

Sermon – Spiritual Regeneration
Sunday December 11, 2022

What makes a person good?

Is it their behaviour? Is it how often they pray or read their Bible? Is it how involved they are in their church?

A German psychologist wanted to find out. So he recruited 1,200 people – religious and non-religious men and women to do an experiment. He sent each participant text messages several times each day. And whenever they received a text, they had to report on their behaviour and indicate whether they were doing good things or bad things.

The researchers analyzed all the data and do you know what they found? They found no real difference between the behaviour of religious people and non-religious people. The only difference was that religious people just felt more guilty whenever they did bad things.

So based on these findings, do you know what they concluded? They concluded that religion doesn't play a significant role in behaviour.

Now this study got a lot of people upset. Many people pointed out the flaws in the research. And yet despite these flaws, the conclusion still affirms a biblical truth: good behaviour doesn't make you righteous. Only Jesus can make you righteous.

This was summarized in the following way by one Christian writer:

Science is just now catching up with timeless truths revealed in the Bible... human nature is inherently flawed. It is only after we trade our nature with the infallible nature of God that we have the ability to experience true righteousness.

The theological term for this is Spiritual Regeneration.

So how does God take our fallen human nature and restore it?

How does he take what was dead and make it alive?

We're in a Christmas series called *Unwrapping Christmas*. Each Sunday, we're "unwrapping" a different aspect of the purpose of God's "epiphany" in Christ.

The word *epiphany* in the original Greek refers to a visible manifestation of a hidden divinity, either in the form of personal appearance, or by some deed of power by which its presence is made known.

In the Pastoral Epistles which we're looking at in this series, namely 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus this theme of epiphany appears throughout Paul's letters.

We see the theme of the first epiphany, the visible appearance of God in Christ at Christmas.

We see the theme of the second epiphany, Christ's future second coming when he returns to set the whole world right again.

Last week, we looked at how Christ's epiphany involved a timely rescue. Today we're going to look at how Christ's epiphany involved Spiritual Regeneration.

Our passage today is found in Titus 3:1-8.

Remind the people to be subject to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready to do whatever is good, ²to slander no one, to be peaceable and considerate, and always to be gentle toward everyone.

³At one time we too were foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures. We lived in malice and envy, being hated and hating one another. ⁴But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, ⁵he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, ⁶whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, ⁷so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life. ⁸This is a trustworthy saying. And I want you to stress these things, so that those who have trusted in God may be careful to devote themselves to doing what is good. These things are excellent and profitable for everyone. (Titus 3:1-8)

Paul wrote this book to encourage Titus. Titus was a young pastor who had the hard job of putting the church in Crete to order. To do that, he had to assemble a team of elders and teach them how the gospel leads to transformed lives. But in order for this to happen, one first has to be born again, or spiritually regenerated.

The term spiritual regeneration comes from the word *rebirth* in verse 5 of this passage. It's a word that appears only twice in the New Testament.

This word *rebirth* comes from the Greek word *palingenesia* which is made up of two words: *palin* which means new, and *genesia* which means birth.

So Spiritual Regeneration literally means "new birth." It refers to the work of the Holy Spirit who gives new birth to Christians from their previous state of spiritual death and separation from God.

Today we're going to talk about Spiritual Regeneration and what I want to do is look at:

1. Why it's needed
2. How it happens
3. What it means

First, **Why is Spiritual Regeneration needed?**

Verse 3 says, **At one time we too were foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures. We lived in malice and envy, being hated and hating one another.**

This is a picture of the human heart separated from God. It's enslaved to sin and spiritually dead. Now how did it come to be in this condition? To understand this, we need to go back to Genesis.

God had placed Adam and Eve in a beautiful garden and told them to take care of it.

And the LORD God commanded the man, “You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; ¹⁷ but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die.” (Genesis 2:16)

We all know how this turns out. The serpent tempts the woman. The woman takes the fruit and shares it with her husband. And they both explicitly disobey God bringing death into the world. We refer to this as the Fall.

Adam and Eve who were created to live with God forever will now age, deteriorate and die. They don't experience a physical death immediately; they live for many more years before they die.

But they do experience an immediate death, a spiritual one. Because what happens right after they eat the fruit?

- They suddenly realize they're naked and cover themselves up.
- They lose their innocence and know fear and shame.
- They blame each other instead of taking responsibility.
- They run away from God when he approaches.

Sin leads to spiritual death and separation from God.

So what is sin? Think about how it's spelled. S – I – N. What's in the middle of sin? “I”. Sin is essentially putting “I” or “me” in the centre. You see, our natural inclination isn't to love God and love others; it's to love me; it's to love myself, it's to put my needs in the centre, it's to put my interests above others.

