

Text: John 3:1-21

Title: “Jesus, Friend of Religious Sinners”

Let’s open our Bibles to John 3. Not all sinners look like the homeless man in this video. You can be a respectable religious person and be just as spiritually homeless as this man is physically homeless. Millions of people were taken to church from the time they were born and today they sit in churches thinking simply because they are going to church, maybe even giving some money, maybe even baptized, thinking that’s all that is required. You can be just as far from God sitting in a church pew as you are sitting on a bar stool.

The good news is that Jesus loves sinners of all kinds ... rebellious sinners and religious sinners. That says that...

1 Timothy 1:15b - Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners...

So what would Jesus say if He were to speak to sinners sitting in church? Jesus sat down one night to have a long conversation with a man who was very religious, what we might call “a good church-going man,” but still very far from God. This is one of the best known conversations Jesus ever had ... a conversation with a man named Nicodemus. **Read John 3:1-8.**

ILLUSTRATION – Warren Wiersbe tells about something that happened to the great Revolutionary War patriot Benjamin Franklin. He was a tremendous statesman and inventor. Being as famous as he was he received letters from people all over the world. One day he received what might be considered the most important letter he ever received. It came from George Whitefield, one of the most famous preachers in the world in the mid-1700s. Whitefield wrote to Mr. Franklin: “I find that you grow more and more famous in the learned world. As you have made such progress in investigating the mysteries of electricity, I now humbly urge you to give diligent heed to the mystery of the new birth. It is a most important and interesting study and, when mastered, will richly repay you for your pains.” That’s what we’re going to do today ... “give diligent heed to the mystery of the new birth.”

Knowing what Jesus knew about most Pharisees (many of whom would become His worst enemies) Jesus made time to have a personal conversation with Nicodemus. He was straightforward and honest with Nicodemus, but at the same time Jesus was respectful of him. Jesus wasn’t intimidated by Nicodemus’ questions (there are at least three in this conversation), but He answered them

honestly. To every question Jesus would reply, “I tell you the truth...” We can learn so much from Jesus about the way He approached people ... rebellious sinners and religious sinners.

What do we know about Nicodemus? From v.1 we learn that he was a Pharisee. In each of the encounters we have seen so far in this series we have met the Pharisees. He lived by the strictest religious code and typically was judgmental of others who didn't live that righteously. Not all Pharisees were hypocrites, but all of them sincerely believed that God was impressed with their religious zeal. Being a member of the ruling council (the Sanhedrin) meant that he was a highly respected leader among the Jewish people.

The next verse says that Nicodemus came to Jesus at night. Why? Maybe it was because he feared what his fellow Jewish leaders would think about him associating with Jesus, since, as it turns out, most were Jesus' enemies. Perhaps it was because Nicodemus had serious questions that would take more time that Jesus would have to give to him during the busy daytime. But what follows is one of the most intense conversations with Jesus recorded in the NT.

John 3:2 - “Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him.”

Nicodemus knew enough about Jesus to know that His life was extraordinary. Reports of Jesus' miracles were circulating everywhere, and no one could have that kind of supernatural power unless God was with him. Really religious people like Nicodemus were expecting the Kingdom of God to come, and they were pretty sure that they would be among the first to be welcomed into that Kingdom. But Jesus shattered that illusion when He said to Nicodemus...

John 3:3 - “I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.”

I'll use this term “born again” and “new birth” over and over this morning, so it's best that I go ahead and define it for you.

OUTLINE – The new birth is the act of God in which He imparts eternal life to those who are spiritually dead, making them children of God.

That's what this religious man needed. So Jesus talks about...

1. THE NECESSITY OF THE NEW BIRTH

John 3:3 - No one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.”

To see the kingdom of God is the same as being saved. It's being part of the family of God. And for that to happen one must be born again. Many like Nicodemus are very religious, but they're spiritually dead. The Bible says that apart from Christ ...

Ephesians 2:1 - You were dead in your transgressions and sins,

It doesn't matter if you're a church member or how long you have been one. Without Christ you're spiritually dead.

ILLUSTRATION – When I was a seminary student and a young pastor I did a little work on the side for a funeral director. I would help out with funerals and I got to see the inner workings of the funeral business. Now I don't mean to be morbid here, but one of the ways funeral directors try to comfort the families of a deceased person is to try to make that lifeless body look like they did before they died. They will place a person's favorite dress or suit on them. They will put make-up on their faces to hide the fact that all the color has gone out. It takes away some of the shock of seeing your loved one in a casket.

Religion without Christ is like putting clothes and make-up on a corpse. It makes them appear to be alive (sleeping), but they're not. Nicodemus was very religious, but still very far from God and spiritually dead. Going to church and being religious might help you to get a new start. But you don't need a new start; you need new life!

Jesus talks about the necessity of the new birth, but He also talks about ...

