

“THE CHRIST OF THE CATEGORICAL IMPERATIVE”

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Lk 18:9-17; Jn. 3:1-7

The phrase “categorical imperative” used in our title this morning is borrowed from Immanuel Kant, the great German philosopher. In his Ethics he employed it to describe the absolute and unconditional demands of moral law. I am using it this morning in conjunction with the inescapable implications of that phrase from our text, “Ye must be born again.”

Something which is *categorical* is the direct antithesis of something which is hypothetical. It refers to that which is positive, explicit and unqualified. The word *imperative* is equally strong and refers to that which is binding, unavoidable and compulsory. When you put the two together you have a phrase which is exceedingly strong and demanding. Something which is absolutely binding and inescapably obligatory.

This phrase of Jesus, “Ye must be born again,” is that kind of statement. It is the “categorical imperative” of the Christian faith. It is authoritative, specific and inescapably binding upon all people everywhere. Jesus did not say,

“Ye may, or ye might, but, ye *must* be born again.”

No doubts. No uncertainties. No question marks about it. The statement is clear, precise and emphatic, “Ye *must* be born again.”

The famous preacher, George Whitfield, was once asked why he so often preached on this text, for more than half of his sermons were on the necessity of the new birth. Mr. Whitfield replied, “I preach so often on the text, ‘Ye must be born again’ because ‘Ye must be born again.’” I guess that’s the best possible reason he could have given, for these are five words you cannot avoid, “Ye must be born again.”

There are five questions relating to these five words which I would attempt to answer this

morning,

Why must we be born again?
Who must be born again?
What does it mean to be born again?
How are we born again?
When should it happen?

Why?

The answer to the first question, “*Why* must we be born again?” is really quite simple: Because we need to be. The Bible is very clear that “all have sinned.” As a result, there is an unmistakable rift between God and man which makes abundant life, let alone *eternal* life, impossible. Sin has produced a cleavage between heaven and earth which must be breached if there is to be any hope for us.

Now let’s be clear at the point that sin is not a certain set of improper acts. Sin is an attitude. It is putting yourself ahead of God. It is refusing to let God *be* God in your life. It is living your life as if there were no God at the very moment you profess to believe in him. That, in its most distilled essence, is sin. “Making yourself a kind of god instead of letting God run your life.”

And because of sin, because of this willful, deliberate, headstrong determination on your part to be your own boss come hell or high water, hell comes! And you are lost. Not because you have committed any particularly immoral or antisocial act. But because the basic attitude of your life has been to shut God out and thus to alienate yourselves from him who is the source and sustenance of life itself. Therefore, said Jesus, “Marvel not that I say unto you, ye must be born again.”

Who?

The second question which stands badly in need of answering is, “Who must be born again?” And the answer is equally simple. All of us.

Because sin has left its stain upon the soul of everyone, and because there is no erasing its indelible mark, every last one of us is in need of being born again. As King Edward VIII of England once said to his minister, “Kings, as well as commoners, need the very same Savior.”

There is a notion among a lot of folks today that the new birth is only needed by a certain class of people. That it is reserved for the down-and-outer. The wretched, wicked, wayward people of the street. They imply that cultured, educated, law-abiding citizens who conform to the mores of society do not need to be saved. Well, that may *sound* appealing and comforting, but to put it crudely, it just ain’t so! According to Jesus, we all need to be born again.

Jesus did not address these words to a down-and-outer, but to an “up-and-outer.” Nicodemus was a ruler of the Jews. A Pharisee. A master in Israel. A moral, educated, refined, law-abiding citizen of his country. Even his name, Nicodemus, has an aura of superiority about it. It’s made up of two words, “Nico” meaning victory or superiority, and “Demus” from which our word democracy comes. Put them together and they convey the idea of having “superiority over the people.”

And in practice, Nicodemus lived up to his name. There was nothing false or superficial or shoddy about his life. He was a good man, tried and true. Furthermore, he was a child of the covenant. He belonged to that favored nation of Israel with which God had entered into special agreement. And yet, in spite of everything good and noble about him, Jesus said, “Nicodemus, you must be born again.”

