

Found: When Ordinary People Meet Jesus – Jesus and the Church Goer

John 3:1-15

By [David Strain](#)

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Let me begin by thanking you again for coming to our evening service, especially if you are here at the invitation of a friend. We're so very glad that you are here. In the pockets in the pews in front of you, you will find copies of the Bible. If you would, please take one in your hands and turn with me to page 887 to John's gospel, chapter 3. Page 887, John's gospel, chapter 3. In just a moment we're going to read the passage together. Before we do that, it's our custom to pause briefly and ask God to help us understand His Word as we pray. Would you pray with me please?

Our Father, we thank You for the Bible. It is Your Word. You speak to us in it. And we ask now that You would work by the Holy Spirit so that we might understand and believe, that You would help us to meet Jesus as He speaks to us in the pages of holy Scripture, and to be changed by Him as He calls us to Himself in His grace. In Jesus' name we pray, amen.

John's gospel, chapter 3. We're reading from the very first verse:

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." Jesus answered him, "Truly, truly I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." 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?" Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' The 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."

Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" Jesus answered him, "Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?"

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? 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."

Thanks be to God that He has spoken in His holy Word.

Born Again?

I wonder what you think of when you hear the phrase, "born again." It really is a loaded term in our culture, isn't it? It has been used by politicians from Jimmy Carter to George W. Bush to Bill Clinton in an attempt to secure your votes. It has been used by snake handlers in the bayous to describe their unique brand of religious extremism. In one survey that I read that charted the percentage of Americans who said they were born again, the concept was correlated to income and education. The more money a person made, the better educated they were, the less likely to identify themselves as born again. So for many people it's an experience for those on the fringes - drug addicts and dropouts get born again; the poor and the broken. It helps them deal with the mess that is their lives.

Well this evening, ladies and gentlemen, I want to invite you to look at the passage of Scripture we've just read together from John chapter 3 because it is here, rather than from any of these contemporary, social, or political contexts that we should draw our definition of the phrase "born again." It's an expression coined not by the pollster, George Barna, nor by the evangelist, Billy Graham, but by the Lord Jesus Christ Himself. And what we find as we read Jesus' fascinating conversation with Nicodemus is that being born again isn't something fringe or bizarre at all. It's not anti-intellectual or weird; it's not a political expedient, or even really a moral revolution that Jesus has in mind. No, it is far more fundamental than that, basic, as we'll see ladies and gentlemen, it's a reality actually every one of us urgently needs.

I. A Radical New Beginning

Would you look at the story with me please? John's gospel chapter 3. Jesus tells Nicodemus and He tells all of us three things about being born again in our passage. And the first of them you can see in verses 1 through 4. Jesus explains that the new birth He has in mind is a radical new beginning, a radical new beginning. Let's take a look at it together. Chapter 3, verses 1 to 4. In verse 2, we discover that Nicodemus comes to visit Jesus under cover of the darkness of night. Presumably, Nicodemus does not want to be seen talking to Jesus; He is already a controversial figure. But Nicodemus, notice, Nicodemus begins the

conversation with what looks like a promising opening line. Don't you think? He addresses Jesus with an honorific, a title. You see that in verse 2? He calls Him, "Rabbi." Nicodemus is a scholar; he is a man of some status in the Jewish community. Jesus, on the other hand, possesses neither rank nor privilege nor training. But Nicodemus here is honoring Him as a peer, an equal. He calls Him Rabbi.

And then he goes on to tell us what he and his friends make of Jesus. "We know you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him." It's a pretty clear vote of confidence in Jesus and His ministry, isn't it, which is why Jesus' response is stunning. Verse 3 - "Jesus answered him, 'Truly, truly I say to you, unless one is born again,'" there's our phrase, "unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." At first it reads like a total non sequitur, don't you think? What does Jesus' answer have to do with Nicodemus' opening line, as though he were answering a question Nicodemus hasn't asked? But you see what Jesus is really doing? He's cutting through all the niceties right to the heart of the matter. "Here's what you're missing, Nicodemus. Here's what you really need to know. You must be born again. It's a new start that you need."

