

What Is Expected Of Christians

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[0 : 00] Let us open our hearts and open our hearts to your word, we pray. And so bless us all. In Jesus' name, amen.

John chapter 3 and verse 8, page 89 in the New Testament section of our Bibles, and words that in fact we heard in the gospel reading.

The wind blows where it wills, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know whence it comes or whether it goes.

So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit. This was prepared as a message for a baptism service.

On the program this morning, you saw it. You did see them this morning. It said that this was going to be a baptism service this evening. But as perhaps you all know, chickenpox is the lead, and it is not a baptism service after all.

[1 : 15] So the message is a little bit hanging in the air. Nonetheless, it was, and is, in essence, a word for the baptized.

And if you and I are in the fellowship of baptized believers tonight, I think you will find that there's something relevant here for you and for all of us.

It's a message about being different. It's a message about being willing to be so different that you become an enigma to people who know you.

That's what Jesus is talking about in this verse. It comes from that famous conversation between him, the young rabbi, in Jerusalem for the first time, and Nicodemus, a man probably twice his age, who came to him by night as representative of a group of Pharisee leaders in Jerusalem.

And, you know, it was a conversation about new birth, and it went like this. Nicodemus, the older man, started the conversation.

[2 : 29] Well, that's what you would expect. The younger man naturally allows the older man to speak first. And the older man says in a fulsome way, Rabbi, we know that you're a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him.

Which sounds very affirming. It's a way of saying that we recognize that God's hand is upon you and your ministry. But it's really patronizing, when you look at it a second time round, you realize that.

The key words are, we know. In other words, you have passed our test. Nicodemus is taking it for granted that he and his fellow Jewish leaders are the people who ought to decide whether Jesus is acceptable or not.

And the thrust, therefore, of what Nicodemus says to Jesus is that we would like you to become one of us. Join the club. We accept you.

Be glad. And Jesus, you see, cannot respond to Nicodemus on that level at all. And he strikes an entirely different note by saying, Unless a man is born again of water, sorry, unless a man is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.

[3 : 58] And Nicodemus is prone by that. It doesn't seem a proper response to what he's just said. He doesn't know what to make of it.

He gags. He doubts. He says, how can a man be born when he's old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born? I'm sorry, Rabbi. I think you're talking nonsense.

I have no clue what you mean. To which Jesus responds by saying, it's really an amplified repetition of what he said before.

Truly, truly, I tell you, unless one is born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. He can't see it. He can't enter it. By now, John's reader, that's you and that's me, is supposed to be able to see what's happening.

Jesus is talking about new birth, and it's a parable. That is, it's a pictorial, a figurative way of talking about a spiritual reality.

[5 : 07] Jesus is picturing something as a new birth, and the something, obviously, from the picture, must be a great change, for there's no greater change in any of our lives than the change that takes place when we cease to live in our mother's womb and come out to live in the wide world.

And the great change is a fresh start. That's what the illustration, the parable, is clearly talking about.

A radical new beginning. And Jesus talks about being born of water and the Spirit. And that, I judge, is a reference to the Old Testament, and specifically to that Old Testament passage, which was said as the first of our readings tonight.

You say, why do you think it was a reference to the Old Testament? Well, because a little later on, when Nicodemus has confessed that he still doesn't understand this, doesn't know how it can be, Jesus chides in.

He says, are you the teacher of Israel? The person's supposed to know all about the Scriptures. And that meant our Old Testament, you see. And you don't understand this?

[6 : 32] You ought to, because it's all in the Scriptures. And if, in fact, you look again at that passage from Ezekiel 36, I think you'll see it there, plain and clear in the Scriptures.

Here is God talking about what he's going to do for his people in the day when he visits and blesses them. And he says, this is verse 25, I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you.

There's water. A new heart will I give you, and a new spirit I will put within you. I'll take away out of your flesh the heart of stone, hard and unresponsive, and I'll give you a heart of flesh, which receives and responds to my word.

