

8. We believe that regeneration by the Holy Spirit is absolutely essential for personal salvation.

(Transcript of message preached by Pastor Rick Minett on May 1, 2005 at Grace Community Church)

“I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do them” (Ezekiel 36:26-27).

The term “regeneration” is one of those long five-syllable theological terms that sounds complex, but is actually very simple to understand. Mr. Webster defines it this way: “To reform completely; to give new life to...” And spiritually, that is exactly what it means as well. One of the greatest works of the Third Person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit, is when He enters the heart and spirit and makes it brand new. It’s something that one can’t do on his or her own. It’s a creative act of God and God alone. He takes the “old” that one brings to Him and transforms it; making it “new.”

The Problem

As I’ve already stated, we have an innate problem that was handed down to us by our ancestors starting all the way back with two people named Adam and Eve. As the representative heads of the human race, their actions would affect all of us. And because they sinned, we are all now sinners by nature. It’s innate. We call it “original sin.” But before we are too quick to blame them, an honest appraisal of our own lives will quickly determine that we would have done the very same thing they were guilty of because no one forces us to sin today, but who among us has never sinned? None, according to Romans 3:23.

We need regeneration because the human heart left on its own is very corrupt. Jeremiah 17:9 says, *“The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked; who can know it?”* I can only imagine that there have been times when you’ve done some things that later you said, “How could I have done that?” In other words, you’ve regretted that you did this or said that, and it surprised you that you did. But the fact of the matter is this: We don’t even know our own hearts. That’s why we need the Holy Spirit! I hear people say all the time, “The human heart is basically good.” No it’s not. The human heart is basically evil, deceitful, and beyond a cure without supernatural help. The problems on the “outside” can never be cured until a supernatural transformation takes place on the “inside.” In other words, I can’t change what is wrong on the outside of me until I first change what is wrong on the inside of me.

The Pharisees of Jesus’ day thought they were good people because they did “good things.” They thought of themselves as pious and pure because they, for example, washed their hands before they ate. Now I highly recommend washing your hands before you eat, but all that does is give you clean hands—not a clean heart. You may remember the story in Matthew 15 when the scribes and Pharisees came to Jesus complaining. They were upset about the fact that His disciples grabbed a loaf of bread and started eating before they washed their hands. Jesus called them hypocrites. And then, starting at verse 17, He told them: *“Do you not understand that whatever enters the mouth goes into the stomach and is eliminated? But those things which proceed out of the mouth come from the heart, and they defile a man. For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies. These are the things which defile a man, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile a man.”* Where did Jesus say sin has its point of origin? In the heart! *“For out of the heart proceed evil...”*

I never cease to be amazed at what medical science is able to do. There was a time when small pox wiped out tens of thousands of people at a time, but that’s not the case today. Medical science found a cure. Polio used to cripple people every single day not that many years ago, but that’s not the case today. Medical science found a cure. But what about cancer? What about AIDS? What about Alzheimer’s disease? What about MS? Man has accomplished remarkable things, but there’s a limit to his accomplishments. Some people suggest the day is coming when medical science will discover a cure for every disease known to man. I doubt I will ever see that day, but even if it comes to be, the most horrific disease ever known to man can never be cured by man, and that is the disease of the sinful human heart. Regardless of how hard we try (as they say in East Texas) “we can’t cure what ails us.” We need something beyond ourselves. We need Someone!

The Process

A man named Nicodemus came to Jesus one night. Apparently he was a good man who was doing his best to be the best he could be. He was rich, well-educated, very religious, and he recognized something that many of his colleagues failed to recognize—there was something incredibly special about Jesus. He said, *“Rabbi, we know that You are a teacher come from God; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him”* (John 4:2) And then Jesus responds in a way that totally befuddled Nicodemus and all scribes and Pharisees of that day—as well as countless millions to this very day. He said, *“Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God”* (John 4:3). That totally threw Nicodemus for a loop. He said, *“How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into His mother’s womb and be born?”* (John 4:4) And then Jesus talks about the necessity of the Holy Spirit by saying, *“Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit”* (John 3:5,6).

