

**REFORMED OR REBORN?
II PETER 2:20-22**

NEED: THE NEW BIRTH

PROPOSITION: REFORMATION WILL NOT KEEP A PERSON FROM FALLING BACK INTO A LIFESTYLE OF SIN SO A PERSON NEEDS TO BE REBORN.

OBJECTIVE: TO LEAD THE REFORMED TO EXPERIENCE BEING REBORN.

INTRODUCTION:

How much positive impact did Jesus of Nazareth have on Judas Iscariot? You are familiar with the outcome of the life of Judas Iscariot. You are aware of that shameful betrayal which he committed against Christ. You may even recall that Jesus said of Judas that it would be better if he had never been born. Did Jesus have no positive impact on the life of Judas?

The evidence we find in the four gospels seem to indicate a very positive influence on the life of Judas. Judas changed his lifestyle so much that for the period of almost three years he so followed Jesus that everyone thought he was a genuine disciple of Jesus. Without question he underwent a moral reformation during this period of time. He took on many of the outward characteristics of the followers of Jesus. He was changed outwardly so much that not one of the twelve suspected he was capable of betraying Jesus into the hands of His enemies. He no longer associated with the rebels that had been his friends before he met Jesus. He seemed to be a changed man!

The experience of Judas is a potent reminder of how Jesus can effect a life outwardly and yet the heart not be changed. Judas was reformed, but he was never reborn!

Jesus referred to people like this in His famous sermon on the mountain. There he spoke of a group that will make an appearance at the judgment and will claim that Jesus has had a dramatic influence upon their lives, but He will confess to them that He never knew them. They will be from the same group that Simon Peter is talking about in this second chapter of his letter. They will be false teachers and false prophets who have misled others on the way. They will be people who are outwardly reformed, but never inwardly transformed. They will be persons who followed the false teachers in their deceptive ways.

The closing paragraph of this chapter raises serious questions to the careful student. Some have read this passage and have concluded that it is possible to know the Lord in a saving way, but in the end be lost. They have developed upon the bases of this passage and others a doctrine of falling from grace. Others of us, who have been convinced by other statements of scripture that if you are ever born of God that you cannot be unborn, have struggled with this passage. What does it mean? I want to present to you the idea this morning that Peter is describing persons who have undergone profound moral reformation, but were not reborn. They became outwardly an active part of the church, but they were never inwardly a part of Jesus Christ. There are three very sobering lessons that we should learn from this passage of scripture.

I. THE GOSPEL OF JESUS CHRIST CAN MOTIVATE A PERSON TO MORAL REFORMATION.

Peter's description of these who follow the false teachers is very graphic: "If they have escaped the corruption of the world by knowing our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ." The word that grabs our attention in this text is "knowing." Our problem with this text is that we know that the apostle John used that word "know" as being one of the things that marks a child of God. The children of the Lord are those who know "Him personally and experientially." Simon Peter uses precisely the same word that John used throughout his gospel and his letters. He even went a step further to use the form of the word that means to know fully. Paul often used this word as descriptive of those who are genuine followers of the Lord Jesus Christ. Our first inclination as we read this text is to conclude that Peter is talking about someone who has been genuinely saved. However, the last verse of this paragraph seems to confirm that he is not talking about someone whose life has been inwardly transformed, but rather someone who has been outwardly reformed.

1. Coming to knowledge of the things of Christ gives a person a vision of a better life. You cannot attend church and hear the gospel of Jesus Christ taught, preached, sung, and testified to, without getting a vision of a better life. Many people make a commitment to live that better life on the basis of what they have heard through the gospel of the Lord Jesus. They come to a rather thorough and full knowledge of the contents of the gospel and the demands of the gospel. They make significant changes in the way they conduct their lives in order to be conformed to their understanding of the gospel. This leads to a

moral reformation – even though they may come short of a moral regeneration. They are outwardly changed, but the heart is still the same.

2. The gospel of Jesus Christ will introduce you to people who have a better life.

When you begin to attend a gospel assembly like the First Baptist Church, you will meet a quality of people that you will not meet any place else on the earth. They will have a decidedly positive edge on their lives morally. They stand out from the crowd with reference to honesty, morality, integrity, truthfulness, and general trustworthiness. As you relate to these people you will find yourself drawn to them. You will find in yourself a desire to be like them. Sometimes when people make a public commitment to be a Christian, this is all they are indicating. They are not indicating that they are opening their heart to the life of the Lord Jesus, rather they are indicating that they want to live like the people they have met in the gospel assembly. They want to be a good person.