2. THE POSSIBILITY OF THE NEW BIRTH

This is puzzling to Nicodemus.

John 3:4 - “How can a man be born when he is old?” Nicodemus asked. “Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born!”

Now this is strange terminology for a man like Nicodemus. People who are far from God cannot comprehend things like this without the help of the Holy Spirit.

Nicodemus is thinking literally, not spiritually. He knows what's involved in a mother giving birth to a child ... so he reverses all of that and it doesn't make any sense. He's thinking, "This is physically impossible. How can a grown man be born all over again?"

Jesus gives the same answer, but this time with more explanation of what it means.

John 3:5 - Jesus answered, "I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit."

So it's possible to enter the kingdom of God, but it's not possible in our own strength. You can't cause yourself to be born again spiritually any more than you could cause yourself to be born physically.

Now what does it mean that one has to be "born of water and the Spirit"? There is much debate among scholars on this. From the context, I think that when Jesus talks about being "born of water" he is describing physical birth where we come through our mommy's amniotic fluid (water). To be "born of the Spirit" is describing spiritual birth that comes when we put our trust in Christ and the Holy Spirit comes to give us new life within. Jesus explained...

John 3:6-7 - Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.'

So here's what we know: Nicodemus is very religious, but he's still very far from God ... from the kingdom of God. An upstanding leader like Nicodemus would have presumed that the kingdom of God would be wide open for a devout man like himself. No he must be born again. He needed new life, not just more religion. What is needed is more than respect for Jesus. Many people have a basic respect for Jesus Christ; but, no, you must be born again. What is needed is more than amusement with the supernatural. Nicodemus saw and admired the miracles Jesus performed. You can't just *see* the supernatural; you must *experience* the supernatural. You must be born again. What is needed is more than head knowledge of Jesus. Many people like Nicodemus say, "*We know* you are a great teacher." It's more than knowledge of who Jesus is. You must be born again.

And the Good News is that this kind of transformation is possible. But also Jesus talks about ...

3. THE MYSTERY OF THE NEW BIRTH

John 3:8 - The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.”

ILLUSTRATION – When a golfer is preparing to hit a shot they want to know if there’s any wind blowing and how it will affect their shot. Sometimes it’s hard to tell, so they will often reach down, pick up a piece of grass and toss it in the air to see which direction the wind blows the grass. You can’t see the wind, but you can see the winds effect on something.

People might not understand the work of God, but they can sure see the effects of it in your life. This was a mystery to Nicodemus and Jesus wanted him to understand that when you’re born of the Spirit, others will be able to see the difference in your life. They may not be able to explain it, but they can sure see it. It’s a mystery because it is supernatural.

So Nicodemus is still puzzled when he asks...

John 3:9 - “How can this be?” Nicodemus asked.

That’s a great question. That’s the question we all need to have answered for us if we are to step out of a merely natural life to a supernatural life in Christ. And so Jesus shows us...

4. THE REALITY OF THE NEW BIRTH

This new birth becomes a reality when we believe in Jesus. This new life comes with Jesus. Now let’s jump all the way down to v.15 where Jesus said...

John 3:15 - Everyone who believes in him (Jesus) may have eternal life.

We need more than religion. We must have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Why?

BECAUSE WE ARE PERISHING

This is another way of saying we are lost.

John 3:16 - “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

BECAUSE WE ARE CONDEMNED

This is another way of saying we’ve been judged guilty because of our sin.

John 3:18 - Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son.

BECAUSE WE ARE UNDER WRATH

John 3:36 - Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God’s wrath remains on him.”

So here is a fiercely religious man. Someone might look at him and say, “If anybody is going to heaven it’s Nicodemus.” But no, he’s perishing, he’s condemned and he’s under wrath. And the only solution is for Him to believe in and trust on Jesus.

Pastor, how can I know if I’ve been born again? First, was there ever a time when you heard a message like this and you made a conscious surrender of all you know of yourself to all you know of Christ? Second, has there been a change in your life? Now many of us were saved when we were children and so there may have not been an obvious turn-around in our life, but over time you know there’s something different about the way you think and behave. Third, is there the witness of the Holy Spirit in your life? The Bible says that the Spirit will bear witness with our spirit that we are children of God. There are times that you just know that God is your Father and you are united with Christ.

We have no indication what Nicodemus’ response was to Jesus that night. It appears that he walks away from that encounter with Jesus unchanged. What we do know is that a couple of years later Nicodemus shows up again in the Gospel story. It’s after Jesus was crucified. And a man named Joseph of Arimathea went to the Roman governor Pilate and asked to take away the body of Jesus to prepare it for burial. Pilate agreed to release the body to Joseph. And with Joseph that night was Nicodemus, there to help tend to the body of Jesus with every indication that he had been born again. How about you?