

John 2:23-3:15 – You Must be Born Again

Last week we looked at Jesus' cleansing the temple. This was another sign of him fulfilling the Old Covenant, fulfilling the sacrificial system. Jesus sent out those selling in the temple, as they distracted what worshipping God is all about, namely, his grace. If we are selling in the temple, then we are focusing on ourselves, and what we can offer or get, and not on what we receive from God, being redeemed by his precious blood. This distorts our worship.

Today we are introduced to one of the Jewish leaders, a Pharisee named Nicodemus. Nicodemus was one of the foremost Jewish teachers of his time. Nicodemus also shows that not all Jewish leaders felt the same way about Jesus, even if they were confused by his actions. More importantly though, Jesus conversation with Nicodemus reveals another way that he will fulfill the Old Testament, through new birth, regeneration, being "born again."

Let's take a look at Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus:

John 2:23-3:15.

"Now when he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, many believed in his name when they saw the signs that he was doing. ²⁴But Jesus on his part did not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people ²⁵and needed no one to bear witness about man, for he himself knew what was in man.

Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. ²This 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." ³Jesus answered him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." ⁴Nicodemus 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?" ⁵Jesus answered, "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. ⁷Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' ⁸The wind 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."

⁹Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" ¹⁰Jesus answered him, "Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things? ¹¹Truly, 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. ¹²If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things? ¹³No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended

from heaven, the Son of Man. ¹⁴And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.”

This is the word of the Lord.

You might be wondering why I didn't include the last two verses of chapter two in with the last sermon, but placed them here with Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus. It is sometimes the case that the chapter markings are put in the wrong place. You might know that the chapter and verse markings were added in the 13th C by Stephen Langton, an Archbishop of Canterbury, and he did a pretty good job, but sometimes made a mistake. As a general rule, if you are ever confused by a section in scripture the first place you should look at is what comes directly before it.

I think that these last two verses of chapter two are essential to understanding Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus. Whether people start believing in Jesus or not, he knows what is in us, and what is necessary for our salvation.

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John tells us that during the Passover in Jerusalem people saw what Jesus was doing and they “believed in his name.” That is, they thought that he might be the messiah, or at least a powerful prophet because of the signs he was performing. One of these people is Nicodemus, a very prominent Jewish teacher. While we might think that it a good thing that people believe in Jesus' name, including a leader like Nicodemus, Jesus knows better. He doesn't jump to conclusions. John says, Jesus “would not entrust himself to them, for he knew all people...he knew what was in each person.”

Slide 9-12

This may be saying that Jesus was able to divinely see what is in everyone (maybe there was a little red or green light above everyone's head), but more importantly it tells us that he knows what is in their hearts. Jesus didn't need superhuman power to see this, all he needed was an ability to read the Old Testament. Ps.14:3, “All have turned away, all have become corrupt; there is no one who does good, not even one.” Ps.51:5, “Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me.” Eccl.7:20, “Indeed, there is no one on earth who is righteous, no one who does what is right and never sins.” Jer.17:9, “The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?” There are many more examples of this, and in many ways all scripture tells this story.

The people who were impressed with Jesus' signs are looking for a way out from the Roman oppression. They think the temple cleanser won't stop at the corrupt temple leadership, but will take his whip to the Romans. A new Joshua, cleansing the holy land once more. But

they did not know their real oppression, their sinful nature. Jesus does though, he knows “what is in each person,” in all of us. He knows what kind of rescue needs to take place. This is why he tells us we “must be born again.” If we are only born of Adam, born of flesh, we will only be fleshly. If we want to enter the eternal kingdom we need to be born of the eternal Spirit, born again.

As we dig into our passage a little more, the first question we have is, who is Nicodemus anyways? In the passage we see the Pharisee Nicodemus, called by Jesus “*the* teacher of Israel,” come to Jesus at night to suss him out a bit. This leads us to ask, who is Nicodemus, and what is he looking for?

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Interestingly, we actually know something about a Nicodemus from other areas than John’s gospel. There was a Nicodemus who we know of from this time and place who was an extremely wealthy man from one of the most powerful families in Jerusalem, the Gurion family.¹ Nicodemus was an extremely rich man, who was said by the Jewish historian Josephus to be able to feed all of Jerusalem with his food stores for ten years.

Nicodemus is a very unusual name, and for John to include it in his gospel shows a strong connection to his historical knowledge of this time, even if he is writing much later. John claims to be an eyewitness to the events he records, and this corroborates that claim. Nicodemus, along with Gamaliel, were likely the leading Pharisees at the time of Jesus, sharing power with the Sadducee party in Jerusalem.

This leads us to ask, what would a man like this want with Jesus? We might remember that it is these leaders that are typically depicted in the gospels as leading the charge against Jesus. Maybe Nicodemus saw Jesus’ cleansing of the temple and felt convicted about allowing a marketplace in the temple. We know Pharisees are sticklers for the law, and he likely would not have appreciated a desecration of the temple in this way. He was also likely impressed with Jesus’ ability to clear all these out, showing that he had some kind of divinely given ability.