Now think for a moment about how Nicodemus would have heard Jesus' words. Verse 1 tells us he was a Pharisee. That is, he has impeccable moral and religious credentials. The Pharisees were the strictest, most straight-laced, most upright, conservative members of Jewish society. Nicodemus, we might say, is a church-going guy. Whenever the doors are open he's there. That's the kind of man that he was - extremely devout. In verse 10, Jesus tells us Nicodemus is more than just a church-goer. He is Israel's teacher. He is a leader, a Bible teacher. Nicodemus is a scholar and an expert in the Scriptures. He would preach and teach in the synagogues. He can quote the Bible at will. More even than that, verse 1 tells us he is a ruler of the Jews. That is to tell us that he belongs as a member of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling council. So here is Nicodemus, a religiously devout, morally impeccable, intellectually qualified, socially respectable teacher of others, policy maker for the community. And notice too, Nicodemus comes to Jesus and he's not in crisis, is he? He's not seeking. He doesn't even come with a question. He comes with a statement of conviction - "We know you are a teacher come from God. I'm on your side, Jesus. I get what you're all about. I'm a fan." He's not in crisis; his life isn't a mess. He is a man all sorted out. He has it all together, he has all that he wants, and he "gets" Jesus, at least he thinks he does.

Perfect Credentials yet Desperate Need

And don't miss the plural in his opening words to Jesus - "We know you are a teacher come from God." We know. So he's come to Jesus at night, this leader of the community, as the spokesman for a party, a group who have reached certain conclusions about Jesus. Perhaps he's there to cut a deal, to co-opt Jesus for

their cause; at least to determine whether He's willing to stand with them on certain aspects of their platform as they pursue their own political or social or religious agendas. But Jesus is unwilling, quite unwilling to play party politics with Nicodemus and his friends. I think there's a delicious irony there, don't you? So often in our context being born again has come to be a PR tool deployed by cynical politicians to leverage votes. The phrase has been co-opted by a political agenda too often. But when it was first used it came as part of Jesus' refusal to be co-opted by anyone's platform. Instead, Jesus wants Nicodemus to understand that he's the one who needs a radical new start. Now get that. He needs a new start - Nicodemus! His life isn't in crisis, remember? He's not on the fringes socially. Nicodemus actually is elite. He's a church-goer; he's a Bible scholar. He's a community leader; he's a good man. You would like Nicodemus. You would be impressed by him. He has all the credentials. If anyone's life should attract the favor and blessing of God it's Nicodemus, right?

No, "You need to be born again, Nicodemus. You do! Your church membership's not enough. Your charity work, your community involvement, your education and your wealth doesn't count. It does not count. None of it counts. Unless you are born again you cannot see the kingdom of God. You need a new start. You do, Nicodemus. You must be born again." It's not for the fringe people after all, is it? In Jesus' thinking, being born again isn't for the snake handlers and televangelists. If Nicodemus needs the new birth, Nicodemus of all people, well then everyone needs the new birth. The very best of us needs the new birth. You need the new birth.

Suppose you don't have Nicodemus' pedigree. Suppose you're never in church. Suppose your life is far from "together." Doesn't Jesus' message to Nicodemus encourage you? It encourages me. You don't qualify for God's kingdom on the basis of how good you are or how smart you are or how religious you are. That's Jesus' message. When it comes to citizenship in God's kingdom, the entrance qualifications are universally the same - you must be born again. You don't need to clean yourself up first. You don't need a new suit or a new dress to belong to the kingdom. You don't need a moral reformation to gain entry. It's not good folks who qualify and bad folks aren't beyond hope. What you need is to be born again.

II. A Supernatural New Beginning

But then do notice what we learn about the nature and character of this new beginning that Jesus requires. If we must be born again, what on earth are we really talking about? Verses 5 to 8 please. The new birth is a radical new beginning first of all. Now secondly notice the new birth is a supernatural new beginning; a supernatural new beginning. Verses 5 to 8. Jesus' reply has left Nicodemus spluttering in bewilderment. He's been completely blindsided by Jesus. Verse 4, "How can a man be born again when he's old? Can he enter a

second time into his mother's womb? What mother's womb? What are you talking about, Jesus?" Poor Nicodemus does not get it at all. But do look at Jesus' reply. "Truly, truly I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter the kingdom of God." Jesus probably has Ezekiel 36 in mind when he answers Nicodemus this time. It's a famous Old Testament passage that would have been well-known to Nicodemus, the Bible scholar. It promised the day when God would take away hard, stony hearts and give His people new hearts, when He would wash them with clean water and put His Spirit within them. That's what I have in mind, Nicodemus. Born of water and the Spirit; a heart washed clean. New heart created and inhabited by the Spirit. It's quite amazing when you think about it. "Just like we're born physically," verse 6, "the new heart I want you to have is also a kind of birth, but since it's a spiritual birth it happens as a result of the work of My Holy Spirit."

