

The Jesus Way / THE WAY OF FAITH
Religion to Relationship
John 3:1-17

¹ Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council. ² He came to Jesus at night and said, “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.” ³ In reply Jesus declared, “I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.”

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!”

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. ⁶ Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. ⁷ You should not be surprised at my saying, ‘You must be born again.’

⁹ “How can this be?” Nicodemus asked.

¹⁰ “You are Israel’s teacher,” said Jesus, “and do you not understand these things? ¹⁴ Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, ¹⁵ that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life. 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. ¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.

This is the journey of one man from mere religion to life-changing relationship with God. Amazingly, the religious leaders of Jesus’ day were stuck knee-deep in a bureaucratic religious structure that made the system more important than the cause for which it was founded – not too unlike some religious institutions today. But in the mind and heart of one of these religious leaders, named Nicodemus, there were gnawing questions about this revolutionary man – Jesus – who performed miracles and claimed to be the Son of God.

So Nicodemus decided to find out more, so he comes to Jesus by night. There has been a lot of speculation as to why he came at night. Some have suggested that this was the normal time of study for the rabbis, of which Nicodemus was one. Or maybe he came to avoid the crowds around Jesus during the day; maybe he wanted a lengthy conversation with Jesus without interruption. Or maybe he feared being seen with such a “politically incorrect” individual. Whatever the reason, I suspect that the imagery is important. Later in this passage, John says that “Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil” (John 3:19). This entire story is about one man’s journey from religion to relationship, from darkness to light.

Some things are very clear, however, from this story. First of all, Jesus' dialogue with Nicodemus tells us that...

A RIGHT RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD DOES NOT COME *MERELY* THROUGH RIGHT BELIEFS.

Now, this may be a shock to some people who have been led to think that if you just believe in God everything will be all right in the end. Others think that it takes more than this....that if you just believe in the Bible, or in the creeds of the church, or even that Jesus has come from God. In other words, right thinking *about* God means that one has a right relationship *with* God. But what about Nicodemus? Did he believe these things?

Oh yes, intellectually and religiously, Nicodemus was no slouch! He was one of the most well-known and respected religious leaders of his day. He absolutely believed in God and in the Bible. In fact, being a teacher of the Jews, he had memorized most of the Old Testament. In other words, 'ole Nic was considered a sincere believer, very orthodox, a member of the Pharisees.

Now the Pharisees were a very pious people. They believed in angels, they believed in the Old Testament Scriptures, they believed in the immortality of the soul, they believed in a coming day of judgment and in the resurrection from the dead. In fact, Nicodemus *even believed in Jesus* – as much as he understood about him. Listen to what he says, “Rabbi” (meaning “teacher”) he said, “we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs that you are doing if God were not with him” (John 3:2).

Nicodemus was not only in concluding that Jesus was a man sent from God. Many others had drawn the same conclusion. Look at John 2:23-25:

²³ Now while he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, many people saw the miraculous signs he was doing and believed in his name. ²⁴ But Jesus would not entrust himself to them, for he knew all men. ²⁵ He did not need man's testimony about man, for he knew what was in a man.

Did you catch that? People “believed in his name,” and yet “Jesus would not entrust himself to them.” Why? Because right beliefs, in and of themselves, do not save us from the darkness of our sin. In spite of all of Nicodemus' belief in God, and in the Bible, and even his growing belief in Jesus, Jesus placed his finger on something that was terribly wrong in Nicodemus...and in you and me. It has to do with our human nature and the need to be changed from the inside out. Could it be this morning that you have “believed in his name” and yet Jesus has not yet entrusted himself to you? You see, a right relationship with God does not come by simply having the “right” beliefs.

But the story of Nicodemus also tells us that ...

A RIGHT RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD DOES NOT COME THROUGH RIGHT BEHAVIOIR.

Some may be saying, “Now wait a minute! I thought you became a Christian by believing the right things and behaving in the right way.” Well, that is exactly what Nicodemus thought. He was not only a man who *believed* the right things (at least, to a certain degree), he *did* the right things. In fact, he’s described in these verses as a Jewish religious leader, a “Pharisee.”

The Pharisees had a very strict moral code. If the Scriptures said to pay a tithe to God, they even gave God a tenth of the herbs of their garden. If the Scriptures said not to work on the Sabbath, they would not even pluck a few heads of grain to eat as they walked by a wheat field. They tied a small box, called a *phylactery* containing passages of Scripture, to their forehead so they would not forget the Law of God. Another small box with Scripture in it, called a *mezuzah*, was on the door frames of their homes. They would touch that box every time they would enter or leave the house. They meticulously kept the Law of God and its moral code, but that alone did not give them a right standing with God.

