

4-7-19 Jesus, Friend of Sinners: Nicodemus  
Website title - Friend of a Pharisee: Nicodemus

Recap Friend of Sinners series. Jesus' disciples, Simon the Pharisee and the woman who washed Jesus hair with her feet the Samaritan woman at the well, Zacchaeus, and Paul.

We will conclude today with Nicodemus. John 3:1-21 -  
**There was a man named Nicodemus, a Jewish religious leader who was a Pharisee. <sup>2</sup> After dark one evening, he came to speak with Jesus. "Rabbi," he said, "we all know that God has sent you to teach us. Your miraculous signs are evidence that God is with you."**

**<sup>3</sup> Jesus replied, "I tell you the truth, unless you are born again, you cannot see the Kingdom of God."**

**<sup>4</sup> "What do you mean?" exclaimed Nicodemus. "How can an old man go back into his mother's womb and be born again?"**

**<sup>5</sup> Jesus replied, "I assure you, no one can enter the Kingdom of God without being born of water and the Spirit. <sup>6</sup> Humans can reproduce only human life, but the Holy Spirit gives birth to spiritual life. <sup>7</sup> So don't be surprised when I say, 'You must be born again.' <sup>8</sup> The wind blows wherever it wants. Just as you can hear the wind but can't tell where it comes from or where it is going, so you can't explain how people are born of the Spirit."**

**<sup>9</sup> "How are these things possible?" Nicodemus asked.**

**<sup>10</sup> Jesus replied, "You are a respected Jewish teacher, and yet you don't understand these things? <sup>11</sup> I assure you, we tell you what we know and have seen, and yet you won't believe our testimony. <sup>12</sup> But if you don't believe me when I tell you about earthly things, how can you possibly believe if I tell you about heavenly things? <sup>13</sup> No one has ever gone to heaven and returned. But the Son of Man has**

**come down from heaven.<sup>14</sup> And as Moses lifted up the bronze snake on a pole in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up,<sup>15</sup> so that everyone who believes in him will have eternal life.**

**<sup>16</sup> “For this is how God loved the world: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life.<sup>17</sup> God sent his Son into the world not to judge the world, but to save the world through him.**

**<sup>18</sup> “There is no judgment against anyone who believes in him. But anyone who does not believe in him has already been judged for not believing in God’s one and only Son.<sup>19</sup> And the judgment is based on this fact: God’s light came into the world, but people loved the darkness more than the light, for their actions were evil.<sup>20</sup> All who do evil hate the light and refuse to go near it for fear their sins will be exposed.<sup>21</sup> But those who do what is right come to the light so others can see that they are doing what God wants.**

Let’s have some backstory. Nicodemus was a Pharisee (Explain Pharisee briefly). Most of us know that the Pharisees interactions with Jesus were not kind and usually contentious. But this one was different. For a few reasons...

- Nicodemus came alone. Pharisees usually confronted Jesus in groups. That way, if they caught Jesus in some sort of conversational trap or stump Him in some way, there would be plenty of witnesses to testify to Jesus falling short.
- Nicodemus wasn’t looking to trap or stump Jesus. He came as one who was earnestly searching for truth.
- Nicodemus came at night. The Pharisees only did work at night that they wanted to be hidden. Jesus’ “trial” took place in the middle of the night. But Nicodemus wasn’t looking to hide deeds of darkness from the world. He wanted to hide his investigation of Jesus from the other

Pharisees. He didn't want to be seen as a traitor by his own people just because he was honestly seeking truth.

So Nicodemus comes to Jesus and makes some claims. He claims that Jesus is clearly from God because of the miracles he performs. Before he says anything else, Jesus is like, "Lemme stop you right there and let's talk about why you are here. Unless you are born-again, you cannot see the Kingdom of God."

I'm like, "Woah. Why'd you say that, Jesus?" And the answer is clear. Because Jesus knew what was on Nicodemus' mind. (We know this because the last verse of Chapter 2, right before his encounter with Nicodemus, states that Jesus knew what was in each person's heart). Nicodemus didn't stop Jesus, and he like, "Hold on there, I'm here for something else," because he wasn't. He was there to talk to Jesus about the Kingdom of God.

