

Jesus: The Great Teacher
John 3:1-3
The Gospel According to John
Series #12

Introduction: Take your Bible and join me in John chapter 3, the Gospel of John, chapter 3.

As we open our Bibles this morning, we open them to one of the most important sections of John's Gospel for us. All of this gospel record about Jesus is important for us, but in these next few verses in John 3 we find Jesus interacting with a man who is so remarkably similar to so many within the church at large. So, it is in this man named Nicodemus that the Lord gives us a mirror to see into our own soul. Which obviously makes this section such an important one for each of us. Not only that, but we also find in John 3 spiritual truths about conversion which often are only understood by many with a surface level understanding. So, we need to dig in and learn from our Lord in these next many weeks what it means to be born from above – or as some would say – to be born again.

What we find in our text for this morning is the initial encounter between Jesus and Nicodemus. And we will see that the teacher of Israel – Nicodemus – is the one who will be taught here by the greatest of teachers – Jesus himself. And what he teaches Nicodemus is a never-changing truth that we must all understand, know, and experience. If we are to enter into the Kingdom of God, we must be born from above. That is Jesus' key message to this very religious man. Let's read the text, starting in 2:23 and we will read down to verse 8. *Read 2:23-3:8.*

Last week we saw that the crowd had an initial, or even a partial, belief in Jesus. But it was a false belief. It was a belief that was based upon Jesus' signs. And once that belief was tested by Jesus' teaching, many of them walked away – as we saw by looking at chapter 6. They wanted a Messiah – an anointed one – one sent from God – who would do what they wanted. They wanted a Messiah of their own imagination and desire. They wanted a Messiah they could control. And when they saw this Jesus show up on the scene and perform these many miraculous signs, they got extremely excited that this might finally be the Messiah they had been hoping for. His signs confirmed for them that he was capable of being that Messiah. But, Jesus knew them better than they knew themselves. He saw their faith for what it was. He knew what was truly in mankind and he knew that their faith was a temporary and false faith. So, he did not entrust himself to them. He did not have faith in their faith. He did not go along with their plan to make him king and overthrow Rome.

And what was true generally of the crowd at the end of chapter 2 is now true specifically of this one man in chapter 3. I showed you that last week, how the pronouns went from plural in verse 24 to singular in verse 25 to prepare us for Jesus' conversation with this one man – Nicodemus. Jesus knows Nicodemus. He knows what is in his heart. He sees his true need. He understands

his heart condition. He sees through the accolades of others. His understanding of Nicodemus is not clouded by the man's accomplishments, religious activity, schooling, knowledge of the Scriptures, ability to rule, or status in society. Jesus saw him really and truly. And this is further undeniable evidence of Jesus' divine nature. He is God in the flesh. And he sees you and I just as truly and just as clearly as he saw Nicodemus. In verse 1 in our text we get this description of the man, Nicodemus. And then in verse 2 we get a glimpse into his heart as he seeks out Jesus and speaks to him. And then in verse 3 we get Jesus' clear assessment of Nicodemus coupled with the only hope anyone has for entering into the Kingdom of God.