Martin Luther describes sin as “humanity curved in on itself”.

So why is spiritual regeneration needed? Because we are all sinners. The Bible is clear about this.

The LORD saw how great the wickedness of the human race had become on the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time. (Genesis 6:5)

For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. (Rom 3:23)

For it is from within, out of a person's heart, that evil thoughts come... (Mark 7:21)

To be a sinner, doesn't just mean you do bad things. To be a sinner means that you are separated from God. It means that you are spiritually dead.

So what are the consequences? It means that:

- You can't trust God.
- You don't want God.
- You don't understand the ways of God.
- You don't want to obey God.
- You can't truly love God and others the way you're supposed to.

In other words, your natural inclination isn't to love God and others. It's to love yourself.

This is why we have the problems that we do in our world. War and conflict. Poverty and oppression. Fear and divisiveness.

This is why we have the problems we do in our lives. Anger and bitterness. Addiction and blame. Abuse and broken relationships.

Sin is the cause of all brokenness.

When we think about our sin, we might think of it like being adrift in an ocean. If we can just hold on and let Jesus throw us a life-preserver, we'll overcome its effects.

But here's the reality. You and I aren't just spiritually adrift. According to the Bible, you and I are spiritually dead!

This means that we're not floating adrift in the ocean. It means that we've already drowned! We're spiritually lifeless, we're lying on the ocean floor.

And what you need isn't for Jesus to throw you a life-preserver. What you need is for Jesus to give you life, to make you a new person, to make you spiritually alive.

How does that happen?

There are two important "But God" passages in the Bible that describe this.

The first one is from our passage today. We were foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures... But... God...

But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, ⁵ he saved us... (vv. 4-5)

God's kindness here refers to his goodness. Paul is saying that everything God creates is good because it has a purpose.

God's love here isn't the word *agape* which we're used to. It's the word *philanthropia*. Any guesses what English word we get from this? Philanthropy, or love of humanity. Paul is saying that God is committed to the good of humanity.

But here's the problem. If God's kindness and God's love don't show up and take human form then nothing will happen. We'll be dead in our sin.

But God's kindness and love do show up. They do take human form. They do appear and here's the epiphany: God's presence has now come to us in the person of Jesus.

If you and I were just spiritually unmotivated, God could have sent us a Coach. If you and I were just spiritually ignorant, God could have sent us a Teacher. But you and I weren't just spiritually unmotivated and spiritually ignorant. We were spiritually dead! So what does God send? A Saviour.

But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared... He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, ⁶ whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, ⁷ so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life. (vv. 4-7)

Spiritual regeneration is possible only because Jesus came to save us. Jesus was a real person. He actually came into human history.

And this is why we celebrate Christmas. We celebrate because God sent us a Saviour. We celebrate because God sent his son to come into the world and save us from our sins.

And here's the thing. We didn't do anything to deserve it. Verse 5 says, **he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. (v. 5)**

This leads us to our second But God verse, found in Ephesians 2.

...we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body^[a] and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.^[b] ⁴ But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, ⁵ even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ... (Ephesians 2:3-5, ESV)

Dead people can't save themselves. We certainly can't save ourselves by the worst things we do. We can't even save ourselves by the best things we do.

So why did a Holy God come for sinners like us? Because of his mercy. Jesus came for us even though we didn't deserve it, but while we were still sinners Christ died for us.

So **What does it mean to be spiritually regenerated?**

Verse 5 says, **He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit... (v. 5)**

Paul says that regeneration is a cleansing and a renewal. He uses two images to paint this picture: water and the Holy Spirit.

In the Bible, there are two other important passages that shed light on this.

In the book of Ezekiel, the prophet is writing to the people of God who had just witnessed the destruction of Jerusalem. They're exiles now in Babylon and are wondering, Has God forgotten about us? Does he even care? Is he going to help?

So what does God tell Ezekiel to write? He says reassure them and let them know that I'm not done with them yet. I'm going to make a new covenant with them. Tell them these words:

I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. ²⁶ I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. ²⁷ And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. (Ezekiel 36:25-27)

In the book of John, Jesus is talking to Nicodemus, a respected teacher of the Law. Rabbis believed that only Jewish people could enter God's kingdom. But Jesus says, anyone can enter this kingdom, but first they must be born again.

Jesus answered, "Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. ⁶ Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit^[b] gives birth to spirit. (John 3:5-6)

Here again, water cleanses the people and the Holy Spirit gives them new life. So what does this mean for you and me?

It means that you are cleansed from your sin. Your sin once separated you from God because sinful people can't come into the presence of a Holy God. But God wanted to be with his people so much that He sent his Son to come into the world and die for our sins so that our sins could be forgiven and our relationship with him restored.

So when you have this new life, you're no longer separated from God. Your sin has been taken away. Your guilt and shame have been removed.

