

"You Must Be Born Again"

John 3:1-21

In our series entitled 'Fishology', learning how Jesus taught His disciples to be fishers of men, Jesus first approached people with an invitation to get to know Him more by spending time with Him and listening to what He said and watching His life. The first disciples had a greater opportunity than we do as they saw Jesus firsthand. And yet, we can still do that through the Bible, His Word, inviting people to actually read the Bible and see for themselves who Jesus is and learn the truth about Him. That's a great approach.

But we also learned that at some point, you have to challenge people as did Jesus with His own disciples for them to follow Him. You've seen the evidence, heard His Words. Is He or is He not the Messiah? Are you going to follow Him because He clearly is? Some do, many do not.

With people who have the evidence of who He is, Jesus is very clear. He was extremely clear with the people who knew Him best, His own community in Nazareth, showing that from Isaiah 61 that He was indeed the Messiah. He was there to free them from the spiritual bondage of sin, but they were offended by His claim to be the Messiah.

This is part of the gospel that is necessary yet difficult to share. As we saw last time in Mark 2, Jesus came to forgive sins. He healed the paralyzed man who believed, as did his 4 friends, that Jesus had the power to heal. Jesus showed that if He has the power to make a lame man walk again or a blind man see again or a leper's skin whole again, then He must be divine. Since He can also heal everyone's universal problem, sin. If we believe by faith alone. Something religious people struggle with because they don't think they have a sin problem. So how do you deal with nice people who think they know God already, yet, as Nicodemus shows us in John 3, are still willing to listen and learn.

John introduces the Nicodemus narrative with this:

Now there was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews; ² this man came to Jesus by night

There's something interesting going on that we miss when we forget that chapter divisions weren't in the bible originally. Look at the end of Ch. 2:23.

²³ Now when He was in Jerusalem at the Passover, during the feast, many believed in His name, observing His signs which He was doing. ²⁴ But Jesus, on His part, was not entrusting Himself to them, for He knew all men, ²⁵ and because He did not need anyone to testify concerning man, for He Himself knew what was in man. ^{3:1} Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus . . .

The word John wants to emphasize here that best describes Nicodemus is the word "man". Nicodemus was initially one of these "men" who saw the signs Jesus was doing, recognizing Jesus had to be from God but didn't understand He was the Messiah. So when he approaches Jesus he comes to Jesus as mankind often approaches Jesus: He's just another spiritual teacher from God. But to be a follower of Jesus . . .

Is Not Just Acknowledging Jesus Was a Teacher

(3:1-2)

Nicodemus approached Jesus as one who thought he had authority over Jesus. In 1st century Jewish society Nicodemus was one of the most influential people among the Jews. He was a Pharisee. The word Pharisee means 'separatist'. The Pharisees were a group of Torah teachers who taught and sought to apply them to every area of their life. They believed that as God's chosen people, they should live separately from the world. That was their original goal when they were founded in the 2nd century BC. However, over time they became legalistic, forming a religion centered in rituals about God but not of God.

Nicodemus was also a "ruler," which meant he was one of the Sanhedrin, the 70-member political party that kept Jewish law and order so that Rome could let them run things their own way. Nicodemus approaches Jesus as one who thinks he has authority, representing the Pharisees and maybe even trying to enlighten Jesus on how to really instruct people.

Nicodemus comes at night. Most likely not to be seen by his peers but we're not told why. He may have been sent on an assignment to look into Him. But clearly, he is drawn to Jesus.

Rabbi, we know that You have come from God as a teacher; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him.

Who are the 'we'? The Pharisees. He addresses Jesus as a Rabbi, a Teacher who has come from God. But just because he agrees Jesus is a good teacher, it doesn't make him a follower of Jesus. There are lots of people in the world who acknowledge Jesus as a religious teacher, but that doesn't make them a follower.

Jesus ignores Nicodemus' polite speech and goes directly to his heart. Since Nicodemus was a man and Jesus knows what is in man's heart, then he knew what was in Nicodemus' heart. And He responds,

³ *"Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God."*

Jesus revealed the heart of Nicodemus right there. Nicodemus thought as a Pharisee and a member of the Sanhedrin – the most righteous Jew you can find – that he was obviously a natural for the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God is primarily the age when the Messiah will establish God's rule on the earth. Nicodemus wrongly thinks that because he's a Jewish religious person that the Messiah (whenever he comes) will obviously accept Him. Yet the Messiah was standing right in front of him. And the Messiah tells Nicodemus a follower of the Messiah . . .

