

## **Heavenly Love**

John 3:1-21

This morning we continue our new series, “See How He Loved Them: Meditations on the Heart of Jesus.” And our goal this fall is to slow down and meditate on the heart of Jesus as it’s revealed in his interaction with others in the Gospels. As we talked about last week, so often our relationship with Jesus can get stuck in the theoretical. We have an *informational* relationship with Jesus—which is not unimportant. Sound doctrine is essential to knowing Christ. But Jesus is more than a doctrine. *He’s a person*. A person whose heart is filled with love for us. And one of the best ways to see his heart of love is by looking carefully at how he treated others.

And we’re going to do so this morning in the Gospel of John, ch. 3. The story of Nicodemus and the heavenly love of Jesus.

Now in John’s Gospel, Jesus has recently gone public. He performed his first public sign (or miracle) at the wedding in Cana—turning water into wine (2:1-12). That’s followed by the story of Jesus cleansing the temple, driving out the money changers and those who had turned God’s house into a shopping mall (2:13-22). And there too, the Jews ask him for a sign to prove himself (2:18). Jesus answers them by alluding to his upcoming death and resurrection. But he continues performing miracles, [2:23-25] and as ch. 2:23 tells us, “many believed in his name when they saw the signs that he was doing.” At least kind of. “But Jesus on his part did not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people and needed no one to bear witness about man, for he himself knew what was in man” (2:24-25). The people were attracted to Jesus because of his signs, but Jesus knew what was really going on in their hearts.

And one such man, intrigued by Jesus and his signs, decides to seek him out. Chapter 3:1: “Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, ‘Rabbi, 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’” (3:1-2).

Now if you compare Nicodemus to the man we met last week in Mark 2, the leper, they couldn’t be more opposite. The leper came to Jesus in desperation, humility, and faith. He was at the bottom of Jewish society’s barrel. Nicodemus is at the top—part of the religious elite. He’s a Pharisee, the religious leaders who were entrusted with teaching and guarding Israel’s Law. And as a “ruler of the Jews,” he was most likely a member of the Sanhedrin, the highest legal body in Israel’s society. And while he is intrigued by Jesus, he’s doesn’t exactly sense a need for him. He’s certainly more open to him than most Pharisees. He doesn’t accuse him of performing signs by Satan’s power, as some had done (cf. Matt. 12:22-32); rather he acknowledges his unique connection to God. But he’s cautious. Notice how he goes to him *at night*—probably to avoid being seen with him, or perhaps to avoid the interruptions common with crowds. And he’s pretty

self-confident. He's not going to Jesus to learn from him. He's basically giving Jesus an opportunity to explain himself to someone who already has the kingdom figured out.

So what does it look like for Jesus to love Nicodemus where he is at? For the leper, Jesus showed a willing love. He was willing to move toward him and rehumanize him, to restore him by dealing with the problem, and then redirect him from getting too excited about small things. What Nicodemus needs is a heavenly love—one that won't let him stay trapped in his earthly categories, but exposes his real need for radical transformation, and then meets that need through the cross and resurrection.

And we see Jesus' heavenly love revealed in three ways. First he resets the conversation. Second, he exposes our real need. And then third, he meets that need through his own death and resurrection. Let's look first at how he resets the conversation.

### **Heavenly Love Resets the Conversation**

When Nicodemus compliments Jesus in v. 2, he's asking an implied question. "Rabbi, 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." So . . . *who are you?*<sup>1</sup> That's what he wants to know. How do you fit into the kingdom of God I know so well?

But notice how Jesus doesn't answer his implied question. Instead he creates this extremely awkward moment by changing the subject. "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God" (v. 3).

Why do that? He was so gentle with the leper. Why throw out some evasive, mysterious comment? It seems kind of rude and snobbish.

But the problem with Nicodemus is that he thinks he knows things that he doesn't actually know. He thinks he has the kingdom of God figured out, such that what he really needs is simply for Jesus to explain himself and how he fits in. He thinks he should be driving the conversation.

But if he's going to see Jesus, they need to be having an entirely different conversation. One that he's not actually capable of having yet, because despite his certainty as a teacher of the Law, his earthly categories aren't even capable of comprehending the real nature of the God's heavenly kingdom.

I recently asked my five-year-old where babies come from. With great confidence, she informed me that Jesus creates the baby, puts it in mommy's tummy, then mommy has the baby. And that's all there is to it! To which I said, 'Amen, that is exactly what happens.'