So Jesus says that to see the Kingdom of God, one must be born-again. Clearly, this makes no sense whatsoever. Because someone can only be born once! Nicodemus asks Jesus in verse 4, "How can this be?! How can an old man go back into his mother's womb and be born again?" I'm a little curious, too. How does that work? I'm guessing someone would be asked to boil a whole lot of water, and people would have to take turns yelling "push" because the labor would take a long time. It's a legit question for Nicodemus to ask! He wants to see the Kingdom of God.

You see, the Jewish people wanted the Kingdom of God. To see a land of peace and no oppression. Where the rule of God was law, and the benefits of the land were great because God's sovereign, gracious, and mighty hand was upon it. ("Oh, to be like the days of King David, when Israel was known for it's power and might! Oh, to be like the days of Solomon! When Israel was known for it's peace, wealth, and splendor! Yes, that is the Kingdom of God we yearn for! Where our land is our own!"). But the Kingdom of God was not there. The Jews were seen as second class citizens. The Romans ruled the land and were oppressive. So someone like Jesus comes along and teaches with wisdom and speaks about the Kingdom of God coming. "Could

this man be the one that delivers the Jews once again?" Nicodemus seeks out Jesus with the question on his heart, "What must be done to see the Kingdom of God? How do we get this Kingdom?! Is it by political might and power? By swaying the people? By staging a coup and overthrowing the Roman government? Perhaps with the miraculous power that is behind these miracles of Jesus! What must we do to see this Kingdom?"

And Jesus replies that one must be born again. Born-again? How is that possible? Nicodemus poses the question to Jesus...

I ask myself the question and try to break it down logically. Let's look at what it means just to be born once without being born again. Birth is our mode of entrance into this world. It's how we get here. To be born again would mean entrance into another world. Jesus is saying the Kingdom of God is a whole other world that can only be entered by birth. There is no other way to enter the Kingdom of God.

You see, the Kingdom of God is not what the people at the time think it is. Jesus was saying that Nicodemus was being far too short-sighted. In fact, that's what led to his execution. Next week, we will be celebrating Palm Sunday, where Jesus was led into Jerusalem as a hero, with a triumphal entry fit for a king. And yet a week later, he was crucified as a criminal. Why the switch? Because the people wanted a hero to save them from their earthly woes and circumstances. And Jesus was a God, THE God, to save them from sin and eternal judgment. They wanted something they could see. And despite all the amazing miracles that Jesus performed, that wasn't good enough for them to trust Him. (So then He performed the greatest miracle of all time by beating death, Himself! But I'm getting ahead of myself. Just come the next couple weeks and we'll talk about all that amazingness).

Where were we? Right, the Kingdom of God is not what Nicodemus thought it was. The Jews were looking for a literal Kingdom on earth. Jesus was talking about something greater, a Kingdom not held by space or time. A Kingdom that will outlast this world. And to get into this eternal Kingdom, one must be born again.

So how does this birth take place? We see that in verses 5-8. There is nothing anyone can do on their own to experience this special birth, because it is a spiritual birth. Humans can only reproduce human life. It is the Holy Spirit which gives us this birth into spiritual life. (1 John 5:11-12 states that God has given us eternal life through Jesus His son.). You see, when we believe in Jesus, the Holy Spirit does something inside of us. We are washed, and made new by that washing.

**(ILLUSTRATION:** "Does washing an old car make it new? No!!! But this is the miracle of the Holy Spirit. When we get washed, it isn't just a cleansing. It isn't just scrubbing off the dirt. It is a replacement! God is saying that being "washed" by Jesus makes us born again. It actually makes us new!! A new creation! By washing! To get something new, we frequently feel like we need to throw out the old. Jesus says, "no, I make the old new." Only He has the power to make something that is old into something that is new!! He defies the logical laws of this world to say, "if I call something new, then it is new." That is why salvation is a miracle! To be born again is a miracle! It is a huge deal!!! To be a scandalous, good for nothing, dirty rotten sinner, and be made into something holy. Sinless. Righteous. I don't know about you, but the greatest miracle I have personally observed is the fact that a wretch like me can ever be considered holy by a perfect judge of holiness. Not only that, but I will ALWAYS be considered as holy! Now THAT is a miracle of miracles!)