And verse 27, I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes, and be careful to observe my ordinances. Water, spirit.

That seems to me to be the best explanation of the phrase Jesus uses. When you're cleansed from your sin, and when you're renewed in heart so that you naturally, spontaneously embrace God's commandments and love to do them, then you've been born again.

[8 : 03] That's what Nicodemus ought to have spotted right from the start. That I conceive to be Jesus' meaning here. But he goes on.

He explains the matter to Nicodemus yet further. Verse 6, he explains that there is a difference, a total difference, between the first birth and the second, and so a radical difference between the people who only know the first birth and the people who know both births.

Those who only know the first birth, well, of them it must be said, as Jesus does say, that which is born of the flesh is flesh. And then he goes on to say, that which is born of the spirit, that which knows, or those who know the second birth, are spirits, in the sense that the spirit of God, in their spirit, now controls their lives.

And then, verse 8, you find him saying that the person who's undergone the second birth is a mystery to a person who only knows the first birth.

That's really the point that he's making when he says, the wind blows where it wills, and you hear the sound of it, but you don't know whence it comes or where it's going, and it's like that with everyone who's born of the spirit.

[9 : 44] Actually, John, in narrating this, is able to use the same word for wind in the Greek as he used for spirit. We can't do that in English, but the Greek word does signify both things.

He's talking about the wind here. He's not equating the wind with the spirit of God, but he is using the same word to show that the one really does illustrate the other, and that the spirit of God in our spirit animates us in the same way that the wind blows around us on a windy fall day.

When you know that the wind is active, well, we get it from time to time in Vancouver, not as frequently as they do in some parts of the world, but you've seen it. The leaves whirl around on the ground.

Branches come down from the trees. All the evidence of the power of the wind at work is there. You hear the sound of it. You hear the wind in the branches.

You hear it moaning. You hear the leaves rustling. There's the wind blows them. There's the sound of a going in the tops of the trees to echo a scripture phrase. But you can't see the wind.

[11 : 03] You can't tell where it comes from, except in the broadest sense. You know if it's a north or an east or a west or a south wind. But you can't say where it started.

And you can't tell where the moving air that's blowing past you is going to end up. You don't know where it comes from. You don't know where it's going. In that sense, the wind is a mystery.

No question about its reality and its power. But you can't say that you fully understand it. And says Jesus, it's like that with everyone who's born of the Spirit.

The person who isn't himself or herself born of the Spirit cannot understand the one who is. And that's the thought that I want to underline this evening.

The world expects the Christian not to be different, but to be the nicest person of the world's own sort.

[12 : 07] The Christian is known to embrace an ethic of love. All right, says the worldling. I know what that means. It means being soft and infinitely indulgent and infinitely forbearing and patient when people let you down.

It means being one of life's wits. But that's what the Christian is expected to be. And if the Christian doesn't behave that way, the world will round on the Christian and say, you're a pretty odd sort of a Christian.

Because the world is so sure that that's how the Christian ought to behave. The Christian who stands on principle for right and who won't give any indulgence to wrong action is regularly regarded as, well, a substandard Christian, a man with a bee in his bonnet.

Not the sort of loving person that a child of God is supposed to be. That's the world's reaction. And, you know, the world's expectations at this point can be very tyrannical.

And I guess we, all of us, have felt the tyranny of them. And in situations where, in retrospect, we realize what we ought to have done was to have stood on principle, stood firm on principle, and not indulged sin at all, well, we didn't do it.

[13 : 39] And why didn't we do it? We didn't do it because the world's expectations that we could be soft and yielded were so strong. And I think we have got to learn the lesson of this eighth verse of John chapter three.

God does not expect us to fall into line with the world's expectation of Christians. The Lord Jesus tells us that the Christian ought to be a person over whom the unconverted scratch their heads.