I. The Status of the Seeker – vs. 1

- a. So, in verse 1 we might say that John gives us the status of the seeker. He tells us his name, the religious group he's a part of, and his political influence as a ruler of the people. And these are not just innocuous details that don't really matter. This is setting the stage for his interaction with Jesus. This is no small fry that is seeking this conversation with Jesus. He is in the top crust of society. He is highly accomplished academically. There is evidence that he from a very wealthy family. He is among the most widely respected men in all of Israel – he really is the fancy pants big shot of his day.
- b. John tells us that he was a Pharisee. When we think of Pharisees, we think immediately of another word which has become synonymous with Pharisee. What is it? Hypocrite! We think that way because that is exactly what Jesus exposed them to be through his ministry. We see this particularly in Matthew's gospel where there is this clear and forceful confrontation between Jesus and the Pharisees which culminates in Matthew 23 with Jesus publicly condemning them for their hypocrisy. They wouldn't allow a woman to pluck a gray hair on the Sabbath, and they would tithe their dill and their mint and the cumin but didn't ever deal with their true self – their heart. They were white-washed tombs that looked clean and aesthetically pleasing on the outside but were full of dead men's bones on the inside.
- c. But that is not at all how they were perceived by the majority of the people when Jesus arrives in Jerusalem in John 2. The Pharisees were the most respected group of religious leaders in Jewish society. Their movement was a little over a hundred years old by the time Jesus arrived on the scene. Their movement arose during the horrific and godless reign of Antiochus Epiphanes who loved to persecute the Jews. And through that persecution he expanded the Hellenistic influence upon the Jewish people. And so, the Hasidim was a movement that grew up in resistance to this persecution and in resistance to losing the Jewish faith. The Pharisees started out of the Hasidim movement, and they were the purist – the puritans of the Jewish religion you might say. They were the separatists. They were fighting to preserve and conserve the Old Testament way of life. They took their marching orders from Mosaic Law and they traced their principles of law keeping back to Ezra. To preserve the keeping of the Law they created a fence around the Law by coming up with their own laws. These laws were to keep the super spiritual from ever getting close to breaking the Mosaic Law. So, the Law

says there was to be no work on the Sabbath day – and they put a fence around that Law and said that you can't pull out a gray hair or gargle with vinegar to help with a sore throat because those would both be considered work – you could swallow the vinegar, but you couldn't gargle with it!

- d. They were expert law keepers, you might say – at least in their minds, and in the minds of the people. These were the guys who were super spiritual and super serious about obeying God. And so, they had the massive respect of the people.
- e. He was also a ruler over the people – meaning that he was a part of the Sanhedrin. This is the body of Jewish men – 71 in number who would rule over the affairs of Jewish society. The Sanhedrin was made up representatives from the Pharisees and from the Sadducees. According to Josephus – who was himself a Pharisee – the Pharisees numbered about 6000 men. And so, to be one of the Pharisees selected to serve on the Sanhedrin was a high honor. It also meant that Nicodemus had great power in society. He was a man who garnered high respect and who wielded great power.
- f. And he was likely from a wealthy Jewish family. Did you notice that he has a Greek name – Nicodemus? That likely indicates that he was given a Greek name so that he could be trained in the best schools available, which further indicates that he came from a wealthy family. Of course, we can't be totally sure of that, but nonetheless, Nicodemus is a heavyweight in the Jewish community.
- g. If there was someone that should represent humanity in this interchange with Jesus – it is Nicodemus. He is the best of the best. He is the wisest of the wise. In verse 10 Jesus will refer to him as the teacher of Israel. He is smart, rich, powerful, respected, religious – he's the guy we would all send to go to Jesus with our questions and concerns.

II. The Desire of the Seeker – vs. 2

- a. But we have to ask, what is Nicodemus after? Why does he come to Jesus? Well, verse 2 gives us some insight into that question. He comes to Jesus at night and he makes this kind of strange proclamation to Jesus about Jesus. He speaks to him in the plural – like he is representing a larger group than just himself – and he says to Jesus – we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him.
- b. So, by his very words we can tell that he thought highly of Jesus, and this was largely due to his signs that he had been working in Jerusalem. Nicodemus had seen or heard about Jesus' cleansing of the Temple and had seen some other miraculous signs he had done – and now was seeking after him sometime during the night. As one who took the Law and the Prophets seriously, I am sure that Nicodemus was very much anticipating the coming of the Messiah – of David's greater son who would be sent from Heaven. He had heard the message of John the Baptist and now he was seeing the works of Christ, and he is wondering what is going on. Implied in his statement in verse 2 is this question of – are you something more? Is there more to you than just a great teacher sent from God?
- c. And we know that this was more than just an intel operation by the Pharisees through Nicodemus. He was not there to challenge Jesus or to condemn him. We

know that because he came at night. He came under the cover of darkness to seek out the truth about this Jesus. We know that in John's Gospel, night and darkness have a spiritual dimension to them as well. Nicodemus coming at night is not just that he came when it was dark physically, but it is also pointing to Nicodemus' spiritual state – that he is in darkness. Which is quite the statement when you consider who Nicodemus was – a Pharisee of the Pharisees – a Jew of the Jews – a ruler of the Jews. One of the most well educated, spiritually earnest, pure and holy conduct guys around – he's in darkness?