Now, if I were to try and offer my five-year-old a little more scientific description (which of course I wouldn't do at that age; in fact Carissa and I fight over who has to explain all this to our kids when they hit puberty)—but if I were to try for some silly reason to explain zygotes and embryos and other things, she wouldn't have a clue what I'm talking about. She just doesn't have the categories to think at that level of scientific understanding. She's operating at a five-year-old

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<sup>1</sup> See D.A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (PNTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 187.

understanding of the world (which is exactly where she needs to be, and frankly, I'd be just fine if she stayed there for quite some time on this issue). And she operates there with *great conviction and certainty*; she has this figured. (By the way, if you want to know what happened to the dinosaurs, she's got some pretty strong convictions about that as well). It's awfully cute, but it's not completely informed.

This is where Nicodemus is living with respect to God's kingdom. He assumes he has it figured out and he holds his understanding with great conviction and certainty, such that all he needs is for Jesus to explain himself and how he fits in.

And we all do this. We all have certain ideas about what God's kingdom is like, and we can hold these ideas with great confidence and conviction, only to find ourselves confused or even shocked when Jesus says something or does something that *doesn't seem very Christian to us*.

For many today, the kingdom of God has become so enmeshed with particular political agendas, both on the right and on the left, that it's barely distinguishable. For some, advancing the kingdom means protecting the interests of America, God's country. Which means minimizing the influence of foreigners whose cultures dilute our heritage, or whose presence becomes a drain on our society. Then we see Jesus showing kindness to the stranger and the alien (e.g., Jn. 4; Mk. 7:24-30), and telling us to do likewise (e.g., Lk. 10:25-37), and we scratch our heads and ask him to explain himself.

For some on the other side of the aisle, the kingdom is all about love. And love means laws that ensure everyone is unconditionally affirmed in whatever they do, and however they feel—especially with regard to sex and gender. And then Jesus starts preaching against sexual immorality (e.g. Matt. 5:27-32) and reminding us how marriage is rooted in God's creational design of one man and one woman (Matt. 19:1-12), and all of a sudden Jesus sounds pretty "un-Christian." We're not sure we can be seen with him in public. We might have to go to him at night and get him to explain himself.

For others, the kingdom of God is less about politics and more about religious practice. You keep the commandments, go through the motions, pay your dues; you read your Bible daily, you pray and keep your life clean (or at least cleaner than their life). Then we see Jesus eating dinner with tax collectors and sinners (Matt. 9:9-13), and we're outraged. We want an explanation.

For still others, the kingdom of God is about humanitarian ethics. It's just doing good for your neighbor, defending the cause of the marginalized, advancing the brotherhood of all humanity. Then you overhear Jesus saying something like, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me," (Jn. 14:6), and we think, 'that's not very Christian.' That's so exclusive. He must have meant something else. He'd better explain himself.

It's easy to think that we've got God's kingdom figured out, such that what we simply need is for Jesus just to explain himself. How he fits in, how he's relevant. And of course, we'll be the judge of whether or not he does.

But God's thoughts are not our thoughts. And God's ways are not our ways. We have our earthly categories, but God operates from heaven. As he says in Isaiah 55, "For as the heavens are higher

than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts” (Isa. 55:9). And until we realize that, there’s no conversation to be had.

And so in his love, Jesus resets the conversation. He grabs the emergency break and Nicodemus’ train of thought comes to a screeching halt as Jesus redirects him onto a different track, where, second, he will expose his real need.

### Heavenly Love Exposes our Real Need for Radical Transformation

Jesus isn’t just saying something obscure to get attention. In changing the subject to spiritual birth, he’s exposing a hidden problem and the real need of Nicodemus and everyone who would see God’s kingdom—the need for radical transformation, for new spiritual birth.

Look again at the conversation. Verse 3: “Jesus answered him, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.’”

Again, Nicodemus is thrown off. Not only because he thought he had the kingdom figured out and now Jesus says he can’t even see it, but because he has *no clue* what Jesus is talking about. “Nicodemus said to him, ‘How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?’” (v. 4). He takes his words uber-literally. So Jesus reiterates his point. He says it again in a slightly different way: “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God” (v. 5).

