

The Word Became Flesh

The Birthright (John 1:12-13)

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn at HCC on December 13, 2015

Introduction

- ❖ Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones was arguably the greatest preacher of the 20th-century. In the course of his ministry in Westminster Chapel, he preached thousands of sermons. **But one of the most helpful contributions he made was a simple clarification – that the gospel at the heart of Christianity means *good news* and not *good advice*.**
 - ▶ When someone gives you good advice, they're telling you what you need to do in order to achieve your goals, to meet your needs, to secure for yourself a better future. The assumption behind advice is that you can do it. You just need guidance. You need inspiration. You need someone to point you in the right direction.

- ❖ But good news is different. When you read the newspaper, you're reading a report about events that have already occurred – whether just the day before or weeks, months, maybe years ago. **Regardless, when you're given news, you're not being told what to do. You're being told what has already been done and the only thing you can do is respond and react to the news.**
 - ▶ Now this is where Christianity stands out among all world religions and every other worldview that centers on self-help, that boils down to doing what I can to become a better version of myself. **Christianity is about offering good news. Every other worldview just offers good advice.**

- ❖ Lloyd-Jones asks us to imagine an ancient city under attack by invading forces. The enemy has crossed over the kingdom's borders, and they're ravaging the countryside, slaughtering villagers and burning down their homes. So the good king leads his army out to confront the enemy before they reach the capital.
 - ▶ Now there are two ways this could go. If the king and his army win the battle and defeat the encroaching enemy, then he'll send back heralds to the city. They're the evangelists, which literally means "good newsmen". They have good news to share and they'll tell everyone, "*The king has won. It's over. Victory is yours. Be filled with peace and joy and live in light of this good news!*"
 - But if the king loses or if the battle drags on with no clear end in sight, then he's going to send back military advisors. They don't have good news to share. They have good advice to take. "*Store up your crops. Hide your valuables. Sharpen your swords. Get ready to fight for yourself.*"

- ❖ **The religions of this world and all the modern systems of self-help are just sending you military advisors.** They've got advice. "*If you want happiness, if you want self-actualization, if you want enlightenment, if you want salvation, then this is what you do. Here's Dr. Phil's advice – heed it. Here's the law of God – keep it. Here are the Five Pillars of Faith – observe them. Here are the Eight Noble Truths – embrace them. Here are the seven keys to a happy marriage or a successful life. Heed this advice. Fight for yourself.*"
 - ▶ **But Christianity alone sends heralds (good newsmen, evangelists)** who say, "*Let me tell you what happened. Let me tell you about what was accomplished in the past on your behalf. Receive this news. Believe this news. And now live in light of it.*"

- ❖ So on that particular evening, over the ancient fields of Bethlehem, where shepherds lay, when a host of angels appeared, they weren't military advisors. They were heralds. They didn't come with *good advice* of great joy. They didn't offer seven keys or four steps to save yourself or to bring peace on earth.
 - ▶ No, they announced *good news* of great joy for all the people (Lk. 2:10). They heralded the arrival of a newborn king, "*born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.*" (2:11)
- ❖ The gospel at the heart of Christianity is good news about the arrival of a baby. And not just any baby. **We're talking about the Son of God who became a Son of Man so that all who receive him by faith may themselves become sons of God.** That's the gospel in a nutshell.
 - ▶ As we've been going through John's Prologue during this Advent season, we've come to vv12-13. Here we find the heart of his Prologue, which is same as the heart of his Gospel. It's about a great divide, a great privilege, and a great change.

The Great Divide

- ❖ The first thing we see in our text is a great divide. Read with me starting in v11. "*11He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. 12But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God*".
 - ▶ **All of humanity can be divided into two groups. There's a basic division between mankind.** It's not between the religious and the secular. It's not between the conservative and the liberal, or the rich and the poor, or the Jew and the Gentile.
 - John is saying in vv11-12 that there is a basic division between those who have received God's gift of Jesus and those who have already rejected it. There's only two groups. Not three.
- ❖ **I know it's common to assume there are three groups:** a) those who've received Jesus, b) those who've rejected Jesus, and c) those who've yet to hear about him or just yet to decide.
 - ▶ **But that assumes we all start off in neutral.** That we're all on the fence until we've unwrapped God's gift and realize Jesus is under the wrapping. And then we get to decide whether to receive or reject him.
 - So some of you see yourself as unwrapping the gift. You're hearing about Jesus for the first time. Or you have already but you're undecided. You feel like you're neutral. You haven't decided whether to receive or reject him.
- ❖ But that's a mistake. You've mistakenly presumed your own neutrality. Within John's theology (which is biblical theology) every one of us is fallen by nature. **That means by nature we've rejected God's gift from the outset – even before peeking under the wrapping, even before ever hearing the name of Jesus.**
 - ▶ So no one starts off life in neutral and then decides one day to either receive or reject Jesus. We all start off in a fallen state where, in our flesh, we reject the gift of God by nature. And therefore we start off already condemned as those who reject Jesus.

