

Last week I began a series of messages based on the Gospel of John. We're going to look at encounters that various people had with Jesus. In the last message we looked at John the Baptist, and the times they interacted with one another. Today we'll be looking at a man named *Nicodemus*.

Our adult Sunday School class has just begun using a popular TV series called *The Chosen*. This is the fourth season now of this program that depicts the life of Jesus and His disciples. The episodes are really well done, very imaginative, and have been getting rave reviews. Our Sunday class has begun at the very beginning, Season 1, episode 1.

In the first few episodes, a lot of time is spent on the character Nicodemus. He is portrayed as a man of prominence and wealth, a teacher, and a respected religious leader. This fits in well with how Nicodemus is described by the gospel writer John.

Turn to John, chapter 3. "Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews" (John 3:1). Nicodemus was a "Pharisee". That tells us some important things about Nicodemus.

Pharisees were a religious group who passionately devoted themselves to keeping God's laws. For them, this meant not just keeping the *written* laws in their Scriptures, but the *oral laws and traditions* that grew out of these written laws. For instance, one of the commandments is to honor the Sabbath, and do no work on the Sabbath. But what is "work"? What could you do, what shouldn't you do, in order not to work. A whole host of rules and regulations were set down to help interpret the *written* laws in Scripture.

The Pharisees were insistent on keeping over 600 laws and rules, including all sorts of rituals for ceremonial purification, and they believed everyone should do what they were doing. This was how you showed your devotion to God.

The Pharisees were known as the "chaburah," or "the brotherhood." They entered into this brotherhood by taking a pledge, in front of three witnesses, that they would spend all their lives observing every detail of the scribal law.

Nicodemus was a super religious man, who spent his whole life trying to please God.

It also says that Nicodemus was a leader, or ruler, of the Jews. In the 7th chapter of John's gospel it seems to indicate that Nicodemus was a member of the Sanhedrin. The Sanhedrin was the ruling body of the Jews - like the supreme court of the Jews. It was the final court of appeals for matters regarding Jewish law and religion.

So, Nicodemus was a prominent, influential religious leader.

The only record we have of any actual interaction between Jesus and Nicodemus is described in John 3.

He comes to Jesus at night. Why at night? It doesn't say – we can only guess. Maybe that was a convenient time to meet – it fit both their schedules! My thought is Nicodemus preferred to keep their meeting out of the public eye. Just a guess.

We learn more about Nicodemus as we listen to their conversation. Nicodemus begins, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God" (John 3:2). He refers to Jesus as "rabbi". He respects Jesus, even though, as far as we know, Jesus had no formal training (as far as we know). He was a carpenter. He didn't graduate from rabbi school!

Nicodemus also believes that Jesus has been sent by God – for unless God was with Him, He would never be able to do the signs and miracles that He's doing.

What Jesus says next to Nicodemus is surprising, actually stunning. "Jesus answered him, 'Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above'" (John 3:3). You'd think Jesus would first of all commend Nicodemus for his devotion to keeping the law and pleasing God! You'd think Jesus might even be a bit intimidated by this powerful, influential religious leader. But Jesus says, "I'm telling you the truth, nobody can get into God's kingdom unless they are born from above (the Greek can also mean "born again"). And if you read between the lines, it's like Jesus is saying to Nicodemus, "This is something you need too!"

How does Nicodemus respond to this zinger from Jesus? "Nicodemus said to him, 'How can anyone be born after growing old?' Can one enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?'" (John 3:4). C'mon Nicodemus! You gotta be kidding! How many times have you seen a grown person go back into his or her mother's womb? Is that what you have to do to enter God's kingdom? If that's the case, nobody would be in, or get in! You'd think a man like Nicodemus, with all his religious training and education, wouldn't ask such a childish question!

"Jesus answered, 'Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit'" (John 3:5-6). "Nicodemus, this is not a *physical* birth I'm talking about! It's a *spiritual* happening."

Jesus goes on: "Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from

above. The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit" (John 3:7-8). "Nicodemus, there's a certain mystery to being born again, just like the wind. It's something more to be *experienced* than *explained*."

"Nicodemus said to him, 'How can these things be?'" (John 3:9). Nicodemus says, "I still don't get it!" Jesus responds, "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?" (John 3:10).

John continues the conversation a little bit longer – and we're not sure how much of the remaining part of John 3 was said to Nicodemus. Remember, soon afterwards John writes John 3:16: "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son..."

This is the only meeting between Jesus and Nicodemus recorded in the Bible. The only other time Nicodemus is mentioned is in John, chapter 19. "After these things, Joseph of Arimathea, who was a disciple of Jesus, though a secret one because of his fear of the Jews, asked Pilate to let him take away the body of Jesus. Pilate gave him permission, so he came and removed his body. Nicodemus, who had at first come to Jesus by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about a hundred pounds. They took the body of Jesus and wrapped it with the spices in linen cloths, according to the burial custom of the Jews" (John 19:38-40).