Now Nicodemus isn’t the only one confused on this second point. There’s lots of discussion on what it means here to be born ‘of water and the Spirit.’ Some think that water refers to natural birth (amniotic fluid), and spirit to spiritual birth (cf. v. 6). That’s unlikely because “water” just doesn’t get used as a metaphor for that in the Bible. Others suggest it’s talking about baptism, which is also highly unlikely, first because the emphasis here is on the work of Christ and the power of the Spirit, not on a ritual, and second, because Nicodemus could hardly be chided for misunderstanding Jesus (as he is in v. 10), if he simply missed an allusion to a Christian baptismal rite that hadn’t come into practice yet.<sup>2</sup>

Far more likely, “born of water and Spirit” in v. 5 is just another way of saying “born again” or “born from above” in v. 3. There’s a parallel construction between the two phrases:

- Unless one is **born again** he cannot **see** the kingdom of God (3)
- Unless one is **born of water and the Spirit**, he cannot **enter** the kingdom of God (5)<sup>3</sup>

It’s talking about the same thing—*new spiritual birth*. And missing *that* point is something Nicodemus could be chided for, because as “the teacher of Israel,” he should have known that according to Israel’s Scripture, that’s what God’s people truly need, and what God himself promised to do for them (v. 10). Jesus is using the language and imagery of God’s Old Testament promise to bring new life to his rebellious people. Promises like Ezekiel 36. God says:

I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will

<sup>2</sup> See D.A. Carson, 191-196.

<sup>3</sup> This observation owes to Carson, 194-195.

put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules. (Ezek. 36:25-27)

What Nicodemus thought he needed was proof of Jesus' relevance. What he really needed was the same thing ancient Israel needed, and what the whole world needs—*radical transformation from above*. When God made this earth, he made humans in his image, to be his children and royal servants of his kingdom. There's an intrinsic dignity and beauty in humanity. But our rebellion against God has spoiled that beauty, and wars against that dignity. It clouds our vision of good and evil. It moves us to hurt one another and take advantage of one another. Worst of all, it severs our relationship with God, turning us from children into enemies, hell bent on removing God from the throne and replacing him with something else. Therefore sin brings us under God's holy condemnation. We are deserving of his judgment. And no ethnic heritage, no human effort, no humanitarian service, no political party, no moral reform, and no religious ritual can cleanse us of our sin or replace our sinful hearts.

We need deliverance from above. And so our real need is to be born again. To be cleansed of our sin, and to have our hearts replaced and renewed by God. As Jesus says in v. 6, natural birth makes us part of a human family, but only spiritual birth can make us part of God's family. A secret birth that you can't see happen, you can only see the evidence of it. Like the wind that "blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit" (v. 8). Only then can we see and enter God's kingdom, and experience the life he envisions for us.

But Nicodemus still doesn't get it. He says in v. 9, "How can these things be?" How is this possible? Like a five-year-old trying to explain human birth, he just doesn't have the categories to comprehend spiritual birth. But it's not an intellectual problem. It's a spiritual blindness problem. It's a lack of humility and a lack of submission to the one who *actually* knows what he thinks he knows. Verse 11: "Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of *what we know*, and bear witness to what we have seen, but you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things?" (3:11-12).

"Many believed in his name when they saw the signs that he was doing. But Jesus on his part did not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people" (Jn. 2:23-24).

It feels like a pretty cold shut down. Nicodemus comes to Jesus, and he just dunks on him, like Shaq playing a local high school team.

But notice how Jesus has moved him. Nicodemus started off knowing everything. And now he knows nothing. Which is *progress* when you don't know what you think you know!

It's a long road for some of us. But Jesus is patient in bringing us there, not willing to leave us trapped in our earthly categories. He knew his words would be lost if he just launched into an explanation of the kingdom and salvation and the cross and faith. He had to first expose Nicodemus' real need, and give him space to sit there in it, until he could see his need for Jesus.

And Jesus often loves us in the same way, especially when we think we've got him figured out. We know how things are supposed to work and we get frustrated when God doesn't get with the

picture. But maybe things don't make sense or he's not answering our prayers because he wants us to sit in our need, until we see our need of him. Like the church in Laodicea in Revelation 3: "For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing, not realizing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked" (Rev. 3:17). And it's his heavenly love that leaves us there until we can see past this earth.

It's hard to experience that. It's sometimes harder to emulate it. To reflect Christ's heavenly love in letting others sit in their need, their confusion and disenchantment, until they see their need of Jesus. We want to dive in and rescue them from their circumstances, or grab them by the shoulders and shake them into faith. And of course love means bearing one another's burdens. But sometimes we have to make space for people to come to grips with their brokenness. We have to make space for them to wrestle out what they truly believe, rather than pushing them for a decision. Sometimes, as Paul puts it, we have to "hand them over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh," until they come to the end of themselves (1 Cor. 5:5; 1 Tim. 1:20). We have to entrust them to the loving discipline of the Lord—who (though it's easy to forget) loves them far more deeply than we do, who knows them far more infinitely, and is far more capable of opening their eyes. He's the only one who can do it.