- ❖ Let me show you where John says this. Look at chapter 3:18, “*Whoever believes in [the Son] is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already*”. If someone offers you Jesus and you don’t receive him, it’s not like in that moment you’re suddenly judged and condemned. You were condemned already – at first birth.
 - ▶ Look at 3:19, “*And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people (that includes us in our fallen condition) loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil.*” So the true light has come into the world. He came to his own but his own people did not receive him. **Instead their hearts were inclined to love darkness rather than light.** So we all start off in darkness. Certainly not in light and neither in some dim state of neutrality.

- ❖ **So my point is that there’s only one line that divides all mankind into just two groups.** Charles Spurgeon put it this way, “*Were an angel to come here with a drawn sword, and suddenly to separate the righteous from the wicked with one stroke, you would find that his sword had for its edge the question, ‘Believest thou in the Lord Jesus Christ?’*”
 - ▶ Have you believed in the name of Jesus? Have you received him? Or are you still in rejection of him? How you answer for yourself makes all the difference. It makes the biggest difference, the only difference, between the two halves of humanity.

- ❖ Some of you are probably thinking, “*Come on, you’re being too divisive. We’ve got political leaders making inflammatory statements creating greater division in this country. The last thing we need is a preacher to fuel the flames and talk about what divides us. Stop distinguishing “us” from “them”. Stress what unites us instead of what divides us.*”
 - ▶ That’s actually good advice if I were up here to give good advice. Then of course I should avoid saying anything divisive. But if I’m a herald, if I’m simply tasked with passing on news from the King, then I speak of an *us* and a *them* because that’s how his Word speaks. There is an *us* and there is a *them*. **But it’s not about us versus them. It’s about us for them – for their salvation.**

- ❖ We have to make clear that salvation – becoming a Christian – centers on one issue alone. **It’s the question of *who is Jesus to you?*** Have you received him as God? Not as the God you want him to be or expect him to be. ***Have you received him as he is?*** As revealed in his Word, in the Gospel?
 - ▶ That’s what it comes down to. That’s the only difference between *us* and *them*. So there’s nothing to be proud of in us. There’s nothing to boast about. Think about it: ***Does an empty cup have anything to boast about? Of course not, it’s empty! It just comes to the flowing fountain ready to receive.*** That’s what a Christian is. That’s what it means to become a Christian.

- ❖ I think it’s because we’ve missed this, that many of us have been approaching Christianity all wrong. We’ve been trying to give something to Christ. Now there’s a time and place for that but not at the start. **At the start, salvation comes not by giving but by receiving.** Receiving Christ and all that he has done for you.

- ❖ ***Have you been trying this whole time to become a Christian by looking within and seeing what you can give to Jesus?*** Asking yourself, “Do I have it in me to give Christ the time, the commitment, the devotion that you’d expect of a Christian? Do I have it in me to give the obedience, the service, the sacrifice required of a follower?”
 - ▶ You’ve been going at it all wrong. The answer to those questions is clear. It’s No. You don’t have it in you. None of us do. We’re all empty. We’re all impoverished. **But the good news of Christianity tells us not to look within but to look to Christ. Because unlike us, he’s full. He is full of grace upon grace.**
 - He is the Word of God who became flesh for us. He lived a sinless life for us. He died a sin-atonement death for us. And we are called to simply respond to this good news by receiving Jesus by faith.

