

L.C.F. 17/7/16

PREACHER: REV. ADRIAN HALLETT

READINGS: GEN.1:1-5 & JOHN 3:1-15

SERIES: 'THE MUST SAYINGS OF JESUS'.

2) 'YOU MUST BE BORN AGAIN'.

Everything that Jesus says is vitally important....when he says we 'must' do something then we have to take special note. So we continue our series today on the 'must' sayings of Jesus. Note also the thrust of the meaning in the Greek – 'something absolutely necessary/essential'....something that has to be... something that is non-negotiable....in some cases can mean to convey something inevitable. There is an imperative about it. Two weeks ago we looked at '*I must be about my Father's business*'. And what is his Father's business? To bring people into the kingdom of God. And how do we enter the kingdom? '*You must be born again*'.

And so we come to the second one in our series from John 3 – '*You must be born again*'. I want to approach it by asking three questions: 1) Why? Why must we be born again? 2) Who? Who must be born again? & 3) How? How are we born again?

1)WHY?

Why do we need to be born again? People struggle with the concept of having to be born again. Many are offended by it. React to it, thinking that it originated in America...blame Billy Graham! But, no, we need to realise that it originated with Jesus – he's the one who said 'we must be born again'.

I'm reminded of the minister who kept teaching and preaching to his congregation that they must be born again. He never missed any opportunity to ram the same message home over and over again. The congregation got rather tired of all this, until one member of the congregation said to him, why do you keep telling us we must be born again? Because, he said, you must be born again! At least he was taking seriously the teaching of Jesus! He knew how important it is.

But back to the question 'why?' To answer that question we must go right back to the beginning – to Genesis 3 and The Fall. It points out the result of The Fall

– death. Physical death, yes, but also spiritual death. As a result, man is incapable/unable to respond to the Spirit of God... he is spiritually dead. Man to be sure likes to think he is still spiritual and in one sense he is... he will go after and get involved in all sort of alternative spiritualities, but in terms of being able to respond to the God of the Bible – absolutely not!

Look at 1Cor.2:14 – Man is spiritually dead – unresponsive....unable even to understand the things of God. John 3:6 is making a similar point – *'Flesh gives birth to flesh'*... that's all it is capable of... it can produce nothing of the Holy Spirit. Job 14:4 – *'Who can bring what is pure from the impure? No one!'*

Man in his natural state is a hopeless case, spiritually speaking, – even our good deeds are tainted and stained – Is.64:6 – *'All our righteous acts are like filthy rags'*.

Ours is a desperate situation... separated from God, incapable of responding to the Spirit of God... unable even to understand the things of God.

If you are still not convinced of the hopelessness of our condition, let me read Rom.8:5-8 to you – that says it all - that says it as it really is. Therefore we must be born again. That is our only hope.

2. WHO?

Who must be born again? People are often still reluctant to accept the 'why' of Why must be born again. It is an affront to the pride of the human heart. We like to think we can do it 'by my own'! In other words, I can make it as I am. Others may need to be born again, but not me. It doesn't apply to me.

That's why Jesus says, 'you must be born again' to Nicodemus. This is very significant and important. Let me try and show you what I mean.

There are three things we are told about Nicodemus. He was a Pharisee, he was a member of the Jewish Ruling Council and he was a teacher. Now there are three things we can deduce from that information. 1) He was very religious 2) He was very respectable and 3) He was very responsible.

A) RELIGIOUS

Just how religious was he? As a Pharisee he would have strived to keep the law of Moses...he would have strived to keep the numerous other laws that his religion had developed over the centuries...he strived to uphold the traditions of

the elders....He read the Scriptures... he was regular in his prayer pattern....he strived for perfectionism in purity....he tried desperately to lead a holy life.... he therefore separated himself from the the things of the world.... he believed himself to be one of the true and pious people of Israel... he regraded himself as chosen by God. His whole life revolved around his religion. In fact, his religion was his life.

I'm reminded of the words of Paul in another context – to the pagans in Athens in Act 17 – *'I see that in every way you are very religious'*. That was true of Nicodemus. People looking at him would have said exactly that – 'I see that in every way you are very religious'. That was Nicodemus.

B) RESPECTABLE

We noted that he was a teacher. Now to be a teacher in that culture and religion, you had to be both a moral person and an upright citizen. Not everybody could become a teacher. There were apparently three levels of teacher – and Nicodemus was at the very top. He wasn't just 'any old teacher', he was in fact *the* teacher of Israel. In the Greek there is a definite article before the word teacher. He was *the* teacher of Israel – the top man, the teacher above all teachers. You had to be a moral person, an upright citizen to reach that position.... you had, above all else, had to be a respectable person to be the teacher of Israel.

So he was a very respectable person in a very privileged position and so was respected by the people. The Jews held their teachers in high regard... they were in awe of them.... they looked up to him. Nicodemus was very respectable.

C) RESPONSIBLE

How do we know he was responsible? Well, you don't become a member of the Jewish Ruling Council – The Sanhedrin, if you were irresponsible or unreliable. They were a very august and imposing group of people. The Sanhedrin was made up of the High Priest and those who had been High Priest before.... they came from the privileged families of the land from which the High Priests were chosen.

The responsibilities of The Sanhedrin were considerable... and they had great power to enable the to carry out there duties. They had administrative authority... they could order the arrest of people by its own officers. They had civil and criminal jurisdiction too. They dealt with blasphemy laws – they could charge people with false doctrine, as they did with Peter & John in Acts 4 and

could try people for transgressing Mosaic Law as they did with Paul in Acts 22-24.