Surprisingly, Jesus had some very strong words for these religious moralists:

“How terrible it will be for you teachers of religious law and you Pharisees. Hypocrites! You are so careful to clean the outside of the cup and the dish, but inside you are filthy – full of greed and self-indulgence! Blind Pharisees! First wash the inside of the cup, and then the outside will become clean too!” Matthew 23:25 (NLT)

The story of Nicodemus highlights for us the difference between “religion” and true relationship with God as described in the Bible. Put it this way. You can summarize every religion of the world with one word – “D-O.” I don’t care if it’s Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam or some other religion, they are all based on *doing* in order to attain some form of “salvation.” And that’s really what *religion* is. Religion is simply man’s best attempt to get to God. And each religious systems is different. In Hinduism, salvation is by reincarnation attained through good works and meditation. In Buddhism, salvation comes through the four noble truths and the eight-fold path to stamp out desire. In Islam, sin is balanced out by the good deeds of obeying the five great “pillars” or duties of man. The problem is that we can never know when we have been good enough. Even worse, the Bible tells us that we can *never* do enough. The Bible says, “For all have sinned; all fall short of God’s glorious standard.” Simply put, the “D-O” plan cannot bring us peace with God. All the religions of the world are like the man who tries to make his stalled boat move by pushing against the mast! He exerts a great amount of effort, but gets nowhere. Why? Because he needs the “wind” of God’s grace. According to the Bible, God just gives you salvation; you don’t *do* anything to earn it.

The way to relationship with God, however, is not spelled “D-O” but “D-O-N-E”. In other words, that which we could never *do* for ourselves, Christ has already *done* for us. He lived the perfect life that we could never live. And He died on the cross to pay for each of our wrongdoings. And now He freely offers us His gift of forgiveness. Put it this way. If you ask, “What can I *do* to be saved?” the Bible responds, “You’re too late to *do* anything. Actually, your

about 2000 years too late! What needed to be done for your salvation has already been done and you can't do anything to improve on God's plan."

By the way, if you could work your way to heaven, can you imagine how miserable it would be once you got there? Everybody would be bragging about how they got there. We'd all be trying to "one up" each other with great stories of what great people we were on earth. That's even what the Bible says. We are not saved by "good work, so that no one can boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9). No, salvation is a free gift. You can't brag about it. You can only accept it and be grateful for it.

People trust in all kinds of things to bring them into a right relationship with God. Some trust in *right beliefs*. Others trust in *right behavior*. And there are many who trust in having the *right birth*...i.e. being physically born into the right family.

A RIGHT RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD DOES NOT COME THROUGH THE RIGHT NATURAL "BIRTH."

The Jews placed a great emphasis on being "children of Abraham." That means, being physically born a Jew. And over time, they came to rely upon this as a guarantee of being accepted by God. In fact, the very word "Jew" comes from the word "Judah," first used in the Bible in 2 Kings 16. The word "Judah," referring to the southernmost tribe of Israel, is built off the Hebrew word meaning "praise to God." For these people it was inconceivable that someone would begin to question their relationship to God. After all, their very name, speaking of their identity, means "praise to God!" You see, the Jews thought that their name was an instant passport to heaven. If you were born a Jew (so they thought), then you had a right relationship with God.

In the same way today, there are many people today who do the same by depending on their "birth label." And unfortunately, their religious *label* becomes their greatest *liability*. Someone may ask, "Are you a Christian? Do you have a right relationship with God?" "Oh yes," they reply, "I've been a Christian all my life! I was *born* a Christian!" Or they may say, "My parents raised me in the church. They were good 'church folk.'" Or they may say, "You know, my great-great-grandfather was a preacher!" as if that had anything to do with it! But here, in one fell swoop, Jesus dismisses any such notion. "That which is born of the flesh is flesh," Jesus says. Your physical birth, even into a very religious family, will get you no where.

What's the answer, then? Well, Jesus and Nicodemus are engaged in this conversation about moving from mere religion to relationship. And suddenly, Jesus throws Nicodemus an intellectual and spiritual "hand grenade" (so to speak). Jesus looks him straight in the eyes and cuts to the chase, "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again."

