

A Late-Night Evangelism Visit

- I. Nicodemus had some wrong ideas
- II. Jesus had some good news to share

³ Now there was a Pharisee, a man named Nicodemus who was a member of the Jewish ruling council. ² He came to Jesus at night and said, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him.” ³ Jesus replied, “Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.”

⁴ “How can someone be born when they are old?” Nicodemus asked. “Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother’s womb to be born!”

⁵ Jesus answered, “Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are 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.’ 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.”

⁹ “How can this be?” Nicodemus asked.

¹⁰ “You are Israel’s teacher,” said Jesus, “and do you not understand these things? ¹¹ Very truly I tell you, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony. ¹² I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things? ¹³ No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of Man. ¹⁴ Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up,¹⁵ ¹⁵ that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him.”

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.

Tell me, have you ever gotten into a religious debate with someone? I don't know, maybe it was with your college roommate, who was just totally sold on the theory of evolution. And so, you tried to point out, on the basis of scripture and nature itself, that there's far more evidence that this universe came into existence by intelligent design than by mere chance. Or maybe you got into “a discussion” with your cousin who is convinced that she doesn’t need to get her children baptized. Or maybe you have a friend who is honestly not sure what to believe, and you’re looking for a way to share the gospel with him.

My friends, if you've ever found yourself in the middle of a religious discussion where you're doing your best to speak the truth in love, but that other person just isn't getting it, well, you're not alone. The very same thing happened to Jesus. And today we have the chance to kind of be a fly on the wall and listen in on the conversation that Jesus had with a man named Nicodemus. Today we turn our attention to, what we might call,

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We'll see that,

- I. Nicodemus had some wrong ideas, but,
- II. Jesus had some good news to share.

Our text begins with these words. *Now there was a Pharisee, a man named Nicodemus who was a member of the Jewish ruling council. He came to Jesus at night.* With those words, we learn a number of things about Nicodemus. We learn that he is a Pharisee, in fact, a high-ranking Pharisee. He's a member of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling council. The Pharisees, of course, were Jewish men who took God's laws very seriously. They were experts in the Old Testament scriptures, and they believed that by meticulously keeping all of God's rules and regulations, they were earning God's favor and were therefore, a cut above everyone else. This is why, even at this early point in Jesus' ministry, the Pharisees were already opposed to Jesus and his teaching about sin and grace. This may explain why Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night. He does want his fellow Pharisees to know that he's spending time with Jesus.

And what is it that had piqued Nicodemus' curiosity? What attracted him to Jesus in the first place? Well, Nicodemus says, *"Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs that you are doing if God were not with him."* (John 3:2) In other words, Nicodemus was acknowledging that Jesus was a respected teacher who spoke and acted with the authority of God. Now, you'd think that Jesus might have responded with a statement like, "You're right, Nicodemus. I have come with the authority of God." But Jesus doesn't say that. Instead, he says, *"Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again."* (John 3:3) Now maybe you're thinking, "Wait a minute. Why would Jesus say that? That doesn't sound like it is an appropriate response to Nicodemus' statement about Jesus being a teacher sent from God. Why does Jesus, seemingly out of the blue, start talking about the necessity of being born again?"

The answer? Because Jesus had correctly identified that Nicodemus was not thinking correctly. Nicodemus thought that Jesus was merely a great teacher, someone who could explain to people, with words and actions, how God wanted them to live their lives—kind of like the Pharisees were doing. The Pharisees believed that if they followed God's rules, and did their best to live good, moral lives, they would be welcomed into God's kingdom.

Which is why, with just one statement, Jesus puts the kibosh on that kind of thinking. Jesus says, in effect, "Nick, you're wrong. Entering the kingdom of God is not the result of following the rules, it's not something you can take credit for, any more than a baby can take credit for being born. No, entering the kingdom of God is something that is done to you, something that's done for you.

But of course, Nicodemus is still hung up on that idea about being born again. He says to Jesus, *"How can someone be born when they are old? Surely they can't enter a second time into their mother's womb to be born!"* Obviously, Nicodemus is thinking about being born again in a physical sense, while Jesus is talking about being born again in a spiritual sense. And so, Jesus goes on to explain what he means. He says to Nicodemus, *"Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit."* (John 3:5) With those words, Jesus is explaining how a person is born again, namely, through water and the Spirit. Obviously, that's a reference to the sacrament of baptism. Jesus is saying that the water and the Spirit work together to create a spiritual rebirth. Saint Paul says the same thing when he tells Titus, *God saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit.* (Titus 3:5). Again, the washing and the spirit go together to create a spiritual rebirth.

But now someone might say, "Wait a minute. When Jesus says that no one can enter the Kingdom of heaven unless they are born of water and the Spirit, is he saying that if a person is not baptized, he won't be saved. Do you need to be baptized to go to heaven? No, not necessarily. Remember the thief on the cross? Chances are, he wasn't baptized. Yet in his final

hour he put his trust in Jesus. What did Jesus say to him? *“Today you will be with me in paradise.” (Luke 23:43)* That man was saved by faith in Jesus, faith that was created in his heart by the Holy Spirit, working through the words and actions of Jesus, right there on the cross. Now, if that thief could have gotten down from the cross, would he have wanted to be baptized? Of course, he would. Why would he turn his back on the seal of forgiveness that God offers through baptism?

