atonement, “for it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.” (Hebrews 10:4) Sin requires the death of the sinner. So, the forgiveness they received was provisional. (Romans 3:25) Saint Paul, therefore, call the Mosaic covenant the “ministration of death” and the “ministration of condemnation.” (2 Corinthians 3:7-9) Saint Paul describes the futility and frustration he experienced as a devout Jew under the Law of Moses:

For we know that the law is spiritual: but I am carnal, sold under sin. For that which I do I allow not: for what I would, that do I not; but what I hate, that do I. If then I do that which I would not, I consent unto the law that *it is* good. Now then it is no more I that do it, but sin that dwelleth in me. For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh,) dwelleth no good thing: for to will is present with me; but *how* to perform that which is good I find not. For the good that I would I do not: but the evil which I would not, that I do. Now if I do that I would not, it is no more I that do it, but sin that dwelleth in me. (Romans 7:14-20)

The children of Israel failed to obey the greatest commandment: “Thou shalt love the LORD thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might.” (Deuteronomy 6:5) So, God promised to enable them to do so. He told them, “And the LORD thy God will circumcise thine heart, and the heart of thy seed, to love the LORD thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, that thou mayest live.” (Deuteronomy 30:6) He promised to make with them a new covenant in which He would put His law in their hearts, so that they would obey from the heart. Through Jeremiah the prophet He said, “But this *shall be* the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel; After those days, saith the LORD, I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts; and will be their God, and they shall be my people.” (Jeremiah 31:33) God promised them both true forgiveness, and the ability to keep His law. Through Ezekiel the prophet He said to them:

Then will I sprinkle clean water upon you, and ye shall be clean: from all your filthiness, and from all your idols, will I cleanse you. A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you: and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you an heart of flesh. And I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes, and ye shall keep my judgments, and do *them*. (Ezekiel 36:25-27)

This became the subject of conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus, which Saint John has recorded:

There was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews: The same came to Jesus by night, and said unto him, Rabbi, we know that thou art a teacher come from God: for no man can do these miracles that thou doest, except God be with him. Jesus answered and said unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God. Nicodemus saith unto him, How can a man be born when he is old? can he enter the second time into his mother's womb, and be born? Jesus answered, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born of water and *of* the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be born again. The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not

tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit. Nicodemus answered and said unto him, How can these things be? Jesus answered and said unto him, Art thou a master of Israel, and knowest not these things? (John 3:1-10)

Jesus had come to establish the kingdom of God. He had begun His earthly ministry, saying, “Repent: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” (Matthew 4:17) He proclaimed this message, and He proved His credentials by His miracles. Nicodemus believed that Jesus was sent by God, but he wished to know more. Jesus explained to him that, if He wished to enter the kingdom of God, He had to be born again. Nicodemus was perplexed, and asked how such a thing was possible. Jesus explained that to be born again is to be born of water and of the Spirit. This of course should have brought to the mind of Nicodemus the prophecy of Ezekiel. To enter into the kingdom of God, one must have be purified and renewed. He must have his sins forgiven, and he must be given a new heart. This was God’s promise of a new covenant. The new birth is necessary even to believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. As Saint John wrote in an epistle, “Whosoever believeth that Jesus is the Christ is born of God.” (1 John 5:1) Jesus told Nicodemus that, as a teacher of the law, he should have understood theses things.

Of course, forgiveness comes by the atoning sacrifice of Christ, and the ability to keep His law comes by the power of the Holy Spirit. Christ died for the sins of the people, and, after He rose from the dead and ascended into heaven, He poured out on His people the Holy Spirit, just as He had promised. Some, especially the religious leaders, continued to reject Jesus. When the Sanhedrin put Saint Stephen on trial, he said to them, “Ye stiffnecked and uncircumcised in heart and ears, ye do always resist the Holy Ghost: as your fathers *did*, so *do ye*.” (Acts 7:51) Some, like Lydia, believed, but only because God opened her heart to do so. Saint Luke writes, “And a certain woman named Lydia, a seller of purple, of the city of Thyatira, which worshipped God, heard *us*: whose heart the Lord opened, that she attended unto the things which were spoken of Paul.” (Acts 16:14) Saint Paul, after describing his failure to keep covenant with God, explains the forgiveness and power he has in Christ:

There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus hath made me free from the law of sin and death. For what the law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh, God sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh: That the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit. (Romans 8:1-4)

Let us marvel at the wisdom and knowledge of God. Let us be grateful for the forgiveness we have in Christ, and for the power we have by the Holy Spirit. Let us have soft hearts that are quick to repent, and faithful to obey.

And now to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, three Persons and one God, be ascribed by us, and by the whole Church, as is most due, the kingdom, the power, and the glory, for ever and ever. *Amen*.