A RIGHT RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD COMES ONLY THROUGH A RADICAL "NEW BIRTH"

In that one statement Jesus sweeps away all that Nicodemus stood for...his right beliefs, his right behavior and even his "right birth." Nicodemus is offended and his response to Jesus is

somewhat sarcastic: “What do you mean? How can an old man go back into his mother’s womb and be born again?” (John 3:4).

Unfortunately, Nicodemus interprets Jesus’ words in the most literal sense, taking them to the ridiculous extreme. And yet his words are very suggestive: “How can an *old* man be born again?”. When *one is old*, he is set in his ways and those are the ways of religious tradition, moralism, sin and unbelief.

And so Jesus continues: “I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. 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.’” (John 3:5-7).

Jesus informs Nicodemus that he is talking about another kind of birth – not a physical birth, but a spiritual birth. By being born of water, Jesus was referring to the birth water – our physical birth. By being born of the Spirit, he is referring to a spiritual birth that must take place if we are to know God. In fact, the phrase ‘born again’ can also be translated ‘born from above’. Our physical birth originates in the will of our parents; our spiritual birth originates ‘from above’, i.e. from God.

Then Nicodemus asks Jesus what some of you may be asking, “How can this be?”

Jesus never turns aside a seeking sinner, but points that person to the only solution to our problem. And it’s found in that well-known verse, 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.

Several years ago I met a family that had a dog, a terrier, who was quite gifted. In fact, they had taught this dog to pass out gospel tracts. They would put a tract in his mouth and he would go up to a complete stranger, stand on his hind legs, and offer the gospel tract to that person. When the person took the pamphlet, the dog would offer his paw for a handshake! The title of the tract said this: “Dog’s don’t go to heaven, but you can!” Now the Bible doesn’t tell us about “dog heaven,” but it has a lot to say about “people heaven.” And here, it’s called “eternal life.”

How do we have this eternal life? The verse says, “For *God* so loved...” That’s the God of the universe; the God who created you and me. And this God of all creation loves you dearly. “For God *so loved* the world...” We live under friendly skies! In fact, the Bible says, “The Lord longs to be gracious to you” (Isaiah 30:8). It is his nature to bless undeserving people. He’s waiting for you to accept his love and grace. His heart is broken for you and he wants you to come home.

How has he loved us? “God so loved the world (that’s you and me), *that he gave his one and only Son.*” Jesus Christ is not just a man sent from God (as Nicodemus thought). No, he is *God sent as man*. He is God in flesh, given for you and me. How was he given? The Bible says, “But God demonstrated his love for us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8).

The Bible says that between this moment and your death, you have a decision to make. You can either depend on what *you* do to pay for your sin, or you can depend on what Christ has already *done* to pay for you sin. If you're going to take the hit and try to save yourself, then you'll try throughout eternity – separated from God in hell. But there's another option available. Jesus Christ, out of his amazing love, says, "I'll take your rap. I'll take the hit. I'll pay the penalty." And you, the guilty party – on my merits alone – can be forgiven and taken to heaven forever.

That's what he means when he says, "...so that whoever believes in him will not perish but have eternal life." Nicodemus *believed...* to a certain degree. But there is a great difference between intellectual assent and saving faith. Maybe you're here this morning and you believe like Nicodemus believed. You give Jesus an intellectual "nod." You might believe in Jesus like you believe in Charles de Gaulle or Napoleon. You believe that he was an historical figure. The Bible says, "You believe (in this way)? Even the demons believe and shudder" (James 2:19). No, faith in Jesus Christ means more than an intellectual nod to what God has done for you and me.

John, who may have been standing with Jesus observing this conversation with Nicodemus, writes in John 1:12, "But as many as received him, to them he gave the power to become children of God." To believe in Jesus is to *receive* Jesus. Genuine faith is receiving Jesus Christ as the forgiver of our sins and as the leader of our lives.

When did this happen to you? If you're saying, "Uh oh – I don't know," it might be that you've never really believed in Jesus Christ as your savior from sin. The great news is that you can do that right now. If you believe today – in your head and heart – that Jesus Christ is the Son of God and that he died in your place to pay the penalty of your sin, you have the promise of eternal life. To help seal that decision, I would like to lead you in a prayer right now. This can be an expression of your faith in what Jesus Christ has done for you:

- Dear God, I recognize my need for you in my life. I have sinned. And more than that, I am a sinner and far from you. But I thank you today that you have provided a way of salvation. Thank you for sending your Son, Jesus Christ, to die in my place. And now, I accept this offer of salvation. I receive you today as the forgiver of my sin and the leader of my life. Thank you for saving me and changing me. Amen.