- d. Yes, he is, but it is obvious that he is seeking after something. He sees something in Jesus that compels him to seek out Jesus in the cover of darkness. He has a high view of Jesus. Way higher than his other Pharisee friends. As we work our way through John's Gospel, we will see in chapter 7 where the Pharisees will call Jesus a false Christ. In 8:13 they will flat out say that Jesus' testimony about himself is not true. In 8:48 they will charge him with being a Samaritan – or a half-breed Jew – and they will say that he is possessed by a demon. In 9:24 they will just flat out say that he is a sinner. And in chapters 18 and 19 they will call him a blasphemer worthy of death!
- e. But Nicodemus has a different view. He calls him Rabbi – which is quite the statement of respect coming from the man who was *the* Rabbi in Israel at the time. He says that he knows he is a teacher who has come from God because of the signs he is doing. So, there is obviously a deep respect that Nicodemus has for Jesus. And he seems to be expecting something great out of Jesus.

III. The Answer for the Seeker – vs. 3

- a. And how does Jesus respond? Well, remember, he sees Nicodemus in a way that no one else does which compels him to give an answer to Nicodemus that no one expects. It's kind of a strange interaction when you look at it at first. Nicodemus comes with these pretty flattering words, and doesn't even really get a question out, and then Jesus replies with this undeniable truth statement about entering the Kingdom of God. In the NASB it says that Jesus answered and said these words to Nicodemus, which is a more accurate representation of the original. There is more going on here than just the exchange of a conversation. Jesus knows Nicodemus. He knows what Nicodemus is seeking. He knows Nicodemus' question, even when Nicodemus hasn't asked one. And so, he answers him with this clear truth statement.
- b. He says "Truly, truly" which is only used in John and it is used to mark off a clear and undeniable statement of Jesus of unalterable truth. This is a universal and unchanging truth that is about to come next – truly, truly. And what is that universally true statement? Jesus says, "I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." Jesus lays out for Nicodemus the one thing that must happen before he, or anyone else, can see the kingdom of God. As the conversation develops you can see that Nicodemus asks Jesus two questions in response to this teaching. He asks him in verse 4 – "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" After Jesus explains further what he means by being born again in verses 5-8

Nicodemus asks his second question in verse 9 – “How can these things be?” And Jesus answers him in verse 10 and makes clear that Nicodemus should have been able to understand if he truly knew the Old Testament Scriptures as the teacher of Israel. In other words, Nicodemus is completely caught off guard by Jesus’ answer in verse 3 and can’t make sense of it, but should have been able to if he really understood the Scriptures.