They had great political and religious authority. Therefore they were a very responsible body.... and to be a member of that Ruling Council, you had to be an extremely responsible person – that was Nicodemus – he was extremely responsible.

Who, perhaps, would be a modern day equivalent? Somebody from a privileged background and family, perhaps the aristocracy. Somebody who would have had the finest education – Eton and Oxbridge. Someone with the finest of intellects – perhaps a professor of Theology at Oxford....Someone in a respectable position, perhaps ordained – a bishop or even better, an archbishop... a member of the House of Lords.

In other words, the very best in our society....someone everybody would look up to and respect. Someone who had made it – who had arrived and yet was still a pillar of society...who hadn't succumbed to the trappings of power and prestige....the sort of person people would say is acceptable to God. If there is such a place as heaven, an unbeliever might say, this man gets in! How could God not accept somebody like that!

But, you see, it is exactly to that kind of person Jesus says you must be born again. He says this of all people, to Nicodemus! Do you begin to see the significance of all this? It's very striking.

Now if Jesus had said to the woman at the well in John 4 – the woman who had had 5 husbands and was now living with someone who wasn't her husband. What would people have said? 'She needed to be born again – she was an extremely immoral woman'.

Or, if Jesus had said it to the woman caught in adultery in John 8. What would people have said? 'People like her, an adulteress, people like her need to be born again'.

Or, if he had said it to the woman in Luke 7:37 '*who had led a sinful life*' - a prostitute... the woman who anointed Jesus' feet with perfume and the proceeded to wash his feet with her tears and then wiped his feet with her hair. What would people have said if Jesus had said '*you must be born again*' to her? Self-righteousness would have come straight to the fore...'It's people like her who need to hear about this born again stuff. People who lead sinful lives like

her... and anyway, she was obviously emotionally unstable. Of course she needed to be born again!

One last example. What if he had said it to Mary Magdalene, out of whom 7 demons were cast out in Mark 16:17? You can just imagine what would have been said – 'If you get involved with the occult then of course you need to be born again!'

That's why Jesus said 'you must be born again' to Nicodemus – who needs to be born again? We all do! You say to me, 'I'm religious – I go to church/pray/read my bible etc.' Are you as religious as Nicodemus? You must be born again.

You say to me 'I'm very responsible/respectable. I would say to you, 'Are you as responsible/respectable as Nicodemus?' You must be born again.

3. HOW ?

How are we born again? Nicodemus believed salvation was by law/works – by an act of man. Now he was being taught that salvation is a gift of God. Ask anybody how they are made right with God/acceptable to God and they will answer just like Nicodemus – salvation by works – salvation by an act of man. We too have to be taught that salvation is a gift of God.

When we read, 'You must be born again', it doesn't mean 'now see to it that you are born again' – it doesn't mean 'pull your self up by your bootstraps and make sure you are born again'. It's pointing to the fact that something has to happen to you....that something has to be done for you. It has nothing to do with an act of man.

Look at John 3:5 – 'Water' there refers to baptism I believe, although there are other possible interpretations – the baptism of repentance seems to me the most likely – so repentance in this context means a realisation of the futility of thinking we can save ourselves.... a recognition that flesh can only give birth to flesh.... an acknowledgement that we cannot bring what is pure from the impure... leading to an openness, a desire for the Holy Spirit to plant in our hearts that life from above.

In a minute we are going to sing our closing hymn – 'Rock of Ages'. I have chosen it because it ties in so well with the 'How' of being born again.

Let me read verse 2 to you – What is that pointing to? A realisation that birth gives birth to flesh... the futility of thinking we can save ourselves.

Then there is verse 3 – Again, what is that pointing to? A recognition that we can contribute nothing to this new birth....not something we can do... that something has to happen to us....something that has to be done *for* us. A desire for the Holy Spirit to plant in our hearts that life from above. As you sing this hymn, ask yourself, 'Is his something that has happened to me?'

One last point – let's remember that one of the attributes of the Holy Spirit is that he is gentle. One of the fruits of the Spirit is 'gentleness' (Gal.5:3) that he imparts to us as we are born again. I've heard the Holy Spirit described as a gentleman in that he never forces himself on anyone. So, if we want the H.S. to plant in our hearts that life from above, we have to ask him to do just that.

I remember, many years ago when I was Rural Dean of Ivelchester (sounds like a cheese, doesn't it?!) I tried to introduce something more spiritual than the usual discussion about money and maintenance of the churches. Much to my surprise a lady from that Synod phoned me a few days later and asked if she could come and see me. When she arrived she told me of her struggles with the Christian faith.

Basically she knew all about the Christian faith, but didn't know the founder of the Christian faith. She knew all about Jesus but had never met him personally, never had that personal relationship with him. I gently suggested that she needed to pray a simple prayer of commitment – she willingly agreed. The transformation in her was amazing and she told me many times how her faith had become alive. She became what a friend of mine described people like her as 'a kicking Christian' – alive and used by God. She was born again – because she asked the Holy Spirit to place in her that life from above. Have you done that?

So there we have it. You must be born again.' Why? Because we are spiritually dead. Who needs to be born again? If Nicodemus needed to be born again, then you and I certainly need to be born again! How are we born again? Repent of the arrogance of thinking we can save ourselves ask – ask the H.S. to plant in you that life from above.