The influence of the gospel has produced in them a motivation to be a better person. This is good! However it is not good enough to bring you into the family of God. Becoming a Christian is not a matter of making a commitment to be a better person. It is not a commitment to quit your bad habits. It is not a commitment to cultivate some good habits. All of those things may be motivated by your acquaintance with the gospel of the Lord Jesus, but they come short of bringing you into the kingdom of God. So, whatever Peter is saying in this passage, he is warning us that being a Christian involves more than knowing the facts, even knowing them fully, concerning the Lord Jesus Christ.

II. MORAL REFORMATION WILL NOT KEEP A PERSON FROM FALLING BACK INTO SIN.

Peter uses rather graphic languages as he describes what had happened as these false teachers had presented their message. He writes, “And or again entangled in and overcome, they are worse off at the end than they were at the beginning.” The word he had used earlier in the statement for what they came out of is “corruption.” This graphic word was used of many different situations that would be characterized by corruption and filth. It could be used of a swamp where all kinds of disease and insects would be bred. It could be used of something that had the potential to defile and even destroy. The influence of the gospel had led them to renounce this but now under the influence of false teachers they are again entangled in those things that they had abandoned earlier. And their second state was worse than their first state.

This passage may well reflect Peter’s memory of a story that Jesus told. Jesus warned the religious people of His day about the danger of reformation without the rebirth. He likened it to a man who drove the demon out of the house and then cleaned and scrubbed the house in every way, but didn’t put anything positive into the house. He left the house standing vacant. Jesus warned that the demon that had been driven out of the house would go and find seven other demons. They would move back into the house and the latter state of the house would be worse than the first. Jesus was warning of the danger of reformation without rebirth. The language Peter uses in our text is a reflection of the language that Jesus used – “It would have been better for them not to have known the

way of righteousness than to know it and then turned their backs on the sacred commandment that was passed on to them.”

1. The old temptations and pattern of sin will still be there.

Reformation by itself can never erase the old patterns that sin has formed in the life. It can never destroy that inner darkness that responded so readily to temptation in the past. This is the reason that almost all of the programs supported by our government to reform people ultimately fail. They are very successful in leading people to make a commitment to give up drugs and drink and immoral behavior. They are successful in convincing them that a life of crime doesn't pay, but they have no way of going inside the person and changing that old pattern that sin had already established in the life. This is the reason that moral transformation in itself will not keep a person from falling back into the old way. Something more is needed!

2. To fall back is even worse than never having started at all.

The reasons for this are obvious when you think about it. One reason it is worse is that it breeds into the life the skepticism that will be a barrier to ever experiencing the new birth. In their own mind they will think, "I have tried that and it didn't work." What they tried was reformation and they thought that this is all there is to being a Christian. Just the memory of falling back will keep them from ever coming to a real saving knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Another thing that makes it worse is that it tears down some of the restraints that had been there. Have you ever noticed that when a drug addict falls off the wagon they seem to always go a little deeper into the drug culture? They don't just fall part of the way back; they fall back further than they were before. Someway having tried reformation and failed takes off the restraints that kept them from falling so far before.

Then, there is something about light that is not received! When you have heard the word of God and have not really responded to the word of God, something bad happens inside. You become responsible for what you have heard as well as what you have done.

The lesson is clear for us – moral reformation will not keep you from falling back into sin. You need something more than knowledge and an outward change.

III. MORAL REFORMATION CANNOT CHANGE THE BASIC NATURE OF A SINFUL PERSON.

Here we come to the bottom line. Here we are dealing with the central problem of man. As humankind our need goes so deep, is so ingrained in our nature, that no mental or outward change will ever meet the need. Peter underlines this with these two memorable proverbs that he quotes in the close of our text, “Of them the proverbs are true: a dog returns to its vomit and, a sow that is washed goes back to wallowing in mud.” These proverbs do not present a very pleasant picture to discuss in a Sunday morning worship service, but they do go to the heart of the problem. The first proverb is quoted from the proverbs of Solomon and the second came from the proverbs of the Greek speaking people of that day.

The first of the proverb concerning the dog deals with a rather repulsive reality concerning the dog. The nature of the dog being what it is, it is predictable that a dog will return to its vomit. The dog will now ingest the very thing that made the dog sick to begin with. Here Peter is reminding us in the proverb that it is the nature of sinful man to ingest the very spiritual poisons that will bring about his spiritual death. The dog is utterly void of any kind of discernment. Unsaved man is not capable of discerning that which is destructive to his own spiritual life. In his sinful nature he can be expected to make choices that are not in his own best interest. These false teachers and their followers have gone back to the very lifestyle that they abandoned in the beginning. O the folly of such a move!