Is Not Being Religious (3:3-10)

Nicodemus is thrown off guard here and doesn't understand Jesus' words because he's religious but not spiritually in tune with God. That's not the same thing. He responds,

⁴ *Nicodemus *said to Him, "How can a man be born when he is old? He cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born, can he?"*

Jesus is talking spiritually not physically. Nicodemus hasn't been born of the Holy Spirit. Being religious doesn't make you a follower of Jesus,

We need to be spiritually born (vv.3-4)

Birth means a new life. Nicodemus gets that part but he doesn't understand that Jesus is talking about a new attitude not a new body.

⁵ Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. ⁶ That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷ Do not be amazed that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' ⁸ The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going; so is everyone who is born of the Spirit."

Jesus contrasts being born of the flesh (physical) and being born of the Spirit. When Jesus says born of "water and the spirit" He's not talking about baptism. There is no mention of baptism anywhere around here. Baptism doesn't change your heart. Being born of water and the Spirit is a reference to an Old testament rebirth passage which we'll see in a moment. Jesus uses the wind as an analogy. He says you can't see the wind but you know by its sound and the effect it has on things being blown around that the wind is active. Similarly, Jesus says,

The evidence of the spiritual birth is visible (vv.5-10)

The word for wind is the same word for Spirit. The Spirit is described like wind: unseen but you know it's there by how it's moving things around you. People who are born of the Spirit are those whom the Spirit is changing from the inside out. You see the evidence of God's presence in their life because they are allowing God to move them.

⁹ Nicodemus said to Him, "How can these things be?" ¹⁰ Jesus answered and said to him, "Are you the teacher of Israel and do not understand these things?"

Jesus is stating that Nicodemus should know these things, which means somewhere in the Hebrew Scriptures (OT) it says something about spiritual birth. Nicodemus would have known Ezek. 36-37. Ezekiel 36-37 prophecies about the day when Israel is going to repent and turn to God as a nation. Ch. 37 is Ezekiel's vision of dry bones and God breathes life (Spirit) into them and they all come alive. Just prior in Ezek. 36:25-27 God said,

^{36:25} Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. ²⁶ Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. ²⁷ I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to observe My ordinances.

The religious Jews in Jesus' day equated physical washing as symbolizing your supposed spiritual cleanness. God says I will clean you with water and the Spirit, a cleansing of the heart (internal cleansing) from the sins of worshipping self more than God. God wants to give them His Spirit because then the Spirit enables them to walk in God's Word and obey it. Since Jesus said, 'Repent for the Kingdom of God was at hand' He was inviting people to repent of their sins and believe He is the Messiah. The Spirit of God will come in you and give you a new heart. The evidence of a new heart by the Spirit moving in your life is obedience to Jesus' words. John wrote in 1 John 2,

"This is how we know we are in Him: whoever claims to live in Him must walk as Jesus did." (1 John 2:5-6)

The evidence that one is a disciple of Jesus is how the Spirit is changing our lives by moving us to obey Jesus' words. If there's no evidence of a changed heart as seen in obedient action perhaps we've deceived ourselves as Kyle Idleman says, 'We are mere fans of Jesus and not followers'. Following Jesus is more than acknowledging Jesus as a good teacher or that He was only from God or being religious. Jesus goes on to explain to Nicodemus and all of us in 3:11-21 that following Him . . .

Is Believing Jesus Alone Pays for Your Sins **(3:11-16)**

Nicodemus came to Jesus saying "We know" you are from God because of all these signs You are doing. Nicodemus' "we" refers to the Pharisees, the religious authorities. Jesus comes back at Nicodemus with more authority!

11 Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know and testify of what we have seen, and you do not accept our testimony. 12 If I told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things? 13 No one has ascended into heaven, but He who descended from heaven: the Son of Man. 14 As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up; 15 so that whoever believes will in Him have eternal life. 16 "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.

Who's the we Jesus is talking about? God, the Scriptures and Himself. And who wrote the Scripture? The Spirit. All speak of the truth. Jesus says I am from God; I descended from heaven and I will ascend to heaven. Only one who is from heaven can tell you heavenly things.

Then Jesus gives him another lesson from the Hebrew Scriptures which Nicodemus would have known. Remember when the Israelites were struck by the snakes because the people complained yet again asking why did Moses lead them out of Egypt? There the people agreed that they had sinned, so God told Moses to make a bronze serpent and put it on a pole. And when the people were bitten by the snake (because of their sin), simply looked up at that bronze snake, they would not die from their bites/sins.

That's it? All they had to do was believe God's Word by faith that looking at the snake would forgive their sin and give them life, not death?