The Great Privilege

- ❖ And this is where it gets really good. This is where we receive a great privilege. This is our second point. Look at v12 again, “*But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God*”.
 - ▶ What makes the good news so good is this promise of receiving the right to become children of God. **John is talking about the right of sonship – to have full and legitimate claim to all that belongs to the Father and all that comes with being one of his beloved children.** I don’t think we’ll get the full gravity of what this means until we understand our status apart from Christ, before receiving Christ.
- ❖ **John’s original audience lived in a world where your rank and status meant everything.** A tenth of the ancient Roman world was comprised of slaves. Yet the early church was made up of a disproportionately high number of them. Even some of the early bishops of Rome, like Clement I, were former slaves.
 - ▶ *Now why was Christianity so appealing to slaves? Because the gospel taught that anyone who believes – regardless of your rank or status in life – gets a seat at the family table with God.* In ancient Roman society, a slave is property. But in Christ a slave is your brother, your sister, a fellow co-heir with Christ.
- ❖ Like we said earlier, Scripture teaches that all of humanity starts off in a state of fallenness, enslaved to darkness because we’re in love with it. **But those who receive Christ receive the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, “Abba! Father!”** (Rom. 8:15)
 - ▶ This idea of spiritual adoption is staggering and almost unbelievable if it weren’t written so clearly in Scripture. Now pardon my directness, but if you’re not amazed, if having the right to become a child of God doesn’t blow your mind, it probably means you have too high a view of humanity in general and yourself in particular.
- ❖ **We have to rid ourselves of the popular belief, that we, collectively as mankind, are all children of God.** The Bible teaches the opposite. It says everyone is either a son of Adam or a daughter of Eve, but you’re not a child of God unless you’re in Christ, unless you’ve received him by faith.

- ❖ We're orphans by nature. We're not true sons or daughters of God. And don't get the idea that we're these adorable, innocent, little orphans playing nicely in an orphanage. No, the Bible describes us more accurately as children of wrath (Eph. 2:3), as children of the devil (Jn. 8:44; 1 Jn. 3:10), as enemies of God (Rom. 5:10). And yet he offers us the rights of adoption, the right to become children of God.
 - ▶ **And what's more, consider what it cost God the Father to adopt us.** He had to sacrifice his own Son. To make us sons and daughters, the Father would have to forsake his only begotten Son. *Who would ever adopt children of the devil or your own enemies all at the cost of your firstborn?* No one but God.

- ❖ In the 1930s, British researchers discovered India's lowest caste. You may have heard of the Untouchables, the caste that would make you ritually unclean if you touched one of them. We're not talking about them. This is the caste that washed the clothes of the Untouchables. They were so lowly that even looking at one of them would make you unclean. You could say they were the **Unlookables**. They only came out at night when others could not see them.
 - ▶ So imagine being in this caste of Unlookables. You're the lowest of the low. You live and work in darkness, in perpetual shame. That's all you know. But then one day, imagine you're suddenly brought into the light. You find yourself seated at the head table of the President of India, enjoying a feast, being treated as one his sons or daughters. Your new father is looking you in the eyes. No one's ever done that before.
 - How awesome! How wonderful! **And yet this only captures a fraction of the awe and wonder of the gospel.** That the God of the Universe would welcome sinners like us into his own family? Amazing!

- ❖ It's one thing to end hostilities with your enemies. It's another to make peace with them and be reconciled. But God goes further. **He takes them into his home to be a part of his family.** He adopts us and gives us the right to become children of God. Behold what manner of love the Father has given unto us, that we should be called children of God! (1 Jn. 3:1)
 - ▶ And this is more than just a legal reality. Look, I would never downplay the glory of our justification by faith alone. It's a glorious thing to be covered by the righteousness of Christ, to be declared not guilty by an utterly holy Judge. **But it's a more precious glory to be received into the Judge's home, seated at his table, and to call him "Abba, Father".**

- ❖ **I think the reason why some of us feel lukewarm in our faith and distant from God is because our grasp of the gospel is shallow.** We get it that our sins are forgiven by faith. That we're pardoned. That we're justified. But that's as far as we've gotten.
 - ▶ **Our salvation is merely a legal reality in the courtroom of heaven.** That offers little comfort when you're in the loneliness of despair, when you're weak and heavy-laden, when your friends despise and forsake you. **In those moments you need more than a forgiving Judge. You need a loving Father.**

- ❖ **I fear the reason you're spiritually dry is because you've forgotten or maybe you've never understood your sonship in Christ.** You're like that orphan who's already been adopted, who's in a loving home, but who's still very cautious, very nervous, very reticent and unwilling to open up and receive the family's love.
 - ▶ **You need to pray and specifically ask God to give you grace to have a feeling sense of your sonship.** So that the next time you pray, "*Our Father in heaven*", it's not just a formality. You begin to feel the full import of those words. You begin to understand the great privilege.