Which suggests this rather interesting thought. Being a so-called child of the covenant, that is: being born in a Christian home, being sprinkled by a Christian minister, being raised in a Christian church, being trained in a Christian Sunday School, does not excuse us from the necessity of being born again.

As the old revival hymn puts it,

“What can wash away my sin?
Nothing but the blood of Jesus.
What can make me whole again?
Nothing but the blood of Jesus.”

And in response to the question, “Who must be born again?” we can only answer, all of us! “For all have sinned and come short of the glory of God.”

There is a sense in which Nicodemus is a part of every generation. He is the personification of conventional religion and social respectability. The other day I saw a copy of a letter written by a 65-year-old couple who were retired and happy. It said,

“We have been married 40 years, but never attended church. Never offered a prayer and are not hampered by creeds. We face life squarely, are highly respected in our community, and believe our job is to make the world a better place. You might tell us, if you can, what more life has to offer?”

Well, at first glance that’s something of a stopper. But a more careful analysis reveals that couple, like so many people both in and out of the church, are committed to an Old Testament creed which said, “What doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly (and) love mercy,” but unfortunately, they have forgotten the rest, “and to *walk humbly* with thy God.”

These folks were doing pretty well at “doing justly and loving mercy,” but they had missed the boat completely when it came to “walking humbly with their God.” They were self-sufficient. From their point of view they had arrived. As a result their pride, their sin (or in other words, their refusal to let God *be* God) completely neutralized, or made of little effect, the contribution of their reasonably good lives. The fact remains, dear hearts, that “all have sinned and come short of the glory of God.”

The standard of achievement is *him*, not us. His righteousness, not ours. And when we compare our very best goodness with that of God, we see immediately why Jesus said to Nicodemus, and

to us, “Marvel not that I say unto you, *you* must be born again.”

What?

That being true, “What does it mean to be born again?” The simplest way I know of putting it is that it means to bring into being a new you. Not a new leaf, but a new life. Not a mere temporary juggling of your present set of values to erase those things that are obviously wrong, but a mighty transforming, supernatural event, whereby your whole nature is reordered.

You are given a new heart, not a new start. And this new you lives a life that is centered not in self, but in Christ. Not in time, but in eternity. Not in the transient stuff of this existence, but in the eternal things of infinite worth in the world to come.

Your outward appearance, your address, your exterior, your name, your occupation may remain the same. But down deep within you a wonderful transformation has taken place. Ego has given way to Jesus and you are able to say with Paul, “I am crucified with Christ.” That is, the old me is dead. *That* person doesn’t live any more. For now, *Jesus* lives in me.

Now that doesn’t mean his flesh becomes your flesh, or that there is some sort of physical fusion between you. What it does mean is that Christ has come to occupy your mind and heart and soul so that what he loves you love. What he hates, you hate. His will becomes your will. His interests, your interests. His affections, your affections. His desires, your desires.

That’s what it means to be born again. The bringing to birth of a new you. A soul recreated in its original state as God meant you to be at the very beginning, with all the freedom and power to become everything you were intended to be before the fall.

How?

You say, “John, that’s exactly what I’d like to happen to me, but how does it happen? How is one born again?” The answer is,

“*By an act of the will through which you place your trust and hope in the*

Lord Jesus Christ.”

Let me show you what I mean. An old Scotchman who had been on the Titanic when it sank, stood up in a meeting in Hamilton, Ontario and told how, as he was clinging to a piece of wreckage, bobbing around in the icy Atlantic, a fellow passenger by the name of Mr. Hodge drifted by on another piece of wreckage.

As he did so he shouted, “Are you saved? Are you ready to meet your maker?”

The Scotchman said, “I cried out, ‘No, I’m not!’”

To which Mr. Hodge replied, “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved. That’s the word of God. Believe it.”

Just then a huge wave washed over them and the Scotchman said, “When I came up, I was alone. I felt sure Mr. Hodge was gone. I drifted around for about a half hour trying to remember what he had said. The confusion of the situation and the coldness of the sea had numbed my brain.” Suddenly, almost miraculously Mr. Hodge drifted by again and as he did he repeated the question, “Are you saved yet?” And I replied, “No, I’m not. Please tell me how!”