Now do you see the point? This new birth that we all so badly need, it's not something we can manufacture or generate by ourselves. What was your role in your own natural birth? Well, you didn't have one, did you? You were passive. It was your mother who did all the hard work. Dad stood helplessly to one side or perhaps lay unconscious on the floor! Either way, he was quite passive and so were you, right? You did not bring yourself into the world; you were brought into it by the labor of your mother. You contributed nothing to your own beginning, and that is the point Jesus is making with Nicodemus. Being born again is not the effect of performing a particular ritual - praying a prayer, reciting some words, even being baptized or coming to the front. We're born again, Jesus says, by the secret, supernatural work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts. It's mysterious.

That's what verse 8 is all about. Verse 8 - "The 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 born of the Spirit." The wind is mysterious and free. We don't control it; it blows where it wishes. Its effects we experience, of course, but its direction and power we cannot control. That's how it is with the new birth. God does it. It's a gift; it's a miracle. Not something you manufacture or control; something He gives. Nicodemus came to Jesus, didn't he, talking about the signs Jesus performed, the miracles that led him and his party to conclude that Jesus was a great teacher, but Jesus says, "No Nicodemus, the miracle you really need if you're going to see the kingdom of God is the miracle of the new birth. God must break in and change you."

III. A Purchased New Beginning

A radical new beginning, a supernatural new beginning, and then thirdly the new birth Jesus says we all need is a purchased new beginning; a purchased new beginning. Look at verses 9 through 15 please. At this point it's clear that Nicodemus is having a very bad night. The more Jesus explains the more Nicodemus' whole religious world is turned on its head. You can hear the

perplexity in his voice at this point, can't you? Verse 9 - "How can these things be? I don't understand." But he ought to have understood. Verse 10 - "Are you the teacher of Israel and you don't understand these things?" He was a Bible expert after all. He should have grasped the truth about the new birth and yet he misses it completely. And then Jesus tells Nicodemus something critically important. Look at verses 14 and 15. "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." It's another allusion to the Old Testament scriptures. Nicodemus is a Bible scholar after all and so Jesus is meeting him on familiar territory, pointing him back to the Old Testament. This time it comes from the curious little story in the book of Numbers chapter 21 in which the people of Israel disobeyed God and are stricken by a plague of snakes. And as they lay dying from the snake venom, God told Moses to make a bronze statue of a snake and lift it up on a pole so that everyone who looks at the bronze serpent and believes in God's promises might immediately be healed. And now Jesus says to Nicodemus, "The Son of Man," that's His favorite title for Himself, "The Son of Man must be lifted up just like that bronze snake so that just like everyone who looked at Moses' bronze serpent received new life, everyone who comes to Jesus and trusts in Jesus will receive new birth."

Nicodemus at Night vs. Nicodemus at the Cross

One subtle nuance that was probably lost on Nicodemus at the time has to do with the verb that Jesus uses to describe His being lifted up. It only occurs four times in John's gospel and every time that it does it's talking about the cross. When he says that the Son of Man must be lifted up He's saying that the Son of Man must be nailed to the cross. The new life Jesus gives is new life won for us at the cross. Jesus died, the life-giving Son of Man, He died at the cross to secure new birth for all the Nicodemuses of the world - for you and me. He died to forgive our sin. His death secures new life for everyone who comes to Him. Purchases new birth for all who believe. But as I say, Nicodemus likely didn't understand that subtly at the time. There is good reason to believe, however, that he did come to understand it eventually. We meet Nicodemus two more times in John's gospel, once in chapter 7 verse 50 where we find him standing up for Jesus on the floor of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling council. And then we meet him again in John chapter 19 during the aftermath of Jesus' crucifixion. In verse 39 of John 19, Joseph of Arimathea, whom John tells us was a believer in Jesus, and Nicodemus, came and asked permission to remove Jesus' body and prepare it for burial. John makes a special point of reminding us this is the same Nicodemus who earlier came to Jesus here in John chapter 3 under cover of darkness. He came at night.