Let’s just imagine for a minute that you are Nicodemus, fabulously wealthy leader in Jerusalem, but also, you use this ability to dig deep into the scripture, not satisfied with the status quo, but yearning for a faithful religion. Along comes an outsider from way up north,

¹ There is a considerable debate as to the historicity of Nicodemus in scholarly circles. As most non-Christian skeptical scholars do not think John’s gospel historical at all, they dismiss any connection to the Nicodemus ben Gurion mentioned in Josephus as the same mentioned in John. That being said, John’s account is historically credible as long as one believes that Jesus was in fact God, able to perform miracles, and his disciples knew this when they wrote the gospel. See the foremost John scholar’s defense of this position in Richard Bauckham, “Nicodemus and the Gurion Family.” In *The Testimony of the Beloved Disciple*, 137-172.

maybe you heard some story about how he is the cousin of John the Baptist. You see him come to the temple just before the Passover, and he causes a big scene, doing something you thought impossible, but maybe secretly wanted done anyways. So this causes you to go and seek him out, even if at night so nobody sees you.

You recognize his ability. You admire his zeal for God's house, you wish you had the same. You offer this unknown outsider the respect of calling him 'Rabbi', placing him on equal footing to yourself. This would be ridiculous to any outside observer, but you know the scriptures, how God uses the weak to shame the strong. And you display a vote of confidence in him, even if in secret, saying, "we know that you are a teacher who has come from God."

So, what does Jesus say to this? He doesn't say, "thanks Nico, you're on the right track!" No, he says something that utterly confuses Nicodemus, something that puts everything he knows on its head. Remember back to what John the Baptist is calling Israel to do, to be baptized like gentiles, to recognize that they are not anything apart from God's grace. Jesus is saying something very similar to Nicodemus, his birthright is not what he thinks it is, he must be born again.

Slide 14

Naturally, a rich and powerful man like Nicodemus would have held his Jewish heritage in high regard. How could he not? He is a leader among his people. He has a long and established lineage, a distinct name known among the people. He has properties and feels a sense of ownership of this people, guiding them through the difficult time of Roman oppression. More than this, God has promised salvation to his people. Being born to this nation is equivalent to being saved.

Slide 15-16

In the Mishnah, which is a collection of Jewish tradition from the 2nd-3rd century, there is a quote that says:

"All of the Jewish people, even sinners and those who are liable to be executed with a court-imposed death penalty, have a share in the World-to-Come, as it is stated: "And your people also shall be all righteous, they shall inherit the land forever; the branch of My planting, the work of My hands, for My name to be glorified" (Isaiah 60:21). And these are the exceptions, the people who have no share in the World-to-Come, even when they fulfilled many mitzvot: One who says: There is no resurrection of the dead derived from the Torah, and one who says: The Torah did not originate from Heaven, and an *epikoros*, who treats Torah scholars and the Torah that they teach with contempt."

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Basically, if you're born an Israelite, you're saved, even if you do something worthy of the death penalty, unless you deny the resurrection, deny the heavenly origin of the scripture, or deny the teaching rights of the Rabbis. The main point that Jesus makes to Nicodemus is completely counter to this. Jesus says, it is not your birth as a Jew that saves you, this is only a work of God, you must be "born again."

To us this term, being 'born again' may have become something of a cliché, or, since Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan, simply a political demarcation. Sometimes we use it to see whether someone is a *real* Christian or not. When I was young, people would often use it to designate those who are believing Christians, rather than those who were simply born into a Christian house, and call themselves Christian because of that. Just because we have become used to hearing this term, we shouldn't be blind to just how offensive it would be to someone like Nicodemus.

Here Jesus speaks about the need to be born again. Think, what would this mean to a Jewish person, who believes that they are saved because of their lineage? They say, my Father is Abraham, therefore I am a member of God's people. Jesus says this to a man who would have considered himself of the utmost pedigree, if anyone would have considered themselves saved from their first birth, it would be someone like Nicodemus. He even says, "can a man go back in his mother's womb?" The only place he would want to be born from is his mother's womb, he cannot see past his patrimony.

Slide 18

But remember what Jesus saw that Nicodemus forgot, Jesus knows what's in humanity, our sinful nature. Our sinful nature is like a diseased root that effects everything that comes out of the tree. It is not that we are as bad as we can be, but everything we do is affected by our sin. All humanity, Jewish people included, are guilty of this original sin, and stand condemned by God because of it.

We too, in the Dutch Reformed world might rely on our birth for our salvation. It comes with the territory of being those who have a long and wonderful heritage. Many in this denomination think that it is due to their heritage that they have a right to this denomination. Whether they agree with the confessions or not, they were born into it. It is natural to think this way, to put familial and cultural ties above ties to faith. When this happens, the ground of church is removed. Jesus says, "who are my mother and my brothers?... whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and mother" (Mk.333-34). Just like Nicodemus, you cannot rely on your first birth for your salvation, you must be born again.