Then Jesus, building on the bronze snake symbolic message, says so also will the Son of Man be lifted up so that whoever believes (looks to the One up on the cross) He alone can save you from your sins, will have eternal life. And John 3:16 God says that goes for whoever believes in the world. Why? Because everyone in the world has been bitten by sin. And everyone in the world has to look up to Jesus and believe by faith that His death is what God says will pay the price for your sin. Nicodemus felt he and his fellow Pharisees were the righteous ones and Jesus says, anyone can be declared right with Me, even you Jewish religious types.

But it doesn't end there. The Bible doesn't end at John 3:16. Looking to Jesus in faith means committing to live for Him every day because of what He did for you on the cross. John likes to use the light and darkness metaphor. Light referring to living for Jesus, darkness referring to living for self in sin. A follower . . .

Commits to Live in the Light and Not in the Darkness

(3:17-21)

We're so familiar with John 3:16 we often don't read the rest.

17 For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him. 18 He who believes in Him is not judged; he who does not believe has been judged already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. 19 This is the judgment that the Light has come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the Light, for their deeds were evil. 20 For everyone who does evil hates the Light and does not come to the Light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. 21 But he who practices the truth comes to the Light, so that his deeds may be manifested as having been wrought in God .”

The evidence of whether we follow Jesus is how we live. One who truly believes Jesus died for their sins, lives for Him in appreciation and walks in the light. Living in the light means practising the truth of God's Word which is revealed in our attitudes and actions. However, too many people love the darkness [sin and selfishness] because they are unaware that living for self results in perishing – eternal separation from God.

What is some of the evidence of living in the light that we are genuinely following Jesus? Thankfully, Nicodemus' testimony is not over in ch. 3. He shows up at the end of ch.7. Jesus healed a man on the Sabbath. The crowd is divided as to who He is. Some say He's the Messiah, some others say a lawbreaker and one who has a demon. The Pharisees had sent orders to have Jesus arrested but the officers were over-whelmed by Jesus' teaching and didn't arrest him. Here's the rest of the conversation starting in 7:47,

*47 The Pharisees then answered them, “You have not also been led astray, have you? 48 No one of the rulers or Pharisees has believed in Him, has he? 49 But this crowd which does not know the Law is accursed.” 50 Nicodemus (he who came to Him before, being one of them) *said to them, 51 “Our Law does not judge a man unless it first hears from him and knows what he is doing, does it?” 52 They answered him, “You are not also from Galilee, are you? Search and see that no prophet arises out of Galilee.”*

Nicodemus stood up among his peers and defended Jesus. If we're a follower of Jesus seeking to live by God's Word, then we too will be . . .

Willing to defend Jesus and stand up for the Word (7:47-52)

A follower of Jesus will defend Jesus' name when someone swears by His Name in your presence or maligns believers in your presence or mocks the standards of God's Word in your presence. Even if it means risking ridicule. When Nicodemus defended Jesus he was put down and made fun of. He was accused of being stupid – because that's what the Pharisees attitudes were towards those who were from Galilee.

Willing to risk being identified as Jesus' disciple (19:38-40)

Ch. 7 was a defining moment for Nicodemus. He moved from curious about Jesus to following Jesus. He spoke out about Jesus and made his stand for Jesus. If we had any doubts about Nicodemus, he shows his faith publicly and clearly at Jesus' death. Look at ch. 19:38

38 After these things Joseph of Arimathea, being a disciple of Jesus, but a secret one for fear of the Jews, asked Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus; and Pilate granted permission. So he

came and took away His body. ³⁹ Nicodemus, who had first come to Him by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about a hundred pounds weight. ⁴⁰ So they took the body of Jesus and bound it in linen wrappings with the spices, as is the burial custom of the Jews.

Nicodemus and Joseph would have had to go to Pilate – the head of the government – for permission to bury Jesus’ body. In identifying themselves as Jesus’ disciples this would have cost them their seat on the Sanhedrin and their place among the Pharisees. They lost everything they had worked for in the world and gained eternity.

Jesus came to earth, trying to explain who He was and what God wanted from us. Religious people rejected Him and forced His death. Politically threatened people also wanted Him dead. Jesus threatened them because He exposed the darkness of their sins and they refused to change. We need to share His message about sin and salvation, defend His Name, when people ridicule Him and mock His Word. Jesus’ followers will risk ridicule and persecution to be identified as one of His disciples.

What best describes you? Are you a fan of Jesus, watching from the sidelines, eager to praise Jesus when there’s no risk and everything’s going right but only secretly admiring Him when things get risky? Or are you a follower of Jesus, willing to stand up for Him and risking ridicule and persecution for Him?

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If you have any comments or questions about this message, please contact us at oliviet@rideau.net