But there's a major difference between that man on the cross and the man who is sitting in front of Jesus here in our text. Remember, Nicodemus was a Pharisee and the Pharisees as a whole had rejected the idea that they needed to be baptized. They thought they were just fine without God's gift of a new birth. In fact, when John the Baptist was preaching about the need for people to repent and be baptized, what did Saint Luke say about the attitude of the Pharisees? Luke 7:30. *The Pharisees and the experts in the law rejected God's purpose for themselves, because they had not been baptized by John.* In other words, the Pharisees rejection of John's baptism was an expression of their rejection of God's plan of salvation. For them, the rejection of baptism was really a rejection of Jesus. And a rejection of Jesus is really unbelief. And unbelief damns. That's what Jesus meant when he said, *“Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned. (Mark 16:16)* In the end, it's unbelief that leads to condemnation, not the lack of baptism. Or to put it another way, **“It's not the lack of baptism that damns; it's the rejection of baptism.”**

And why is that? Why does a person need the spiritual rebirth that baptism gives, in order to be saved? Well, as Jesus says, *“Flesh gives birth to flesh.”* In other words, sinful human beings always give birth to sinful human beings. You and I, by nature, were not born into God's family. We were born into Satan's family. To become members of a spiritual family would take the work of the Holy Spirit—which is why Jesus goes on to say, *“But the Spirit gives birth to spirit.” (John 3:6)*

So, do you see what Jesus is doing here in the first half of his late-night evangelism visit? Ever so gently, Jesus is exposing Nicodemus' wrong thinking. Nicodemus is thinking that he is good to go because of his Jewish parents or because of his moral life or because of his position as a religious leader. But Jesus in effect says, “Sorry, Nick, none of those things will make you right with God. Your standing with God is not dependent upon what you do, but rather on what God has done for you.”

My friends, isn't the same thing still true today? When people come to us with their questions, when they want to debate about how they deserve better from God, when they claim that everyone is going to a better place when they die, we need to take them back to where Jesus took Nicodemus. *Flesh gives birth to flesh. All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. All our righteous deeds are as filthy rags. No one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.*

Only when people realize the truth about themselves are they ready to hear the truth about God. Or more specifically, only then are they ready to hear II. The Good News that Jesus has to share.

In the second half of this late-night evangelism call, Jesus begins by explaining to Nicodemus why he alone has the authority to speak about how people get into heaven. Jesus says, *“No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who has come from heaven - the Son of Man.”* Isn't that right? If you want to know how to get somewhere, talk to someone who's already been there. Jesus started in heaven, came to earth and now has ascended back to heaven.

Secondly, Jesus goes on to explain how people gain access to heaven. He uses an

illustration from Old Testament Bible history, something that Nicodemus would have been very familiar with. Jesus says, *“Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him.”* (John 3:14-15) There Jesus is drawing a parallel between Moses putting a bronze serpent up on a pole and Jesus being lifted up on a cross. In each case, when people looked and believed the promises that God had made about what was hanging there, they were saved from death. In the case of the serpent, they were saved from physical death. In the case of Jesus, they were saved from eternal death. But in each case, it was about simply believing what God had said, believing what God had done.

And that’s what leads Jesus into one of the most beautiful expressions of the Gospel in all of scripture. I expect that you all know these words by heart. *“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.”* What you maybe don't know is some of the nuances that come out in the original language. For example, in the Greek text, these words were written in a little different order. Literally, Jesus said, “For so much loved God the world.” That first word is up front for emphasis. God's love is so much, it's so wide and high and deep—it's what prompted him to make the ultimate sacrifice to give up his only Son. And of course, the word for love there is a very special word. It's not love as in, “I love the way you look.” Or, “I love just hanging out with you.” No, it's like “I love to change Hudson's dirty diapers.” Not because I enjoy it. Not because it gives me warm fuzzies. I'm doing it because I know he needs it. For his sake I'm willing to, you know, do whatever it takes. So it is with God's love for this world. Now, I have to admit that my illustration limps a bit, because the fact is, my grandson is a cute kid. He's easy to love. You and I, however, are not so cute. By nature, we are little hellions. We constantly disobey God's commands. And yet God still loves us. And how do you know that God loves you, even when you or I have messed up, big time? Because Jesus says that God so loved the world. Not, “God so loved the elect” or “God so loved good Christians” or “God so loved those who loved him back.” No, it's “God so loved the world”, as in, all the inhabitants of planet earth. If you can say that you belong to the human race, then you can know that God loves you. He loves you enough to give you his only Son to die for you. There's the proof that God loves you.

You realize, that's what makes the gospel such good news. The fact that God's love, and Christ's redemption, are both universal. They apply to everybody. No matter who you're talking to. No matter what wild ideas they're bringing to you in the middle of the night, no matter what they say, no matter what they've done, no matter whether they believe you or not, you can tell them with the authority of God himself, “God still loves you. He gave his very best for you. By his perfect life and innocent death in your place, Jesus has won eternal life just for you. That's the promise that God has made you. Believe it. Take God as his word, and you can be sure that will enjoy life in God's Kingdom forever.”

My friends, over 2,000 years ago Jesus shared the good news with a man named Nicodemus. Today the Holy Spirit is still using that same good news to work faith in our hearts, putting our hearts at peace, giving us hope for the future, and equipping us to share that good news with those who need to hear it the most, even if our religious discussions take place in the middle of the night. God bless your honest efforts to speak the truth in love, for the salvation of many souls, one at a time, in Jesus' name. Amen.