They don't really understand how he takes. They don't know where he's coming from. They don't know where he's heading for. His life is a mystery to them, and as a mystery, it's a challenge to them and a rebuke to them.

But the point being stressed here is that it is a mystery to them. It doesn't fit in with any pattern they understand. They can't predict what the Christian is going to do.

They can't fully appreciate why the Christian does what he or she does. That's how it ought to be. Let me put it in modern catchphrases. We are called to represent God's counterculture.

[14 : 53] We are called to exhibit the alternative lifestyle to which God calls his saints. We don't fit in with the world's way. We shouldn't even be trying.

We should settle it in our minds and hearts that we're called to be different. You can see how I was going to apply this in the case of the folk who would have been baptized tonight.

I was going to tell them, I tell you now, in case there was any doubt, that John chapter 3 is not about baptism, but it's about what baptism is about, namely the new life in Christ.

I was going to say that the symbolism of baptism, which in essence is going under the water in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. He had said, I don't think it makes much difference whether you go under gallons of water, as some do, or whether you go under a few drops of water, as we would have done, we would have seen it done, I think, in this church if the baptism had happened.

It isn't the quantity of water. It's the symbolism of going under and then coming out from under. The sign proclaims that a new life is starting.

[16 : 14] Going under the water is a symbol of burial drowning, if you like. And coming out from under is a symbol of rising to a new life, starting again in Christ, with Christ.

And we, all of us, being baptized, so we may well take that to heart, to heart each single one of us, and take to heart the message that John 3, 8 is giving us.

It is a new life that we've entered into, and in that new life, God's expectation, Christ's expectation, is that we will be different, so different that we are a mystery to unconverted folk around us.

They won't understand us. Something would be wrong if they could understand us. The verse takes the thought just as far as it is.

Let's just dig a little deeper into this. The Christian believer, the person that is who has come to faith in Jesus Christ, as Savior and Master, and thus come into the reality of new birth, is going to be different in at least three ways.

[17 : 31] let's just draw out the thoughts quickly so as to make quite specific what we're talking about here. The Christian believer will be different first in this way, that he or she has a new goal in life.

If you're born of the Spirit, then, as our epistle reading from Romans chapter 6 put it, we are risen with Christ.

And that phrase points to a work of God in our hearts, whereby across the distance of space and time that separates us from the third day when Jesus rose from the dead, we are really and truly united with him by the Holy Spirit.

Space and time don't come into this. We're united with Christ by the Spirit in such a sense that our life is now Christ's life in us.

You say, what does that mean? It means that our disposition, our basic urge, our desires, the fundamental set of our souls is a reflection of that which we see in the perfect life of Jesus, the Son of God incarnate.

[18 : 52] we live to God. It says in Romans 6, a little bit beyond where our readings start, in that Christ died, he died to sin once for all, that's a thing of the past now, in that he lives, he lives to God.

And in him and through him and with him, we who are born again live to God also. It's our nature to do so. what that means is that the deepest desire of our hearts, if we're born again, is to know God as well and as closely as we can, to love God, to serve God, to please God, and to glorify God.

That's what we want to do. And we find our deepest delight in doing precisely those things. And if we ever cease to do them, delight goes and life becomes drab, and we wonder why we feel that things are hollow and empty and miserable.

well, it's because we're doing violence to our own new nature. That's why. This is what it means to be born again, risen with Christ, walking in newness of life.

Romans 6, verse 4 is what I'm quoting there. It means what was put a hundred years ago by a poet named Myers in a poem titled St. Paul.

[20 : 27] There's a verse of the poem which presents Paul as saying this, My goal is God himself, not joy nor peace nor any blessing, but himself, my God.

It's thine to lead me there, not mine, sorry, it is his to lead me there, not mine, but his, at any cost, dear Lord, by any road.

That's what the Christian heart says. that's the deepest desire of the heart once one's been born again. The Christian has this new goal, this new nature, and so, naturally and necessarily, the Christian behaves in a way that the world of the world can't understand.