Some of the greatest truths that revealed arose out of conversations that Jesus had with someone. In this case Nicodemus sought out Jesus. How did John know to write this down? Apparently it was a private conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus. I can't help but think Jesus must have told the disciples about Nicodemus' visit, and how He told him about the need to be born again!

Jesus' teaching about the new birth is of utmost importance! Suppose I said to you, "Now I'm going to tell you something that God says we all have to do, or else we can never, ever enter His kingdom, or go to heaven. Would you just blow me off? I hope not! Jesus said, unless we are born again (or born from above, or born anew), we will never enter the kingdom of God.

There are a lot of people who get uncomfortable when you talk about being "born again." Even church people! Even professing Christians! "Oh, I'm all for being a Christian, but I don't know about this 'born again' stuff!"

Let's try to clarify what it means to be born again. It's a *spiritual* process. It's a spiritual rebirth. Birth is the beginning of a new life. Being born again means we begin a new life in Christ. 2 Corinthians 5:17 says, "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ he (or she) is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come."

A baby is born into a *physical world*. Eventually that baby becomes aware of the physical realm – the sights, the sounds, the smells, of physical life here on earth. When we have a spiritual rebirth, we become more and more aware of the *spiritual* realities of life. We have a new relationship with God. We begin to understand the spiritual elements of life, new life with Christ.

Jesus told Nicodemus that being born again is being born of *water*, and the *Spirit*. Water refers to *baptism*. When we are baptized, that symbolizes that we are dying to the old life of sin and being raised again to a new life in Christ. We are cleansed, we are forgiven, we are adopted into God's family. Jesus also said being born again is being born of the *Spirit*. When we receive Christ, the Holy Spirit comes into our life, and He desires to take control of our life, and guide us in God's will. It's being born "from above" – God gives us the new birth through His Spirit. We don't pull this off on our own!

So, here's Nicodemus: a super religious man. A man who believed in God, and who believed Jesus was special and came from God. And yet he wasn't born again. He had religion, but he didn't yet have faith in Christ, and a new life in Christ.

But here's where some sincere followers of Jesus get worried and confused. They say something like this: "I love Christ. I believe I'm a follower of Jesus. But I can't honestly point to a time in my life when I felt I was born again." If that's what you're thinking, I hear you.

It's much easier to believe that a person is born again if he or she lived a life far from God, and was a really bad person, then found Christ, was born again, and their life drastically and obviously was changed. Right. Would any of us really have a hard time being happy about someone being born again if their life was changed dramatically by Christ? The mean and miserable person who became caring and loving? The man or woman who lived in the moral gutter, whose life was cleaned up and made whole by Christ? But what if we can't point to such a dramatic change in our own life? Are we left out in the cold?

No. Some people are blessed to have God in their life early on, even as a child. Maybe they were brought to church as youngsters. They never really sowed their wild oats and did really bad things to mess up their lives. Still sinners – yes. Still in need of forgiveness, yes. But never sunk into really bad habits or lifestyles that messed up their lives. I believe a point in their life when they gave themselves over to Jesus, or committed their lives to God, they were born again.

1 John 5:1 says, "Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God." Now "believe" doesn't just mean believe certain facts about Jesus, but it

means to surrender ourselves to Christ, hold onto Him, trust Him, follow Him. When we do that, we are born again – whether or not we *feel* anything in particular.

John's gospel helps to clarify this too. "He (Jesus) came into the very world he created, but the world didn't recognize him. He came to his own people, and even they rejected him. But to all who believed him and accepted him, he gave the right to become children of God. They are reborn—not with a physical birth resulting from human passion or plan, but a birth that comes from God" (John 1:10-13). Notice, to all who believed in Jesus and accepted Him, he gave the right to become His children, not with a birth based on human passion, but a birth that comes from God."

If you've honestly turned from your sins, and given yourself over to Christ as your Savior and Lord, you have been born again. It's not based on *feeling*, but on what God says and promises in His Word!

I don't honestly know the day, or hour, or even the year I was born again. It probably took place in my high school years, when I got really serious about following Jesus, and surrendered my life to him. I know *physically* I was born October 31st, 19.... never mind. I know the year! I don't know exactly when I was *reborn spiritually* through the new birth, but I know it happened. And that's what's most important!

I'm so thankful that one night, long ago, a very religious man named Nicodemus came to Jesus full of questions, searching for the truth. And even though what Jesus told him might have shocked him, even offended, Nicodemus learned, and now we know, that we can have a spiritual rebirth that comes from God, we can live a new life in Christ that's so much better than any kind of life without Him, and because we have been born again we can share life forever with God, in His kingdom!

Harry L. Kaufhold, Jr.
Community United Methodist Church
January 14, 2024