Sometimes we need to sit in our need and reflect on it, until we join Nicodemus in asking, How is this possible? How can God's Spirit cleanse *my* sin, when I deserve his judgment? How can I ever be acceptable to God, or ever serve him faithfully, or enjoy his blessing, or be in his holy presence, when my heart thinks so little of him and so much of myself? When I have said the kinds of things that I've said? Thought the things that I've thought? Done the things that I've done, and not done the things that I should have? How is this kind of new birth and new life possible for an unworthy sinner like me?

And then we're ready to understand heavenly things. And though Nicodemus is not yet there in the conversation, Jesus does go on to offer an explanation, of how heavenly love not only exposes our real need for radical transformation, but *meets that need* through the cross and resurrection.

### **Heavenly Love Meets Our Real Need through the Death and Resurrection of Christ**

We need spiritual transformation from above. And there's only one person qualified to give it. Verse 13: "No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life" (3:13-15).

How is new spiritual birth possible? It's possible only because the Son of Man, God's eternal Son, who sat in the heavenly courts with his Father from all eternity and then descended to earth, taking on human flesh—it's possible *only* because this Son will be *lifted up*—crucified. Jesus alludes here to an event described in Numbers 21, where ancient Israel faced a deadly plague that God sent on them to punish their sinful rebellion in the wilderness. Israel found safety and refuge from God's wrath by looking to the bronze serpent that Moses made and lifted up. It's a picture of salvation entirely dependent on God. Israel didn't do anything; they simply had to look up in faith. In a similar way, rescue from God's wrath against our sin and receiving new and eternal

life in its place, is only possible for those who look to Jesus, God's Son, who was eventually lifted up for us when he died on the cross for our sin.

Jesus doesn't just expose Nicodemus' need, he's the one who meets it. And he meets it out of God's heavenly love. Verse 16:

“For God *so loved the world*, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.” (3:16-17)

God meets our need out of love. It wasn't frustration that moved him to send Jesus, or exasperation at our ongoing foolishness or sin. It wasn't some way of scoring points or putting us in our place—dunking on Nicodemus or us. It was *love*—heavenly love. A love we don't have the categories to comprehend until God opens our eyes. And Jesus, in his love, obeyed the will of his Father and willingly gave his life for us. He didn't come into the world to condemn the world; he came into the world to save it. Have we sat in our need long enough to see our need for his salvation?

Apart from faith in Jesus, we remain under God's condemnation. Verse 18 tells us that “whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son” (cf. 3:36). But through *faith* in Jesus, by taking God at his Word, by believing that Jesus is the Son of God, that he died for our sins and rose from the dead, by placing the full weight of our hope and faith in him, there is safety and rescue from the punishment. “Whoever believes in him is not condemned.”

It's not about trying harder to make it up to God through hard work or religious ritual; it's not about figuring out how to create radical transformation from within, as though we can regenerate ourselves. It's about believing Christ's testimony about himself and his kingdom, and trusting in Jesus, that his life, death, and resurrection for you are enough.

Heavenly love won't let us stay trapped in earthly categories, but exposes our real need for radical transformation *and* meets that need through the cross and resurrection of Christ.

So where are you this morning? Scratching your head with Nicodemus? Sitting in your need wondering where God is at? Rejoicing in new birth? Wrestling to walk in that new life? Resting in his love? Desperate to tell others?

Wherever you are, Jesus' love is for you. He's proven that through the cross. But if you're still confused, don't lose heart. Nicodemus didn't get it during this story. He walked away more confused than when he arrived. He wasn't there yet. But we meet him again in the Gospel of John. In ch. 7, he nearly gets himself in trouble with the rest of the Pharisees, for advocating that Jesus get a fair hearing and trial before they arrest him and execute him (7:50-51). He might not get it yet, but he can't escape the presence of God in Jesus.

Then later in ch. 19, after the crucifixion, where Jesus was lifted up that he might draw all men to himself (cf. 12:32), there were two men who came and took his body to anoint it and to bury it—Joseph of Arimathea, and “Nicodemus . . . who earlier had come to Jesus by night, came bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds in weight” (19:39). We don't know when the penny dropped, but we know he became a follower of Christ. And I can't help

but wonder if when he saw the Son of Man lifted up, just like that bronze serpent in the wilderness, if it all made sense to him. If his earthly categories finally gave way to God's heavenly love.

Oh that they would give way for all of us. That we would see Jesus. That we would see his love. That we would see in him our need for radical spiritual transformation. That we would receive his testimony, and believe in him for eternal life. "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life" (3:16).