Then, second, the Christian will and must be different because the Christian has a new view of people. The person who's been born again now sees people through the eyes of Jesus Christ.

Jesus, talking to Nicodemus in this conversation in John chapter 3, is looking at Nicodemus not as a very superior person, not as a leader and a great man and a person before whom he ought metaphorically to take off his path.

[21 : 57] He's seeing Nicodemus as a lost soul, and he's trying all through this conversation to bring Nicodemus to the point where Nicodemus will understand that he's lost and that he needs to commit himself completely to the Lord Jesus in order that he may be found.

And so, Jesus takes him through this sequence of thoughts. Do you want to see and enter the kingdom of God, Nicodemus? And Nicodemus knew, of course, all the Pharisees knew that the kingdom of God is the state of salvation.

Do you want to enter the kingdom of God, Nicodemus? Then you've got to be born again. And it goes on like this. Do you want to be born again, Nicodemus? Then you must listen to my testimony and take seriously the things that I tell you.

And then it goes on in the third stage of the conversation like this. Are you willing, Nicodemus, to listen to what I say? Then let me tell you that as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, lifted up, that is, on the cross, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

So you see, Jesus works the conversation round to a plain, straightforward statement of the gospel invitation, and he summons Nicodemus to faith.

[23 : 23] Well, the Christian, born again, alive in Christ, will see everybody the way that Jesus saw Nicodemus. we see our fellow men and women not just as nice or not-so-nice folk, not as folk who are socially above us or socially below us.

We shall think in those terms. We shall see people, and here I'm echoing C.S. Lewis, as folk who have an eternity before them, and who in that eternity will either be far more like angels or far more like devils than they are at the moment.

It will be one or the other. And destiny is determined. Souls are won or souls are lost in this world right now. And that will give the Christian a sense of urgency about setting the good news of new life in Christ before those with whom he or she has contact, nearest and dearest, friends, acquaintances, whoever, in just the same way that Jesus sought to set that issue of eternity before the good news.

And so naturally and necessarily the Christian will be different in his behavior from folk around him. He's seeing people differently and trying to do something which the world doesn't understand at all.

The world's treatment of people, at least the part of the world that we know out here in sophisticated British Columbia, is tolerant but manipulative. Right?

[25 : 02] Yes, I think you all know that it's right. That's how it is here in Ventura. Tolerant but manipulative. That's how we behave towards each other. Or how the world, the world around us anyway is behaving one towards another.

But the Christian behaves towards people in a way, other people, in a way that is compassionate, in a way that shows the truest love to neighbor by trying to make Christ known to our neighbor, trying to share with our neighbor the most precious thing we have, which is the knowledge of Christ and new life again.

The world doesn't understand that. People scratch their heads when they're at the receiving end and we are trying to share Christ with them. They don't understand why we're bothering even to do it.

But here is a way, you see, another second way in which the Christian is different. It is expected to be different and must settle for being different all our lives, brothers and sisters.

If we're going to see our fellow men and women through the eyes of Christ, we shall be different. And people will be scratching their heads over us. Are you ready for that? I hope so. Because you'll be doing violence to your own nature.

[26 : 20] If you don't allow yourself to see folk this way, and if you don't allow yourself to do what the Lord calls you to, sharing Christ and salvation with others.

And then thirdly, the Christian is going to be different for this third reason also. As he has a new goal in life, the glory of God, as he has a new view of people, lost souls needing the Savior, so the Christian has a new source of strength, a source of strength which the world knows nothing about.

This is strength for what the Christian sees as right, strength for making the stand that the Christian realizes that he or she must make, the person who never thought that he or she could stand and swim against the stream, resist the pressure of the world around, stand out for the Lord, finds that looking to the Lord, he or she is able to stand in a way which in retrospect amazes them.

The world doesn't understand it. The world is amazed that the Christian can do it, just as the world is perplexed as to why the Christian should want to do it. But this is the power of the Holy Spirit in the Christian's life.