Nicodemus doesn't understand that the nation of Israel, the Old Covenant, is a preparation for the coming of Jesus. Just as the cleansing practices are fulfilled in the sign at Cana, and the temple is fulfilled in the cleansing, so too the birth of the people of Israel is fulfilled in new birth, one open to the peoples of every nation on earth. The old birth, even if it is in the Old Covenant, is pointed towards earthly things—the promised land, the kings, the sacrifices—but the new spiritual birth is pointed to spiritual things. To be “born of the Spirit,” as Jesus says, means to be given a desire for the heavenly, the spiritual, not for the things of this world.

At this point in the sermon it would be good to clarify what we mean by being “born again.”

Slide 19

As Jesus says at the beginning, to see God's kingdom one must be born again. While we might use the term to differentiate those who are evangelical Christians, there is no such thing as a non-born-again Christian. To be born again is not simply a new start, like when you come out of winter into spring and everything new and fresh again. To be born again doesn't refer to a special kind of experience someone may have had, a new spiritual awakening or something. To be born again is much more basic, and much more important than that. To be born again is to have God give you a desire for him. To take you out of being dead in sin, and give you new life, a life fit for the world to come.

Ephesians 2:1 says we are dead in sin. This death is the result of the fall. God promised Adam and Eve that they would surely die if they ate the fruit. While they did not physically die right away, they did spiritually die. Their sinful lives were no longer fit for the eternal life God had planned for them. They did not desire God as they once did. Only being born again is able to correct this. Recreating the human heart to be fit for eternity gives a person a desire to be saved, we often call this ‘regeneration’.

Regeneration fixes our desires. Where once our hearts desired sinful things, now God has given us a desire for himself, eternal things that are fit for heaven. The clearest sign that one is born again is that they desire to be saved from their sin. Remember the introduction, Jesus knows what is in each person, their sinful nature, their need to be reborn of the Spirit.

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The Reformed have often held to this “order of salvation”:

Regeneration -> Faith -> Justification -> Sanctification -> Glorification.

Slide 21

Romans 8:29-30 puts it this way, “For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters. ³⁰ And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified.” Here we can equate being born again with being “called.”

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Rebirth is a miraculous work of God in a person’s life. It is because God breathes new life into a person that they desire him in the first place. We do not cooperate with God in our regeneration any more than we cooperate in our first generation! It is only something that God can do, a new creation that God “calls” into existence. It is only through being regenerate that we have any ability to cooperate with God in our lives. Our regeneration is the grounds of this cooperation.

Slide 23

The gospel is proclaimed to many who do not believe, the reason for this is their sin, but the reason that *some* do believe when they hear the gospel is because they have been called by God and spiritually raised from the dead, born again from the Spirit. This is why Jesus says in order to enter the Kingdom of God one must be born again. To be born again means to have a nature that is fit for his eternal kingdom.

At the end of Jesus’ conversation with Nicodemus, we have to appreciate that to Jesus, the failure to believe is far more important than the failure to understand. Jesus (I think somewhat sardonically) jests at Nicodemus that even though he is “the teacher of Israel,” he doesn’t understand what Jesus is saying.

Nicodemus asks the right question, “how can this be?” The answer is, one can enter the kingdom, be born again into God’s eternal kingdom, only by believing in the saving work of Jesus on the cross. Just as the Israelites were saved from the serpents in the wilderness by looking at the bronze serpent on Moses’ staff, so too we are saved by looking upon Jesus on the cross. Believing in him, receiving him by faith alone.

Note the difference here for Nicodemus, as all of us in this room, is faith alone, and not birth alone. When you come before God on the judgement day, he is not going to care one bit about who your parents were, or how much they sacrificed to build this church, or that school, you will be judged on your faith alone, the only thing that can save you.

This is not the last time that we will meet Nicodemus, he also is seen at the end of ch.7 and 19. Here his devotion to Jesus is still suspect, he stands up for Jesus, but does not proclaim his own faith. He comes to Jesus in the dark, afraid to tell others what he thinks. For this

reason, John Calvin would call a person a 'Nicodemite' those who secretly believed in Jesus, and the teaching of the Reformation, but hid their true beliefs in public. Nicodemus came to Jesus at night, was among the Jewish leaders, but never professed his own faith.

Again, John is not telling us this story for this story's sake. Throughout John's gospel, he will bring in different stories for his reader to identify with Jesus' interlocutor. Here, we are supposed to ask ourselves. How are we like Nicodemus? Have we professed Jesus in the dark, gone to him saying we privately accept him, but then when the light comes out we simply pretend that nothing is different? Do we rely on our heritage to save us, or can we profess Christ in the light, being born again, desiring heavenly things?

Let's Pray