The Great Change

- ❖ But there's more. You'd think being adopted into God's family is good news enough, but the gospel has more for you. **Not only do you go from slave to son, from enemy at the gate to child at the table, not only are you given a new status before God – when you receive Christ you're given a new life, a new nature.** You're born a second time. God not only calls you his child, he radically changes you so that as you grow, you'll actually look like one.
 - ▶ This great change is our third point. Let's start in v12, "*12But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, 13who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.*"
 - John is clearly talking about a second birth. Not your first birth. Not physical birth. **Everyone's been born once. But if you want to be a Christian, a child of God, you have to be born twice.** There's a great change involved.
- ❖ I think many who are considering Christianity have overlooked the radical change that takes place in conversion. **To them, becoming a Christian is just about becoming a morally improved version of yourself.** Whenever someone starts to feel a need for God, when they realize they need to change, when they're dissatisfied with themselves, they approach Christianity as just a way to help. To be a better you.
 - ▶ But that's not Christianity. **Christianity is not about self-improvement. It's not about becoming a more moral person.** If you approach Christianity with that mindset, you're asking for disappointment. You can't even keep your own morals now. *Do you really think adding biblical ethics to your list is going to help?*
- ❖ You can dress up the old self by becoming more religious. You can make appropriate changes in life. Maybe you become a more compassionate person, a more patient person, a more generous person. But the point is that you can do all of that without being born again.
 - ▶ There's a saying that goes: **You can put lipstick and pearls on a pig but it's still a pig.** You can dress up your old self with religion and good morals, but that doesn't address the fact that you're still dead in your sins. You're still a child of wrath.
- ❖ **Becoming a Christian requires a complete and radical transformation.** Tim Keller says it's not like asking a horse to jump higher. It's asking the horse to sprout wings and become an entirely new creature. That's Christianity! **It's not about becoming a better you but a brand new you.** A new creation where the old has gone and the new has come! (2 Cor. 5:17)

- ❖ You need to hear this. Especially if you grew up in church. **John is saying no one is born into this world a Christian.** Yes, you can be born into a Christian family, but the most you gain from that is a set of Christian values and a Christian lifestyle. But you're not a Christian.
 - ▶ You're not a Christian – not a child of God – until you're born again. ***Okay so how do you get born a second time?*** If this is so critical to becoming a Christian, then how do you get born of God? This is what John gets at in v13 where he says a Christian is born, "*not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man.*"

- ❖ **His point is that this second birth, unlike your first, does not result from human initiative.** It's not based on human will, on a human decision. It's based on the sovereign grace of God. **The second birth is a pure gift from God.** You can't bring it about on your own. It's something the Spirit of God has to do.
 - ▶ Jesus says it's like the wind. "*The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.*" (Jn. 3:8) In other words, the Spirit is free to blow in ways we don't understand, in ways we wouldn't expect, in ways we can't predict.

- ❖ That's why there's hope of salvation for the most hardened of doubters and the most strident of skeptics. There's hope for that person in your life who could care less about God, who has zero interest in anything spiritual. **That means at any moment, in response to the simplest of gospel invitations, the wind could blow and the unlikeliest of sinners could immediately be born again.** The Spirit of God could fall and they'll be utterly changed.
 - ▶ But I know some of you are thinking, "*So if this new birth is all a gift, does that mean there's nothing for me to do to be saved? What if I have a nonChristian friend who wants to receive Christ or what if that's me! – do I just sit there and do nothing?*"
 - No, according to our text, the proper response to the gospel, to the invitation to receive Christ, is to believe in his name. Trust in him. Cry out to Jesus.

- ❖ I'm not saying your faith doesn't matter to being born of God, to becoming a child of God. Of course it does. That's what v12 says. **My point is that your faith results from your new birth.** Not the other way around. **Your profession of faith is the outward expression of an inward change wrought by the Spirit of God according to his sovereign grace.**
 - ▶ Just think about your first birth. What happened first? You were born first. *And then what was the first sign of physical life?* It was a loud cry. Your immediate response to being born was to cry out, and then everyone knew you were alive.
 - The same goes for your second birth. You're born of God first, and the sign of this new spiritual life is a cry – a cry of faith. Your immediate response to being born a second time was to cry out to Jesus asking to receive him.

- ❖ *So have you made this cry? Is this the cry of your heart?* I know many of you have been born into a Christian family. *But have you been born into God's?* That's the most important question you'll ever face. It's because of the good news of that baby boy we celebrate every Christmas that the great privilege of becoming a child of God is yours if you take it.