Across the waters came the same glorious advice, “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved.” With that he lost his grip on the wreckage and slipped quietly into the sea. His last words on earth being those aimed at bringing another to the Savior. They were not wasted. “For then and there,” the Scotchman said, “with two miles of ocean beneath me, the infinite sky above me, and nothing but water about me, I cried out, ‘Oh God, save me. I do believe on the Lord Jesus Christ.’ And in that moment the deed was done.”

My friend, your new birth may not be that dramatic, but it can be just that simple. The “modus operandi” of redemption is this, “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved.”

You are born again when, recognizing your perilous plight, by an act of the will you choose to receive Christ as your Savior. You invite him to do for you what you cannot do for yourself.

You ask Jesus to bridge the gap between you and God created by your sin. He does so, making

you one with your God.

Born From Above

Do you still have some questions about the “How” of it? Well, let me come at it this way. This phrase “born again,” can just as properly be translated “born from above.” That rendition of it has some most interesting overtones. F. B. Myer, one of the truly great pulpiteers of the past explains how being “born from above” actually works. He says,

“The mineral cannot force its way up into the vegetable kingdom, but the vegetable can send its roots down into the soil to incorporate within itself the rich foodstuff of the mineral kingdom.

“The vegetable cannot force its way up into the animal kingdom, but when a cow or horse feeds in the meadow it reaches down and lifts the vegetable kingdom into its own organism.

“The animal cannot force its way up into the human realm, and yet, in that intimacy that often exists between its owner and a highly intelligent dog, there may be a kind of uplift from the lower to the higher.

“In the same way, we humans cannot force our way up into the Kingdom of God. But through the incarnation and cross of Jesus Christ, God has stooped to our fallen level and lifted us up and made it possible for us to become partakers of the Divine nature so that we are heirs of God and joint heirs together with Christ.”

What a wonderful truth! We are “born from above” when, by an act of will, we respond to the goodness and grace of Almighty God and allow the Lord Jesus Christ to reach down and lift us up from the sea of sin, and set our feet upon the sure and steady rock of his salvation.

When?

The final question, then, is when should this happen? And the answer is, “Now!”

“For behold, now is the day of decision. Now is the hour of redemption.”

Yesterday is already a dream. Tomorrow is but a vision. But every today lived for Jesus Christ will make every yesterday a dream of happiness, and every tomorrow a vision of hope. The glorious good news of the gospel is that, *this* very moment and *this* very day may be the beginning of eternal life for you.

The Bible says, “He that hath a son hath, H-A-T-H, hath everlasting life.” It’s present tense and it’s yours right now if you’ll only receive the Lord Jesus as your own. But remember the decision is up to you.

“God will lead and guide, direct aright,
Fill you with wisdom, love and light,
In many ways be good and kind,
But God will not force the human mind.”

The decision to be born again rests with you.

In a little gem of a book entitled, Channels of Spiritual Power, Frank Laubach makes this cogent comment,

“God has built countless bridges to men’s minds, but he has placed one limitation on himself. He does not cross the last drawbridge into our mind until we invite him. It is a drawbridge which we open and close from within the castle of our souls. Don’t ask me why. I don’t know. I suppose it is because he wants his children to have free will. Whatever the reason, God’s final problem in bridge-building is to get past the portal of our soul, our mind, emotions and will.”

Do you remember those lines by Bishop Oxnam?

“To every man there openeth
A way and ways and a way.
And the high soul takes the high.
And the low soul takes the low.
While in between, on the misty flats,
The rest drift to and fro.
But to every man there openeth
A high way and a low,
And every man decideth
Which way his soul shall go.”

This morning will you give heed to the Lord Jesus who says, “Ye must be born again.” Will you open your soul to him?. Will you allow him to touch your spirit so he can begin to make all things new? Will you invite him in, not tomorrow, but today? I pray that you will. Come, taste, and see that the Lord is good!