(Now remember, I said that some things just don't make sense. This is one of those things. But Jesus goes on to say in verse 8 that one can't explain **how** people are born of the Spirit. To explain the supernatural is impossible. Because you would be explaining something that isn't possible through natural circumstances and consequences. The work of being born-again does fall into that supernatural category. **(Sidenote: Too often we discount the miracle of salvation.)**

Back to the idea of washing: When one converted to Judaism, they were ceremonially washed and given new clothes.

It was a fresh start. But for those who were a descendant of Abraham, they never had to go through that. Jesus was stating here that for **anyone** to enter the Kingdom of Heaven, they must be washed. It doesn't matter who they daddy is, they gotta be washed just like everyone else.

Now for Nicodemus, this could have been a deal-breaker. Being clustered in the same group as a convert? A 2<sup>nd</sup> class citizen? He could have taken what Jesus said as an insult. "Don't you know who my ancestors are?! Wait till my father hears about this! Harumph!" But he doesn't do that.

Instead he asks, "How can this be? How are these things possible?" I believe that he truly wanted to know. He wasn't tearing his clothes and screaming, "Blasphemy! How can these things be?!?" He really wants to know.

Jesus is like, "Really? You don't get this? You're a Jewish leader who knows the Scriptures and you don't get it. You have seen (and admitted!) that my miraculous signs are evidence that God is with me. If you can't believe me when it comes to these earthly miracles that you can see, how can you possibly believe me when I tell you about the heavenly things that you cannot see?"

So Jesus pulls on what Nicodemus knows best. As a respected Jewish teacher, he refers him to a piece of Scripture that he knows of, and wouldn't even surprise me if he had it memorized. In verses 14-15, He says, **And as Moses lifted up the bronze snake on a pole in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, <sup>15</sup> so that everyone who believes in him will have eternal life.**

(Explain Numbers 21:4-9)

Numbers 21:4-9 - An image was made of what was killing the people and lifted up on a pole. If the people looked at the image, they would be saved. In the same way, Jesus was lifted up on a cross. He became what was killing us. He took on our sin, and became sin. So that when we look to Him, we are saved.

Jesus used an OT story as an example of what is needed to be born again. (1 John 5:11 tell us that God gave us eternal life and this life is in His Son. (The Spirit gives us this new life, this re-birth through Jesus. 1 John 5:1 says that everyone who

believes has been born of God. **This re-birth happens through belief in Jesus.** Believing = Born again. And just as the only way the people in the story about Moses lifting up the snake could be saved was by looking at the snake, the only way we can be saved is by looking to Jesus for our salvation.

Verse 16. "For God so loved...". Jesus doubles down on his Kingdom of God talk in saying that the if you are in the Kingdom, you won't perish, but will have everlasting, eternal life. (By the way, the word "eternal" not only refers to the duration of life, (forever), but also to the **quality** of life. The word "perish" denotes the exact opposite of salvation. To perish not only means separation from God and not having eternal life, but the life one is "living" now really isn't living at all! It means "living" in utter failure and futility, while losing everything that makes living worthwhile.)

Jesus did not come to judge, but to save. He even came for Nicodemus, to give him the opportunity for new life. A fresh start. A second chance! Who doesn't want a do-over? The greatest thing in life that people want is another chance! **(Like Catwoman in The Dark Knight Rises).**

What if you could erase all the bad things you have done and start over? That happens when we are born again!!! Except we don't start off with again with a blank mind! We have knowledge of our past! We know what our old life is like. (It can be so surprising to us when someone walks away from Christ who has known Him almost their entire life. But for them, they might not know what it is like to be born-again because their old life was so long ago. Which is why Jesus calls us to die daily!! We need to be constantly born again by God's Grace (because He knows how sinful, stupid, stubborn, and messed up we are. Yes, we are washed clean once of our sin, but we need to constantly remind ourselves of His grace. **"My life will never be beyond the need of God's grace!"**)