The second proverb deals with making outward changes. You can take a hog into your home, bathe it, perfume it, comb its hair, paint its toenails, put a ribbon in its tail, put a ribbon around its neck and do anything else you think will beautify your pig, but the moment you let it out of your sight, if there is a mire in sight it will begin to wallow in it. It is the nature of the pig to act like a pig. It is not very complimentary to consider what Peter is saying here. He is saying that you can take a sinner to the church, lead him to sign a card, teach him to quote the ten commandments, teach him to say the Lord's prayer, teach him to tithe, teach him to come to church twice on every Sunday, teach him to make resolutions to be a better man, but if you turn him loose it is his nature to go back into sin. Man needs something more than reformation and resolutions. He needs a radical change in the depth of his heart.

The possibility that such a change can actually happen was presented by Jesus himself when he said to the Jewish leader Nicodemus; “You must be born again!” In His kindness and grace God is able to work a moral transformation into the heart of a human being so that that the person begins to love things he once hated and begins to hate things he once loved. That human being will begin to be repulsed by things that once attracted him and he will begin to be attached to things that he once despised. That is what the new birth is. It is God doing a work of regeneration in the human heart so that the outward conduct is changed because the heart of the man has been changed.

The question that confronts us this morning is this--have we been reformed or have we been reborn? Has Christ influenced us to the point that we have made some changes in our lives or have we allowed Christ to change us from within? My fear is that in the church today we have many who have been reformed but have not been reborn. My concern is that you and I make sure that we have indeed been reborn; that we have had an experience of the grace of God in the depth of our hearts that has changed us in every dimension of our lives. The Apostle Paul recognized this when he declared “If any man be in Christ he is a new creation, old things passed away and all things have become new.”

Suppose you discover this morning that all you have is reformation, what do you do?

The only thing you can do is to do what Jesus told Nicodemus to do. You look to Jesus Christ crucified on the cross as a sacrifice for your sins and you cry out to God for mercy. You acknowledge to God that you need something that you can never do for your self.

You ask God for the gift of eternal life and for his life to be in you and you will be born from above!

How tragic it will be if you turn out to be Judas – influence by Christ but never changed by Christ.

I came across the thrilling testimony of Bernhard Citron recently. He was born into a Jewish home in Berlin in 1905. He was brought up under the influence of the Jewish faith. His father was a successful physician and his relatives were successful people. He grew up following the religion of the Jewish people. He was drawn as a young man into some of the optimistic philosophies of the day only to have it shattered by the rise of Hitler in his home country. All of this brought him to a spiritual crisis. But let me share the outcome of all this in his own words:

“I was born a Jew and grew up a free-thinker, though there was in the back of my mind a constant quest for the eternal truth. In the utter homelessness of exile, I felt the shadow of death near me. There was nothing uncommon in the fact that man who was spiritually and materially uprooted should long for death. One autumn during my stay in Budapest I was walking along the broad river Danube. I saw the mist moving upon the dark face of the water. Great fear fell upon me. I was afraid of the future, afraid of man, afraid of the water beneath the embankment, afraid of myself.... At that moment I noticed the form of a cross shining clearly through the night, with an aura of blue light around it. What I saw was the illuminated cross above the chapel at the foot of St. Gellert’s hill. Suddenly I

knew that the way of the Cross leads from death to life, from homelessness to the Father's house, from the terror of sin to repentance, from skepticism to faith. I decided to read the Bible. With a heart beating I entered the book shop and asked for the New Testament. With joy and awe I attended divine service, till on Good Friday of the following year I asked the minister of the Scottish Mission to instruct me in the Christian faith. I did not say that I wished to be baptized. I just said that I wished to know something about the Christian faith. As one who has starved for a long time devours the first meal which is set before him, I swallowed the Word of God. At the end of my preparation I felt an urge to confess to my instructor those doubts which had long been besetting me. It was the only possible outcome of my conversion experience that I should receive the outward visible sign of the inward grace which God had wrought in me. Once more I stood beside a broad river. This was not the river of death, but the river of life. Yet I could not see what lay beyond. I was unable to comprehend clearly what it would mean to live the Christian life.

The minister who had led me so far gave the answer: 'This is not an end, but a beginning.' When towards the end of the Sabbath service,...I stepped forward and answered the questions which were put before me with a threefold 'I do', I was lifted into a new sphere of life.

This is what it means to be reborn!