He or she is being born again of the Spirit. Now that from one standpoint means, as we said, union with Jesus Christ, his life flowing as it were in our hearts.

[28 : 01] From another standpoint, it means strength from the Spirit of God who indwells us to enable us to live that supernatural life of knowing Jesus, yes, and standing for Jesus.

And the Christian has this source of strength, of power in the indwelling Holy Spirit. And the Christian is expected to be drawing on that power to live the lifestyle which the world doesn't understand and which calls for superhuman strength.

Yes, it does. They talk nowadays about power in relation to the idea of Christians being able to work miracles and do healings supernaturally and all that sort of thing.

I read my New Testament and I see that the central message about divine power in the New Testament is not there. It has to do with being strengthened to stand for the Lord.

Just that. And that's the sense in which I beg you, brothers and sisters, focus on the power of God as you and I need it for our Christian lives.

[29 : 14] when we have seen what is right, what we're called to do, when we've seen the way in which Christ is summoning us to love and serve others for his sake, then we can look to him and say, Lord, I can't do it in my own strength.

You must enable me. And for the Spirit, he will. And he does. And this is resurrection life. It's because this power of God is a reality that Paul was able to say, just let me read you four verses.

In 2 Corinthians 4, he's talking about his own daily experience here. He says in the previous verse, sorry, he says in chapter 4, verse 6, God has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

That's Paul saying joyfully and thankfully that he's a believer, and I hope we all can say of ourselves. But then he goes on to say this, that we have this treasure in earthen vessels to show that the transcendent power belongs to God and not to us.

We, he's talking of himself and his fellow preachers, we are afflicted in every way, yet not crushed, perplexed. Yet not driven to despair, persecuted, yet not forsaken, struck down, but not destroyed, knocked down, but not knocked out, as Philip renders it.

[30 : 53] That's an awfully good rendering there. Always carrying in the body, says Paul, the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies.

While we live, we are always being given up to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus may be manifested in our mortal flesh. Do you see what he's talking about?

Resurrection life from Christ being shown for us as he's put under pressure which ought to sink him and which doesn't sink him, because facing that pressure, the spirit of the Lord enables him to stand.

That's the power of God making our ordinary lives superhuman and supernatural. Brothers and sisters, you and I are going to be put under pressure often and often in our lives, and we shall need to make proof of this power.

Thank God it's there for us. We have that new source of strength for living the new life in Christ, whereby we swim against the stream, we bewilder folk around us, we are like the wind, mysterious, you don't know where it comes from, you don't know where it's going.

[32 : 07] Well, baptism, a symbol of entry into the new life, symbolizes all this, and that's why I chose this message for a baptism occasion.

And though the baptism hasn't happened, you and I are together as baptized believers in this church tonight, and it is a message for all of us. Go out of church tonight, brothers and sisters, rejoicing in the new life which is yours, and realizing what it means to be in that new life.

Go out conscious of the new goal, which is the only goal with which your heart can be happy now, the goal of knowing and loving and serving and glorifying your Lord.

Go out of church with that new view of people, looking at them henceforth through the eyes of Christ as folk who need his love and his saving grace.

Go out of church finally, conscious that there's a new source of strength that is yours, to live the new life, and fulfill the new ministry, and be the Lord's person.

[33 : 19] Mysterious, yes, but bringing the touch of his power into the lives of others as you live your new and different life, and bringing the message of Christ to needy folk around.

Go out then, brothers and sisters. Let's go out together to be new and different for God, and others will get the blessing, and we shall get the joy, and our Savior will get the glory.

So be it. Let's pray. Grant us, Lord, we beseech you to understand the newness of the new life into which you brought us, and understanding it, understanding it, grant that by your power we may be found living it every day of our lives, as long as our earthly pilgrimage shall last.

In Christ's own name we pray. Amen.