**Verse 18 - <sup>18</sup> "There is no judgment against anyone who believes in him. But anyone who does not believe in him has already been judged for not believing in God's one and**

**only Son. <sup>19</sup> And the judgment is based on this fact: God's light came into the world, but people loved the darkness more than the light, for their actions were evil. <sup>20</sup> All who do evil hate the light and refuse to go near it for fear their sins will be exposed. <sup>21</sup> But those who do what is right come to the light so others can see that they are doing what God wants."**

What does this passage tell us? It tells us that God's grace is for everyone. This brood of vipers, these snakes of people, what could be considered Jesus' prime enemy, the worst of the worst... Salvation is still available to them. To every repentant heart. TO ANYONE that believes in Him, no matter their past. You see, in Jesus' eyes, everyone is redeemable." He was "rough" with the Pharisees because that's what some of them needed. Sometimes he speaks softly and lovingly, and other times He speaks sharply and sternly. (Children are a good example. Some need to be yelled at sometimes. The same message sometimes needs to be spoken different ways to different people for all to understand. Same message, different methods.) The message: stop sinning! Repent! Stop loving your life the same old way. Stop choosing to live in darkness. Love the light. Cling to the light. Seek the light! (Jesus said that He was the light. That the only way to change one's life, to cling to the true light is to put your faith in and follow Him.) He doesn't bring us into the light to shame us, He does it to save us.)

Nicodemus came in the dark, when light was hidden. (Sin must be exposed to be eradicated. We must get out of the dark and into the light! We are scandalous sinners that hide in the dark. But when we step into the light, we allow God to wash us and change us. We get that fresh start. We are born again!)

Do not be afraid of the light. Do not fear your sins being exposed. For Jesus did not come to condemn you, but to save you. So stop letting your sin keep you shackled, and let Jesus deal with it! Bring it into the light! If you don't, it will fester and

grow in the dark. Growing like a mold in the recesses of your heart.

For God so loved Nicodemus, that he did not condemn him, but offered him life through the light that was Himself.

### **Big questions/Conclusions:**

- **It is possible to be religious without being born-again.**
- **It is possible to see the works of God without being born again** (It is possible to see the works of God publicly and not have God working in you personally.)
- **We must be born-again to see and enter the Kingdom of God.** (Trying to explain the Kingdom of God to someone not in the Kingdom of God is difficult to do. Try explaining color to a blind person. Or music to a deaf person. ("We see through a glass darkly 1 Corinthians 13:12.) Philippians 4:7 speaks of a "peace that is past understanding." When it comes to following God, most have some measure of understanding, but for all, it will always boil down to a step of faith.
- "Water" and "Spirit" refers (Ezekiel 36:25-27) to the Holy Spirit and His work. There is a cleansing that takes place (water), and a new life (spirit).
- Flesh gives birth to flesh. Spirit gives birth to spirit. Our spirit comes alive when we are born-again.
- (1 John 5:11 God gave us eternal life and this life is in His Son. (The Spirit gives us this new life, this re-birth through Jesus. There is no other way.) 1 John 5:1. Everyone who believes has been born of God. **This re-birth happens through belief.**) And belief alone. Believing = Born again. Born again = Believing
- **The things of God frequently seem like foolishness to mankind.** Being born-again? Meek inheriting the earth? Whoever tries to save his life will lose it, but anyone who loses their life for Jesus will find it? That's cray-cray talk. That

makes no sense. (1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 1 tells us that the Cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to those who are being saved it is the power of God. I know what group I want to be in.)

Things about Jesus:

- **He knows.** He knew what Nicodemus was seeking before Nicodemus asked. He knows what is going on in our heart.
- Despite Him knowing the darkest places of our hearts, **He is patient.** Even though Nicodemus was incredulous and confused at first, Jesus still took the time to speak with him. (We need to be patient with those who do not understand our faith.)