The point John is making is pretty clear, isn't it? Before, he wanted to remain hidden, incognito, but here he comes to Jesus at last openly, no longer in secret, and he comes to do a specific task. It was a task normally performed by the women of the culture, one who would have rendered a person performing it

ritually unclean according to Jewish law. He came to prepare Jesus' body for burial. But Nicodemus no longer cares about those things. He's willing to be now publically identified with Jesus and the scandal of His cross and he's willing now to be made ritually unclean by contact with Jesus' crucified body according to the very law in which he himself was a leading scholar and expert. But none of it seems to matter to him anymore. He even provides, John tells us, seventy-five pounds worth of spices to anoint the body. That's a huge amount at his own expense.

What is going on in Nicodemus' heart? I think John 3:15 has finally clicked. It's message has finally become clear. Now at last, handling Jesus' crucified body, washing the hands and feet through which the nails had been driven, preparing His broken remains for burial, now as he anoints the body of the Son of Man whom He had seen hours before lifted up on a Roman cross, now the lesson of John 3 has finally sunk in. Now he gets the point. It's not that Jesus offers Nicodemus some additional data, some instruction, some teaching to supplement or clarify his thinking. That's Jesus the good teacher. That's how Nicodemus first came to Him, remember, here is John chapter 3 - one rabbi to another; one teacher to another. But a good teacher, Nicodemus now sees, cannot remedy the problem of his heart, of our hearts. Nicodemus no longer looks to Jesus merely as a teacher; now he looks to Him as the Savior who has been lifted up that everyone who looks to Him may have new life.

What You Really Need, What only Christ Can Give

If you come to Jesus as to a teacher looking for some philosophy, some moral lesson perhaps, some instruction in how to live, you will always, always miss the point. That's not what He offers, at least not primarily and not first. It's not why He came - to help you clean yourself up - not at all. He came to die so that you might live. That's why He came. He came not just to teach us truths; He came to take away hearts of stone and give us hearts of flesh. He came to give us new birth. At the cross I think Nicodemus finally grasped that truth for himself. And that is where we must go too. New birth is the gift of God. It is not the product of the right equation in your thinking, the correct calculation, the best philosophy. New birth is the miracle of supernatural grace and it's ours when we stop trusting ourselves and start trusting Jesus. Only He can save you. Only He can save you. And so you must give up your self-help and your self-trust and your self-confidence and you must put all your hope in the Son of Man who was lifted up for you. It's not how good you are or how bad you are that will make the difference. It's not your religious pedigree that matters. It's whether you will go to Jesus Christ, not to help you along your way, but to save you utterly. You must be born again and only Jesus can do it.

Well maybe tonight you've been intrigued by Jesus. Maybe you have still some unanswered questions you would like to explore further. Maybe you know actually now you need the new birth for yourself and perhaps you'd like to talk to

someone. I'll be down front and I would love to talk with you as you begin to wrestle through some of these issues. You can fill out the response form in the bulletin and let us know and we can respond to you that way. Perhaps you came tonight thinking that a little religious top-up couldn't hurt. Or maybe you came actually desperate for answers. It could even be that you want Jesus to fix everything and change nothing. I do hope, however, that whatever brought you, you've come to see what Jesus really offers you. He offers you a new heart, a radical, supernatural new beginning, which He has purchased for us at the cross. You must be born again. You need Jesus to give it to you and He holds it out to you here tonight. Will you look to Him? Let's pray together.

Father, thank You that Jesus is a Savior for everybody that asks Him, that runs to Him, that trusts in Him. That He gives new birth. That He died to provide a new beginning. That everyone who looks to the Son of Man who was lifted up might receive eternal life. Help all of us, all of us to stop looking to ourselves and our own resources and to look wholly and only to Jesus. For we ask this in His name, amen.

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