Flesh gives birth to flesh. That means that our sin nature is innate—a sinful human being gives birth to a sinful human being. And it has happened to every single one of us since the fall in the garden some 6,000 years ago. But in contrast, the Spirit gives birth to spirit. That means that the Spirit of God is more than capable of taking our old innate sin nature and totally transforming it. That’s

what the work of regeneration by the Holy Spirit is all about. I can't explain it fully because it's a supernatural act of God. Like all miracles, it surpasses human understanding or logic.

Many remember an evangelist by the name of Kathryn Kuhlman. She had one of the most anointed and incredible healing ministries I've ever seen. And in every service I ever attended, she would not only pray for the sick, but she would ask sinners to come to Christ and boldly proclaim that the greatest miracle of all was the transformation of the human heart. The fact that we can be "born again" is a miracle, nothing less! And what Jesus told Nicodemus that night is still true today: Unless that miracle takes place in the human heart that person, regardless of how good he or she may be, will not see heaven. Isn't that what Jesus said? "Unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God" (John 3:3). That single word leaves room for no exceptions. Again, Nicodemus was a religious man, but religion wasn't enough. He could talk religiously, walk religiously, and act religiously; but Jesus wanted him to know that none of those things would open the doors of heaven.

It reminds me of a good buddy of mine back in high school. He spent a summer in England and when he came back he dressed like a person from England, ate what an Englishman would eat, and he spoke in what seemed to me to be a very contrived English accent. He was trying to convince people that he was British! But he was as American as apple pie! He was born in Cincinnati, Ohio; his parents were born there and so were his grandparents. He was a Midwest American and nothing was going to change that heritage.

Some folks may "talk" Christian, "dress" Christian, and even "act" Christian—but none of those things make you a Christian. The only way to be a true "Englishman" is to be born of English parents—and the only way to be a true "Christian" is to be born again—born of the Spirit of God by placing your faith and trust in Christ Jesus. In other words, regeneration by the Holy Spirit is absolutely essential for personal salvation.

The first time I saw any of my sons was not in the hospital the day each of them was born. Prior to their individual birth, I saw them by means of an ultrasound. And what we've learned with modern technology is that before a baby is born into this world, he has eyes, but doesn't see what we see; he has ears, but doesn't hear what we hear; he has a mouth, but doesn't speak; and he has a brain, but he doesn't have any knowledge of the things of this world. But when that little child is birthed, all of these innate attributes "come alive." At birth, he begins to see light, begins to hear sounds that he has never heard before, begins to speak, and he breathes and begins to live in a manner altogether different from what he had experienced in his mother's womb.

The reason I so desperately need regeneration by the Holy Spirit is because in my natural state I had eyes, but I could not see; I had ears, but I could not hear; and I had a brain, but I could not comprehend. I needed to be "born again" so I could see things, hear things, speak things, understand things...the way that God wants me to; the way that God intended for me to do prior to the fall in the garden. You can't cure a blind man by increasing the light! Likewise, you can't cure a lost man with more religion. He needs something more; he needs a relationship. He needs regeneration. He needs to be born again. So Jesus was essentially telling Nicodemus, "Young man, you've got a problem. A big problem! A huge problem! But it's not your problem alone; it's shared by the rest of fallen humanity. You are a sinner by birth; it's part of your human nature. And try as you will, you'll never be able to satisfy God's demands. They are simply too high and too great. You need Someone to supply what you can't; you need Someone to provide what you can't; and that is the transformation of your heart. And the Holy Spirit will transform your heart, if you'll let Him."

The Power

I'll never forget going to a little city not far from Cincinnati, Ohio called Xenia back in the early 70s. A staggering tornado swept through the little town and literally mowed down much of it in its wake. I still remember looking at subdivisions filled with hundreds of homes, now only sticks and bricks lying on the ground. I never saw the wind—but the evidence that it had passed that way was everywhere! Likewise, when a person has been touched by the Holy Spirit, there will be evidence that the wind has come through. His or her life will change; attitudes will change; and goals and aspirations will change. And if there's no evidence of any change, it makes you wonder if the wind ever passed through.