...as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us. (Psalm 103:12)

In their place, Jesus has given you his own righteousness. Like Jesus, you can now call God, Abba Father. Like Jesus you can have an intimate relationship with him. Like Jesus, you can enjoy his presence, know his peace, feel his comfort and receive his strength no matter where you are, no matter what you're going through.

Why? Because God has cleansed you from your sin.

Being spiritually regenerated also means that you're made new. Your heart was spiritually dead. Your inclination wasn't to love God and love others, it was to love yourself.

But God gives you a new heart. He gives you new desires and a new inclination to do good. He gives you a new identity and a new power to live. This isn't just a better version of you, it's a new version of you.

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come:^[a] The old has gone, the new is here! (2 Corinthians 5:17)

So now, you don't just come to God to make your life better. Of course, you can pray for things and ask for his help. But you realize now that it's not about you anymore. It's not about God helping you to meet your goals and fulfill your agenda.

Because your new life has given you new goals and a new agenda. You're blessed not so you can keep the blessings for yourself but so that you can bless others.

That's what happens when God makes you new.

Earlier, I said that the term spiritual regeneration appears in only one other place in the Bible, it's in Matthew chapter 19.

Peter has just seen the rich young ruler walk away from Jesus because he couldn't give up his wealth. Jesus then says that rich people often struggle to give their lives to God because salvation is impossible by our own efforts, it's possible only with God.

So Peter asks Jesus, What will we receive in heaven since we've left everything to follow you? And instead of rebuking Peter, Jesus tells them the most remarkable thing.

Jesus said to them, "Truly I tell you, at the **renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. (Matthew 19:28)**

Here's the word *palingenesia* again. But Jesus isn't talking about the renewal of souls, he's talking about the renewal of creation!

Because at the Fall, sin didn't just corrupt human souls, sin corrupted all of creation. So God's plan isn't just to restore people, it's to restore the whole cosmos.

How? By healing it from all disease, corruption and injustice. So that it can once again be the paradise he originally intended to enjoy with his people.

God says in Isaiah, **See, I will create new heavens and a new earth. The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind. (Isaiah 65:17)**

When will all this take place? It already started when Jesus came to earth. But it will be fulfilled when Jesus returns to his throne.

In his book Return of the King, J.R.R. Tolkien says "The hands of the king are the hands of a healer, and so shall the rightful king be known."

That's what will happen when the king comes to his throne.

Everything sad will come untrue, everything broken will be made whole, all potential will be realized and all hopes will be fulfilled.

This has been a hard year for all of us. It's certainly been for me and my family. But this Christmas season, God has a gift for you.

Even if you're in a dark place. Even if you're tired and overwhelmed. Even if your marriage is falling apart. Even if your kids are making horrible decisions. Even if you're stressed over money issues. Even if anxiety and depression feel more real than God's love. Even if you're stuck in addiction. Even if you've made a mess of your life. Even if it seems like all hope is lost.

Two thousand years ago, God sent his Son Jesus, who loved us while we were sinners and gave his life for us, died in our place and rose from the dead so that if anyone calls on his name he will make them new.

So we now have these promises:

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come:^[a] The old has gone, the new is here! (2 Cor 5:17)

[He] who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world. (1 John 4:4)

For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, love and a sound mind. (2 Tim 1:7)

And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who^[a] have been called according to his purpose. (Rom 8:28)

Jesus has come and will come back again. And when he does:

Everything sad will come untrue, everything broken will be made whole, all potential will be realized and all hopes will be fulfilled.

This is the future we look forward to. The work that has already begun. And the good news we'll tell ourselves and others every day until Jesus comes back again.

Let's pray.

Heavenly Father,

Thank you for your love. Thank you for sending Jesus who died for us while we were still sinners.

Many of us have had a hard year. We're still dealing with a lot of challenges. Apart from you we're dead in the water, but you say in your word that your divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life.

You've given us everything we need...

- To love those who are hard to love.
- to persevere through disappointment and suffering.
- To serve others instead of wanting to be served.
- to know hope, peace and joy even when all seems dark.

Thank you Jesus for the new life we have in you.

Maybe some of you here this morning have never given your life to Jesus. You've never received the new life God wants to give you. With everyone's eyes closed, if you feel like God is speaking to your heart right now, if you want the new life God wants to give you, if you want the forgiveness he offers, would you raise your hand?

And now, in solidarity with everyone in the room, let's join our hearts and let's all pray this prayer together. Repeat after me:

Heavenly father, thank you for Jesus and for the cross. Cleanse me from my sins. Make me brand new. Fill me with your spirit so I can live for you and for your kingdom purposes. Thank you for new life, I give you all of mine.

In Jesus name

Amen