- c. Before we get to what it means to be born again, what did Jesus mean by not seeing the kingdom of God? Did you notice that Nicodemus didn’t struggle with that part of Jesus’ answer? He apparently knew what Jesus was talking about when he referenced the Kingdom of God. It was well entrenched in the Jewish mind. They believed the prophecies of Isaiah and Daniel that there would be an end to the current human age and this end would be brought about by the appearance of the Messiah who would judge the wicked, overthrow the unrighteous rulers of the world and usher in a Messianic age in which he would rule from the throne of David in Jerusalem. It would be a time of unprecedented peace and righteousness under the rule of the glorious Son of man. The synoptic Gospels actually talk a lot more about the kingdom that John’s gospel does. In Matthew 19:28, for example, Jesus says this to his disciples – “Truly, I say to you, in the new world, when the Son of Man will sit on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.”
- d. This captures so much of the Biblical teaching on the coming Kingdom and it also captures so much of the Jewish hope. Did you notice that Jesus said in the new world? In the original that is a regenerated world – or a world that has been born again. And that is what the Jews expected when the Messiah would come. He would bring this holy and unstoppable rebirth to the world. He would cast out the old and all things would become new. And all who were Jews would enter into this Kingdom under the reign of their Jewish King – the Messiah – the Son of David and the Son of Man. Every Jew was seeking after this Kingdom age – they were longing for their Messiah to appear and to bring in this reborn world.
- e. And here is Jesus on the scene talking like the Messiah and performing signs like the Messiah. And Nicodemus must be wondering – is this guy more than just a good teacher sent from God? Is there more to come? Is he about to bring this great regeneration of the world in order to establish his kingdom? If he is, then it would be best if the teacher of Israel knew those plans, don’t you think? Maybe that is why Nicodemus came under the cover of darkness. He wanted to find out what Jesus’ real plans were so that he could be a key partner among the people to bring about this reborn world and this Messianic age. Every Jew would enter, in Nicodemus’ mind, and he would be among the first, right? I mean, he is the teacher of Israel. He is the best of the best. He is in the Who’s Who of Israel.
- f. But Jesus drops this bombshell of eternal truth in Nicodemus’ world. In order to get into that Kingdom, you must be born again. It is not just the world that will be regenerated, but it is each and every soul who gains entrance must be regenerated. What a significant statement this was to Nicodemus’ ears. He was

relying in large part upon his birth into a Jewish family, his upbringing in the faith of Judaism, his own pursuit of a holy life through the instruction of the Pharisees, and his own good works as the basis of entrance into the Kingdom. And here Jesus says to him – you must be born again. You must start all over if you are going to get into the kingdom of God. It's a show stopping statement for Nicodemus.

- g. If you look at verse 4 you can get a sense for how he understood it – or better, how he misunderstood it. He asks how it is that he is supposed to be born again. He obviously cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb as an old man and be born a second time, so how is this going to work. Nicodemus certainly knew that there was some spiritual element to what Jesus was saying, but he focuses on the physical element. How is he supposed to be born again physically? It's impossible.
- h. Because Nicodemus understood Jesus to be saying "born again," this is how most translations translate that Greek phrase. But the specific word for again can also mean "from above." It is not the normal word for "again" which unambiguously means again. Rather it is a word which can mean either "again" or "from above." And John does this a lot in this book doesn't he? He uses a term which on the surface means one thing, but when you dig deeper it means more in that it conveys a deeper spiritual truth. And that is what is happening here. He uses this same word 4 more times in his gospel account. He uses it in verse 7 where he tells Nicodemus – "Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.'"
 - i. And then he uses it in 31 – look down there. The text says, speaking of Jesus, "He who comes from above (*that's our word*) is above all. He who is of the earth belongs to the earth and speaks in an earthly way. He who comes from heaven is above all." So that is an obvious use which means "from above" and not "again."
 - ii. Then it isn't used until chapter 19 when Jesus is on trial before Pilate and Pilate is trying to get Jesus to answer his questions and threatens him with his authority to put him to death. And Jesus responds in verse 11 by saying, "You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given you from above." That's our word – and it obviously means "from above" and not "again."
 - iii. And then a few verses later, as Jesus is being crucified, the soldiers divide his clothes equally among them, but the tunic they had to cast lots for because it was seamless, "woven in one piece from top to bottom." And that is our word used there for "from top." This obviously can't mean again, but it means from the top of the tunic.
- i. So, that proves that John's use of this word typically means "from above" and not "again." Which returns our attention to Jesus' words in verse 3 to try to figure out what he meant. Nicodemus understood him to mean again, but he obviously meant more because being physically born again is impossible. So, in verse 5 he further explains that to be born again means to be born of water and the Spirit. We'll delve more into that next week, but just note for now that this is a spiritual