Jesus told Nicodemus that salvation is invisible like the wind; we don't see the Holy Spirit working in us; but its results are very visible. And the greatest result is exactly what Ezekiel said would happen to the human heart when it experienced the power of regeneration that comes by the Spirit. "*I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh.*" When one opens the door of his or her heart to Jesus Christ and invites Him to be his or her personal Savior, the Holy Spirit comes and cleanses and renews that person. And now that spirit is connected to God's Spirit—they are on the same wave length, if you please.

But this regeneration not only affects the spirit, it also affects the heart; the very seat of one's emotion, thoughts, will, desires, etc. It's the inward part of a person—the soul. And the Spirit takes this hard heart that is opposed to God and He softens it and makes it receptive toward the things of God.

But that's just the beginning, because verse 27 of Ezekiel 36 says, "*I will put My Spirit within you...*" The Holy Spirit doesn't just come and clean our heart and then move down the street to the next church. He comes to transform our heart and then He sets up His home in us. And since He can be everywhere at all times, He can be in me and be in you and everyone else that calls on the name of the Lord all at the same time. As the old song says, "He didn't bring us this far to leave us. He didn't teach us to swim, to let us drown. He didn't build a home in us to move away. He didn't lift us up to let us down." He abides in us. He makes us heirs of God and joint heirs with Jesus. That's what Paul said in Romans 8, beginning at verse 12: "*Therefore, brethren, we are debtors—not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh. For if you live according to the flesh you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are the sons of God. For you did not receive the spirit of bondage again to fear, but you received the Spirit of adoption by whom we cry out, 'Abba, Father.'* And the Spirit Himself

bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ...” The power of the Spirit not only saves us by transforming our heart, it also totally changes our citizenship. It changes our inheritance!

But there’s more! On top of that, the Holy Spirit changes our very nature. Now we will want to follow His statutes and now we will have the power necessary to keep them. The Spirit within you will *“cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do them.”* And the reason is because you’ve been regenerated—changed—by the Spirit. You are not the same man you used to be; the old man is dead and a new man has taken his place. The old creature has been replaced by a new one. That’s exactly what Paul said takes place. *“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new”* (2 Corinthians 5:17). This is what regeneration is all about; it’s about renewal, restoration, and rebirth. And notice very carefully the specific words that Paul used when speaking to the saints in Corinth.

Notice the word “anyone.” That means that this marvelous salvation by the regeneration of the Spirit is available to anyone. Black, white, red, yellow...it doesn’t matter. If you are dead in your sin, this verse is for you! If you are lost in your sin, this verse is for you! The invitation is extended the length and breadth of planet earth.

Notice the word “if.” That word is conditional. It suggests that you have to respond, you have to act, and you have to believe. It means not everyone is saved, even though everyone is extended an invitation. I love what a preacher of a past generation once said: “The Lord, He is always voting for the man. The devil, he is always voting against the man. And then the man votes and that breaks the tie.”

Then notice the contrasting words “new” and “old.” In other words, when the Spirit does a work in our heart He transforms us into a new person and does away with the old person that used to live there. I wish I could do that on the physical level, but I can’t. I wish I could exchange this fifty year old body for my former twenty year old body, but I’m afraid I’m stuck with the “old” regardless of how hard I fight it. But thank God, on the spiritual level it’s not that way. That old, dead, sinful, stony heart has been made brand spanking new—not because of something I’ve done, but because of something the Holy Spirit has done. As Paul said in Titus 3:5, it’s *“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...”*

Several years ago, Deanna and I bought a house that was in terrible condition. When the realtor met us at the house to let us in to see it, he literally had to spray us with insect resplendent because the fleas were so bad inside the house. And when we agreed to buy it, we told the realtor not to worry about the condition of the house, not to try to clean it up, not to replace any broken windows...because we didn’t want the house; we planned on building something new. That’s what Christ wants to do in each of us. He is not interested in remodeling; He is only interested in building new. What He wants is the site and the permission to build, and when he obtains that, the Holy Spirit goes to work! Many people never come to Christ because they think they need to fix all the broken windows of their life prior to coming. Come as you are, for He has no plans of remodeling the old you. By His Spirit, He is going to build something brand new!