

How Can These Things Be? John 3:1-17

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

“How can these things be,” Nicodemus asks Jesus. Jesus had said that one cannot see the kingdom of God unless one is born again. And Nicodemus had asked, “How can a man be born when he is old?” In response, Jesus had explained how someone is born again of water and the Spirit. But Nicodemus didn’t get it, “How can these things be?”

Nicodemus had come to talk to Jesus at night because he was a Pharisee and the Pharisees, as a general rule, hated Jesus. He comes at night because he does not want any other Pharisees to know that he is going to see Him. He flatters Jesus with fine words, “*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.*” But Jesus tells him things that just don’t seem to make sense; a man cannot enter into the womb a second time, and there has to be more to entering the kingdom of God than just a bit of water and something the Holy Spirit does? “How can these things be?”

Nicodemus is a good Pharisee, he **knows** what must be done to enter the kingdom of God – it has to do with the Law. Now Jesus is saying that he must put aside the idea that it is all about how he keeps the Law. Jesus is telling him that one must be born spiritually, intimating that Moses and the Law cannot do it.

In essence, Jesus is saying, “Nicodemus, if you want to see the kingdom of God, you better have something greater than the Law and works in keeping with it. You have not kept the law well enough, you are not up to God’s standards. You are not perfect.

Indeed, you must be born from above. In fact, if you want to enter the kingdom of God, then all you know about being a Pharisee has got to change, you have to be something completely different than you have been up till now. All that you have done, the entire way that you have lived to this point, just doesn’t cut it. To be blunt with you Nick, getting to heaven isn’t done the way that you think it is?”

That is basically what Jesus has told Nicodemus, and to this he responds, “How can these things be?”

Pharisees believed that by keeping the Law, they would attain the kingdom of God. It was their works and their deeds that would open the way for them. And yet, Jesus was constantly telling them that this wasn’t so. You know the so-called *sermon* on the mount, right in the midst of it, Jesus tells those gathered.

“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished. Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” (Matt. 5:17-20 ESV)

Jesus then continues to describe sin not only as what one does, but what one thinks. Lusting in the heart is adultery – hatred is murder – unwillingness to forgive is murder – vulgar name-calling is murder – an oath used to substantiate the truth of your word with anything more than a yes or no is thoughtlessly swearing by God’s name – speaking about your neighbors in a way that harms their reputation is to bear false witness – and the list goes on.

Nicodemus and the other Pharisees felt they were doing pretty good. To all outward appearances, they seemed to be keeping the Law. They had not actually taken a life, nor actually slept with a woman other than their wife, nor taken items that belonged to another. They had even set up some rather stringent guidelines of what could and could not be done on the Sabbath in order to help them know when they were keeping that or not.

Jesus is telling Nicodemus that all that they have been doing does not matter. All you have done does not matter. Were you perfect from now till the day of your death, it would not matter. You need to be born from above, one must be born again of water and the Spirit. And Nicodemus is greatly confused, "How can these things be?"

"Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?... No one has ascended into heaven except him who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life."

You cannot ascend into the kingdom of heaven by your own works, it cannot happen. Do you not understand, dear Christian friends? Your works cannot accomplish what God requires of you. You must be perfect! You must be absolutely, and completely holy. You cannot have lusted, hated, thought of taking what belongs to another. You must have obeyed every authority placed over you, and never grumbled against any of these commandments, and never used God's name in vain. You must have such a trust in God that **ALL** you have ever done, all you have ever considered doing, and in every choice you make, you have **always** placed God first.

When you look at it that way, when you consider perfection – you have failed. Nicodemus and all the Pharisees had failed in their deeds, but to show how badly they had failed, Jesus explained how God had **ALWAYS** understood the Law and what He meant it for – not just your deeds but your thoughts are tainted with sin.

Nicodemus, Todd, Hertha, Heloise, from the moment of your conception into sinful flesh you have failed. Your sinfulness stains everything that you are, and everything that you do. Why is it that you rely upon your own works?

You say that you don't? Really? Have you ever questioned whether you were good enough to get into heaven or not? If so, whose works were you trusting? Have you ever asked, "What else must I do to make sure I go to heaven?" Unless your name is Jesus, the "when you insert "I" into the equation, you have been, or even still are, relying in part on yourself.

Have you ever been a little bit hesitant about claiming that the kingdom of God is your possession? Yeah, I know, you thought it a bit arrogant to make such a claim because you know you are not perfect. Why do I deserve to go to heaven, what have I done?

Stop right there and hear the answer!

Nothing! You have done absolutely nothing deserving of heaven! And that is exactly the point.

That is why Jesus' words are for you. It is sinful human nature that leads you to believe that you are in some small part responsible for any aspect of your eternal salvation. It means that you are thinking just like Nicodemus.

I know how hard it is to trust that it is all by God's grace alone. It is hard to let go of your role in the process. You want to believe that you have to do your part, even if it is only a small part. You at least have to choose to believe.

Your sinfulness is leading you to trust, at least in some small part, in your own works for salvation. Your sinfulness wants to lead you to rob even the Holy Spirit of His job, by claiming that your faith is at least in some part your own work.

You cannot ascend into heaven, so the Son of Man came down from heaven to do for you what you cannot do for yourself. He lived the life of perfection, accomplishing all that God requires in the Law. He fulfills the Law for you. He was lifted up, on the cross, so that those who believe in Him might have eternal life.

When you were born, what part did you play in that? Did you choose to be conceived? Did you choose the date? Did you choose your mother? Or your father? Or where you wanted to be born? No, you didn't do any of that, it was all done to you or for you.

In fact, your parents probably did not choose any of those things for you either. Back in the day, you did not pick out your children from the Sears Roebuck catalog. Nor do you go online to the stork factory and pick out individual parts and build your own child today. Being born happens how and when God designs. You did not ask about your birth, "how can these things be?"

It is the same as being born again. It is all the work of God. Yes, the pastor speaks the words and applies the water, but it is the Word of Christ. It is in that Word through which God the Father calls you by name, and makes you His. Jesus takes your sins into Himself and unites you to His death and resurrection, cleansing you from all your sins. And the Holy Spirit works in your heart the faith to believe that it is finished, and that all this comes to you as a gift from God.

God the Father sends the Son to die for you, who sends the Spirit to work faith in you to trust the works of the Son. It is the Spirit who works faith in you, which trusts the work of the Son for you, giving all glory to the Father.

There is never any time that it is not the work of the Holy Trinity.

Today we began our service in the name of that same Holy Trinity – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The Spirit gathered us together to receive the gifts that the Father would give us in His Son. Christ purchased those gifts by His work upon the cross, and the Father declares that those gifts are dispensed by the Spirit when you hear, eat and drink.

These are the gifts you receive as members of the body of Christ, His Church, and the family of God into which you were born again

Blessings to you all for a wonderful Holy Trinity Sunday! You are born again, of water and the Spirit – into the kingdom of God – from the Father, through the Son, by the Holy Spirit – unto life everlasting. Amen.