birth and not a physical one. This is a work of the Spirit of God upon us that is necessary for our entrance into the kingdom of God. Jesus is not telling Nicodemus that he needs a new physical birth, he is telling him that he needs a spiritual birth from above – from God himself. Nicodemus was not born with the right to enter the Kingdom of God. He had not earned that right through his zeal for obeying the Old Testament Law. He does not get in through his high position of respected authority over others. He is completely helpless to enter into the kingdom of God of his own accord. There is nothing for him to do to make this happen. As Lenski says of this verse, “Spiritual birth is something one undergoes, not something he produces.”¹

- j. We’ll look more closely at this next week, but this is the further explanation by Jesus of the words of John 1:12-13 – “But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.” This is what Jesus is telling Nicodemus – you are not physically born into the kingdom of God. You must be born of God – from above. This is a spiritual birth that is needed. It is a supernatural birth that is accomplished according to the will and purpose of God. It is a birth that we cannot control or make happen or dictate to have happen to others. It is singularly a work of God by His Spirit to bring us from spiritual death into spiritual life through faith in the work of his Son.

Conclusion: So, friend, what is true of Nicodemus is true for me and for you today. You are not born a Christian. You do not earn your way into being a Christian. If anyone could bypass this process it was Nicodemus. We understand that the adulteress women of chapter 8 needed to be born from above – she needed a complete reset by God. But we tend to give people like Nicodemus a pass. He doesn’t really need to be born again because he is so spiritual and godly already. But Jesus says no – anyone who seeks to enter the kingdom of God must be born again by water and the Spirit. Everyone is born the first time outside the kingdom of God. To gain entrance you must be born again, from above.

So many of us are pictured in Nicodemus, aren’t we? How easy it is to grow up in our sanitized Christian environment – which is a wonderful gift from God – I am not minimizing that at all. But how easy it is for us to grow up as a Christian. And I have even heard people say – I have always been a Christian. We are fed truth and we learn the Scriptures from our youngest of days – as we should. And it is easy to grow up in the church and be deceived by our flesh and by the enemy of our soul that we are good because of this – that things between us and God are good because we have this good and conservative life. And we can easily grow up with this subtle trust in our good status and our good works and our good life. We would say that we are Christians, and we might even have a time where we point to as believing in Jesus – but really, under it all, we are just resting upon our own good works – just like Nicodemus. And Jesus says, you must be born from above. You must come to the understanding that your Christian upbringing and your conservative home and your affiliation with the church do not gain you

¹ As quoted in John MacArthur, *The Gospel of John*, pg. 103.

entrance into the kingdom of God. These are not the tickets through the gateway of Heaven. You must be born again.

And this is the challenge of parenting in a Christian home, isn't it? How easy it is for us to take our spirituality and make it external and focus on behaviors and even on truths to be believed, but never to take it to the inner man – to the spirit of our children. How easy it is for our kids to grow up thinking that they are good with God because their parents are Christians, and they go to a good church and they live an incredibly sheltered life. How easy it is for them to put their confidence and trust in those things to gain them entrance into Heaven. And then they get out on their own and the world, the flesh, and the devil have unrestrained access to their hearts and pretty soon they walk away from the church and from the faith once for all delivered to the saints. And we are left wondering, what happened? Why did they leave the faith of their parents? Is it because we didn't teach them good apologetics? Is it because we didn't teach them how to know and defend the truth of the Scriptures beginning in Genesis? Is it because we were hypocritical in some aspect of our own spiritual life and this gave them justification to shuck it all? Well, those all might have been excuses along the way, but the core reason is – they were never born again. They never had this spiritual life from above.

So, friend, no matter how long you have thought you are a Christian – how do you know you will enter into the kingdom of God? What is the basis for that hope? Can you give the testimony of Paul to Titus?

- But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, ⁵ he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, ⁶ whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, ⁷ so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life. – Titus 3:4-7