

Born from above?

John 3:1-17

As you know, I was not born in the United States. I have been living in the United States for 13 years but I am still learning new cultural customs and expressions. David Dorsey is my teacher of slang expressions. A few week ago, I learned a new one, “kickback.” David hasn’t taught me any bad words, so don’t worry.

As my time in the United States has gotten longer, I have also noticed many cultural differences. What is the “come here” hand gesture in America? You use your finger like this, right? But please don’t do that in Korea. That hand gesture is one of the most offensive things you can do there. It’s like saying “so you wanna fight? Bring it on!” When you don’t belong to a particular culture, you may not understand some customs and cultural codes. Even if you have learned about them from books, it does not mean you really understand other cultures because cultures are something that you learn through experience more so than study.

Christian faith in human experience has a similar dimension. You can read thousands of books about Christianity, theology and faith. You may know the Bible but you may still not have a relationship with God nor trust God.

Unless Being Born from above...

Jesus said, “No one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” Unless a person is born from above or born again, no one can see or enter God’s kingdom. The example of Nichodemus not being able to see the Kingdom of God is confirmation of Jesus’s words. He could not even understand what Jesus was saying.

Nicodemus was a learned man with impressive credentials. If Nicodemus lived in Rhode Island today, he would be Rev. Dr. Nicodemus. He would be a Harvard graduate with two Ph.Ds. in theology and in law. He would be a renowned professor at a university, and at the same time, an influential politician in congress as well as a Court judge. He would also be a representative of the National Pastors’ Association. I don’t know if there is anyone who is smart enough and competent enough to handle all those roles at once. But Nicodemus was the one able to do it. He was a highly educated person and had an extraordinary intellectual ability with superb credentials. The only problem for him was that he could not understand Jesus’s words regardless of his intelligence and education.

Academic degrees do not guarantee knowledge of God’s kingdom. Upon graduation from seminary, pastors receive an academic degree, called Master of Divinity. What an incredible title.. Master! of Divinity!! I don’t know if anyone can really master God in three years, but I have that degree anyway. Even so, I cannot claim that I completely understand God or God’s kingdom. The one thing that I learned from seminary is that I will never be able to master divinity. Perhaps, the seminary gave me the Master of Divinity degree to remind me that I will never master God.

In the same way, the number of years that we have attended church does not guarantee seeing God’s kingdom. The amount of time that we work for the church does not guarantee entering the kingdom of God. Even if we memorize every single verse in the Bible, it is no guarantee we will have better knowledge of God’s kingdom.

Unless Being Born from above... 2

Jesus said, “no one can see or enter God’s reign without being born from above or being born again.” What does it mean to be born from above or born again? First, Jesus was saying that entering God’s reign is not our work but God’s work.

Independence is one of the founding virtues of the United States. So we have a strong tendency toward achieving things by our own strengths. But we must remember that this rule does not apply to our relationship with God.

A passionate young pastor asked a mature pastor, “How can I reach up to God?”

The wise, old pastor said, “Let God reach down to you.”

It is God who first reached down to us. The Holy Spirit came down and poured upon the disciples and they were changed. Unless we allow God to change us, we will not be able to perceive God at work. This is a blessing for us. Of course, it is not easy to let God take the wheel of our lives particularly when we are strong and independent enough to control our lives. Perhaps, this is why we experience God’s grace more easily when we are in a vulnerable state.

When I first came to Asbury, I shared my brief spiritual journey with you. I personally met Jesus and accepted him as my Savior when I was in middle school. I believed in my heart that Jesus Christ died for my sins and my sins were forgiven by his grace. Unfortunately, during that time of important spiritual formation, I met a very strict and authoritative Sunday school teacher. As a young kid, I unconsciously identified God with this authoritative and punitive teacher. I tried my best to be acceptable to God by following all of this teacher’s strict rules and doing spiritual practices out of obligation and fear. After 3 years though, my teacher eventually told me and my friends that we had failed him. When I heard this, I felt betrayed not only by this person but also by God. This was the beginning of my spiritual wandering and struggle. This deep wound from the person whom I respected as my spiritual leader made me doubt my own Christian faith and it gradually turned into anger towards God. When the time came to go to college, my parents wanted me to go to a seminary which I agreed to, but only to prove that God did not exist.

But unlike my original, premature intentions, God restored my faith during my time at seminary. I was able to have an intellectual engagement with Christian faith and it broadened my perspective and I gradually overcame my false image of God as a punitive God. Of course, this was not to say that I fully trusted God; some doubts still coexisted in my mind.

During my first year of ministry, I had to face this doubt again. When I was first appointed to a church, there were no church members. I preached to empty pews every week for 6 months and I soon reached my limit. I felt, “Am I crazy? What am I doing there?” Without faith, I could not bear this hopeless situation any longer. I was about to give up ministry.

When I shared my concern with a pastor in my district, he told me that sometimes, we just need to wait and rest if we do not see the path that God has laid out for us. He recommended I attend a spiritual retreat program, before I made a final decision.

Honestly, I did not expect anything to come of it. I cried and prayed but I still did not get what I needed. So, I was about to give up my ministry. On the last evening, there was a foot-washing service. I had given up any hope if feeling anything or getting anything out of this ritual, but strangely, I experienced God’s hand touching my soul and believed that God had never ceased to love me even during my time of doubt and anger toward God. This was “the Aldersgate experience” for me. Since then, faith in God’s unconditional love and grace became the foundation for my Christian life and ministry.

God’s grace comes from above. We don’t have to climb up to heaven. The Holy Spirit first comes down upon us and opens our eyes to see God’s kingdom. When we fail, when we are

vulnerable... even when we have almost given up... God never ceases to love us and never gives up on us.

Faith, the Only Way to Enjoy the River of Grace

Rebirth into God's reign does not come through acquisition of knowledge or religious training. If religious knowledge and training were enough, Nicodemus should have had all that he needed. Entering God's kingdom is possible by grace alone. Entering God's kingdom is possible by faith alone. Trusting God is the only key to entering God's kingdom. Trust that "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but will have eternal life." (John 3:16) That is the only way to be reborn from above.

How many of you like to swim or used to like to swim? I don't like cold water so I don't like swimming. However, my friend taught me how to swim, though I am not very good at it. When I first learned, my friend kept telling me, "you just need to relax more. Just relax." But I couldn't relax. The more I tried not to sink, the more my body tensed up and the more my body sank. Similar, the more we try to enter God's kingdom by our own efforts, we ironically grow away from God's reign.

Stop trying to be acceptable to God. Stop trying to enter into heaven by your own good works. Instead, relax. Relax by trusting God. Our God is good. Our God is good all the time. Trust God and relax into God's grace and lean toward God. The more we trust God and relax in the Holy Spirit, the more we will be formed and reformed by the Holy Spirit. Relax and let the flow of the Holy Spirit lead our church and your lives. As we receive God's love with trust, we will soon find ourselves immersed in the river of God's grace. Relax and take a deep breath of the Holy Spirit. The kingdom of God is at hand.