Things about Nicodemus:

- He did not blindly accept. **He questioned** and made known his doubts. Jesus was up to his challenges.
  - o I think of the rich man who went away sad when Jesus told him to sell his belongings and give all the money to the poor. Whenever I read that, I wish that he stayed and wrestled. That he questioned Christ. Instead he turned and walked away (sad) when he heard something he didn't like or agree with. (It is ok for us to question. Jesus is up to our challenges. (We encourage our young people to ask the hard questions while they are still young. Why does God let bad things happen? Why do we have to die? Why is there pain?). Nicodemus questioned, and we should too.)

(Follow immediately with...

- Yet **he was earnest** in his searching (Seek the Lord and you shall find Him (Jeremiah 29:13. Deuteronomy 4:29). He sought the light, and discovered that Jesus was the light. I'd also like to remind you that he was searching on his own. While it is good to search for truth with others, we must also make a decision on our own to search for truth just as Nicodemus did.

(We must be earnest in our searching.)

Things about Jesus:

- **He is loving.** He does not stand over us with the attitude and demeanor of a critical judge, assigning demerits and tallying up every error and flaw that is found within us. Docking us for every misdeed. He came to save, not condemn. Every interaction with Him is meant to save us from ourselves and our sin. Whether He must seem gracious or stern, we must remember that He does want what is best for us.
- **He is light.** He is God's light that came into this world. To reveal, and save us through that revelation.

Things about Nicodemus:

- **He changed** (John 7:50-51, John 19:39). We have the ability to change too. He started out in darkness, and was drawn to the light. He questioned the light. And we see through his actions that he distanced himself from the actions of his fellow Pharisees, and drew close enough to the light that after Jesus was crucified, it was he who joined in giving Jesus a proper and traditional burial (which was no easy task). If he can change, we can too. If he can change, your worst "enemies" can, too.

Things about Jesus:

- **He is welcoming.** Nicodemus was a stuffed shirt. He was a symbol of everything wrong with religion and Judaism in his day. Call someone a sinner today? Eh, whatever. Everyone's a sinner. Jesus hung out with sinners. Call someone a Pharisee in church today? OOOHHH-WEEE! You might have a throw-down in the church parking lot. That church could split. Nothing is dirtier and worse than a Pharisee. And yet Jesus took the time to share the truth with him. (We need to do the same. With the religious and the irreligious. With everyone! Why? Because God did not send Jesus to condemn, but to save. And if we are ambassadors that go out on God's behalf, then we need to go out in the same way and attitude that Jesus did; not to condemn, but to save.) Don't use a broad brush to paint a picture of a group. Nicodemus was a Pharisee,

which Jesus tended to not get along with, but He judged him by his heart and his actions, not where he came from or who he was associated with. We must be careful to not judge the "religious" among us. It doesn't matter if they are old or wear a jacket and tie, or rich, Jesus is there for them too. Stop focusing on image and look at character. Jesus came for ALL. Not just the dirty rotten sinners, but for the clean fresh sinners, too. Anyone can change. Anyone! We must be bridge-builders like Jesus was, welcoming to all.

2 questions...

**What Kingdom are you living for?** You may be born-again, but are you living for the flesh or for the Spirit? (What determines your daily schedule? When looking at your calendar, what world would one say you are living for? When looking at your wallet, your credit card or bank statement, what world are you living for?). Is your appetite misdirected? Are you loving the things of this world too much?

If we truly are born-again, our new life should be the one that takes priority over the old. We have been given an incorruptible, eternal life. Are we still clinging to the mortal things of this world that will decay and rot away? Or are we upholding God's law where he said the most important thing was to love our neighbor? Are you loving unconditionally as God as called you to? (FYI... It's impossible to love unconditionally unless you are born-again. We love not out of a sense of duty or obligation, but because we want to! It is in response to God's great love for us. We love not because we should, but because we have been loved greatly! We pour out unconditional love and grace because our cup overflows, because great unconditional love and grace has been poured out on us!). So what Kingdom are you living for? Your earthly one, or the Kingdom of God?

**Are you born-again?** The wonderful thing about this interaction is that Jesus places the ball lovingly in our court. By looking to Him on the cross, and believing in Him, we might be saved. He gives us the opportunity to be free as we follow Him.