

This morning we're going to consider our walk with God through the eyes of Nicodemus, the Ruler of the Jews. I want to consider how his faith was challenged by Jesus and then take a look at how we might use his story in our own lives as we walk with God.

OPENING PRAYER

READ John 3:1-6

Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. ² 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 Jesus answered him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." ⁴

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?" ⁵ Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of WATER and the SPIRIT, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. ⁶ That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit."

Nicodemus had ISSUES. First, he was old....Well, that doesn't have to be an issue. But it was for Nicodemus. Second, he was the "RULER of the Jews," which meant his job was to keep the status quo intact. In other words, he WAS an old dog and he was NOT interested in any NEW tricks!

But things had changed. You know how it feels. You're settled in, and everything is coasting along smoothly. Your family is secure. Your job is safe. Your church is NORMAL. And then, KABLAM! everything changes. It's a cosmic, epic disaster of biblical proportions! It's as though the earth is moving underneath your feet! I hate that! And so do you. And so did Nicodemus.

Nicodemus had been serving God his entire life. However, according to Jesus, what he was doing was NOT what he should've been doing. Jesus said, "unless one is born again he CANNOT see the Kingdom of God." For Nicodemus this meant, despite his hard work and good intentions.

When Nicodemus approached Jesus he was sincere. He came in the night in secret. He wanted to get to the bottom of Jesus' teaching without all the political nonsense the other religious leaders carried around with them.

I think Nicodemus must've recognized that Jesus had the right stuff to be a prophet. He was single-minded in his mission for God, much of what he said echoed the prophets before him, he ministered to the hearts of the people, he was self-effacing, and, to top it off, there were the miracles. All the miracles all the other prophets had ever done all together didn't hold a candle too what Jesus had done in less than 3-years! But Nicodemus was in conflict. For there were some things in Jesus' teachings that were unlike anything he'd ever heard before.

Again, Jesus said, "unless one is born again he cannot see the Kingdom of God." Nicodemus must've been thinking, "This prophet must be talking about a new program." So when he asked Jesus to explain the metaphor he wasn't confused about whether or not one needed to LITERALLY "enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born." Rather, Nicodemus wanted to know what the new program was. So he threw the metaphor right back at Jesus. He wanted to know if people like himself who had spent their ENTIRE lives serving God had been doing it ALL wrong.

And Jesus said, "**Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of WATER and the SPIRIT, he cannot enter the Kingdom of God. ⁶That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.**"

Nicodemus was so confused. He wanted to be obedient to God; he wanted to do God's will; he wanted to be a faithful servant to the Almighty. But instead of giving Nicodemus a new list of stuff to do, Jesus told him he had to be "born again" of WATER and the SPIRIT.

So Nicodemus cried out a couple of verses later, in **John 3:9, "How can these things be?!"** That's when Jesus taught him how to read his Bible through new lenses. Jesus illustrated his ministry for Nicodemus with a story about Moses from 1500 years earlier.

Jesus said, in **John 3:14-15**, “**as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up,**¹⁵ **that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.**”

Jesus was saying that this event was a shadow of HIS work on the Cross.

Here’s a Bible study tip: Whenever you read the Old Testament you should be thinking about Jesus. This is what Jesus and the Apostles teach us throughout the Scriptures. So for instance, when you read the Creation Story, think about Jesus, for He is the “Author of Life” (Acts 3:15). When you read about the miraculous crossing of the Red Sea, think about Jesus, for it was a foretaste of the miracle of Baptism (1Cor 10:2). When you read about the sacrificial offerings on the altar in the temple in Jerusalem, think about Jesus, for He offered Himself up for your sins as the ultimate sacrifice (Heb 13:11-13).

So when Jesus retold the story of Moses and the bronze serpent to Nicodemus he was showing him how God had been preparing him for his teaching all along.

Nicodemus anticipated a new list of expectations from Jesus. That was how he was hardwired. I call this the NICODEMUS SYNDROME. This is about how we believe, think and act based on previous experience. Nicodemus wanted Jesus to say, “God loves people who obey His commandments.”

But He did NOT say that. Jesus said, “whoever believes in (Me) may have eternal life.”

When I was divorced I thought for sure that my life was over. I was depressed, angry, sad, and just generally miserable. My Christian friends treated me like a leper. But one day I talked to a Christian professor I knew from my undergraduate days, and he said to me, “Richard, you have not committed the unforgiveable sin with your divorce, as many Lutherans believe you have. But Jesus loves you. He always has. And there is nothing that can take that away from you.”

I was trained to believe otherwise. My own version of the Nicodemus Syndrome was crushing my heart with God’s law. But with my friend’s words,

his reminder of the unsurpassed and unconditional love of my savior, I was reborn, and God began to bring forth life from the ashes.

Perhaps you can relate to my experience at some level. Any kind of loss creates a hole in our heart which only God can fill with the love of Jesus. And all that's needed for us to receive that love is to let go of our pride which insists that we must fix it on our own, that God requires a pound of flesh.

Brothers and sisters in the Lord, God does not require a pound of flesh. But He demands a life. And that life is the life of His Son, Jesus. And through that resurrected life He has breathed life into your life, filling your spirit with His.

The Lord made us brand new with His gracious Word; He re-birthed us through His death for our sins and His resurrection unto eternal life, reconciling us to Himself, making our relationship with Him whole and true. And in doing so He gave us the same ministry to share with others.

You were born again when you were baptized with water in the name of the Triune God. That's when you first received the Spirit of the Living God. But you receive Him again when you eat the Lord's Supper. That's the promise. And you will receive the Spirit of God again and again and again whenever you open your Bible and read about Jesus. Our lives are a series of rebirthing experiences. For every time we receive God's hope in our hearts in the name of Jesus, we believe anew, our hearts are filled to overflowing, and we are reborn.

Friends in Christ, this week may you have the opportunity to spend time in the Word of God, receiving it as your own into your heart, seeing Jesus on every page, and knowing He is your Lord and Savior.

This week as you read this Word may you grow in faith and believe that Jesus is for you, and that all of His work was meant to bring you solace in your time of need, healing in your heart, clarity in your mind, and peace in your spirit.

And this week may you have the opportunity to share what you've learned with someone who really needs to hear it, in Jesus' name. Amen.