

John 3:1-17

by Kris McDaniel

Jesus challenges Nicodemus to start over and know God on His terms, emphasizing the need for radical realignment and the power of the breath of God to bring life and change.

Duration: 23:25

Scripture: Matthew 6:33, John 3:16-17, John 14:6, Acts 4:12, Romans 3:23-24, Romans 10:9, Ephesians 2:8-9

Topics: "New Birth"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker focuses on John 3:16 and its context within the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus. The speaker emphasizes the significance of the signs that Jesus performed and how they point to the presence of God. Nicodemus approaches Jesus with admiration and the speaker relates this to our own encounters with important people. The speaker then delves into the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus, highlighting the references to water, spirit, and wind, and how they connect to the larger biblical narrative. The sermon concludes with the speaker addressing the common desire for congruency in our lives and how Jesus offers the solution to this longing.

Transcript

If you have your Bibles, please turn to John chapter 3. We're going to look at that famous of verses, John 3.16. We're going to read verses 1-16, actually 1-17. And I think that John 3.16, that wonderful verse about why the Father sent the Son, Jesus, into the world is best understood within the context of this conversation that Jesus is having with a fellow named Nicodemus. And so today, we're going to sit with these verses and then we're going to see God connect the dots, I hope.

I'm actually very excited in my heart about sharing with us as a community this afternoon, because I believe that there is some significant power from the Lord in terms of what He would have us know as we read these verses. So I'm going to read and then we'll pray and then we'll spend some time together in the Word. Verse 1. Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews.

He came to Jesus by night and said to Him, 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. Jesus answered him, Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above, or your translation might likely say born again. Nicodemus said to Him, How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born? Jesus said, 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. Do not be astonished that I have 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. Nicodemus said to Him, How can these things be? And that's a biblical way of saying, What on earth are you talking about? And if we're really honest, we hear all this and we think, it's like Jesus is just stringing together an endless list of religious cliches and it can sound like that, can't it? It's like He's going from born again, born above, born of water, born of spirit, and then He starts going on about the wind. And Nicodemus is basically saying what you're thinking.

He's saying, What are you talking about? Jesus, I don't understand what you mean. And Jesus answered him, Are you a teacher of Israel? And yet you do not understand these things? Very truly I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen, yet you do not receive our testimony. If I've told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man, He's speaking of Himself.

And just 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. For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him may not perish, but may have everlasting eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through Him.

This is the word of the Lord. Let's pray and then we're going to meditate together on the scripture. Lord, we thank You for this enigmatic conversation between Nicodemus and Jesus.

We thank You that today we have the joy and privilege of sitting together and contemplating what life anew might look like for us. Father, I thank You for our brother Nicodemus, that he was honest enough to pursue, to inquire, to admit when he was confused, and that he ultimately heard what You were saying to him. I pray now that You would give us the grace to do just the same.

I pray today for an honest spirit of inquiry to be ours. I pray that You would remind us, Lord, that You're not afraid of our questions, You're not afraid of our ponderances, that You long to engage us in meaningful ways, in ways that result in life change. So help us, Lord.

Give us peace today to hear the word and to meditate upon it. In Jesus' name, amen. Amen.

This text is a gift. But before we can unpack that gift, we need to know who it is that we're dealing with. Nicodemus, the scriptures tell us, is a Pharisee.

And in the New Testament, oftentimes Pharisees get a bit of a bad reputation. We think of Pharisees as those people Jesus kind of was coming after all the time. But I want to make it very clear that Pharisees, as a rule, were people who were very rigorous in their devotion to God.

They were people who were given to fasting and prayer and study and giving. These people were oftentimes very highly devoted to the law, to knowing God, and to being exemplary leaders in the church. Now, of course, they were in the Jewish community.

Of course, there were exceptions to that rule. There were whitewashed tombs. There were people who looked the part on the outside and were dead on the inside.

But when this man, Nicodemus, comes to Jesus, we need to understand that he was likely a person who was rigorous and devout in his life before God. He was a person who probably engaged a lot of spiritual practices that we struggle to get our heads and our hearts around. And yet there was something lacking.

There was something that drove Nicodemus to come to Jesus in the darkness. He was also a powerful man. He was a Jewish ruler, the text tells us.

And so he was a person of some influence and leverage in the society of the day. This fellow, in every respect, was an insider. He was a person who knew the rules, who engaged religion, who was a person who did what needed to be done.

His spiritual practices would probably put much of us and many of us in this room to shame. A devout fellow with power. And then we have to ask ourselves the question, once we know who he is, why does he come to Jesus? He says, actually, we've heard of the miracles, we have seen the signs, and no one could engage these signs if it weren't for the presence of God.

He comes to Jesus and rather than really asking a question, he makes a statement. He says, you seem pretty great. I don't know if you've ever had an encounter with an important person.

But oftentimes when we know that we're going to encounter someone who is important, someone that we esteem or admire, we sometimes rehearse what we're going to say to them before we meet them. I had an occasion a year and a half ago or so to sit and share a meal with one of my theological heroes, one of these men that I've read countless books of his, and we sit down in a little group to breakfast, and I say something really stupid. I had rehearsed what I was going to say to try to appear clever but not overly clever, interested but not overly interested, and it just fell flat.

And he's an older man, he's a man in his 80s, and he just looked at me and went, huh, and then started eating his cereal. It's terrible. I think Nicodemus had rehearsed what he was going to say to Jesus.

I think that he had seen enough and heard enough to know that this Jesus fellow was someone he wanted to know. And I believe that what Jesus says to him reveals the real reason why Nicodemus is there in the first place. We know that Nicodemus comes under the cover of darkness because he's a little bit nervous about his peers seeing what he is doing and possibly judging or condemning him for reaching out to Jesus.

So he comes under the cloak of darkness, and he comes first with some flattering words regarding Jesus. And what he says to Jesus is, I can see that you're a man of God. And Jesus says to him, no one can enter the kingdom of God.

Effectively, no one can see what you claim to see unless you're born of God, unless you're born anew or born from above. What Jesus does in this moment is he takes an insider, an elite, and he places him in a vulnerable and precarious situation. Here's why these words born again or born from above would have been really hard for Nicodemus to hear.

Nicodemus had the blood of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob flowing through his veins. He was an insider. No one needed to tell him that he was an outsider because he knew that he was on the inside with regard to

God and the study of God.

He also knew that Jewish people understood that when a foreigner, a pagan, a heathen would convert to Judaism, it was often said of them that they needed to be born again, that they needed to start life totally anew, learning to love and to worship and to serve the God of Israel. That phrase would apply to outsiders, not insiders. You'd never tell an insider that they needed to be born again.

And yet, here's Jesus looking at a man who is a cultural elite, saying, you must be born from above. You must start over. You must be born again.

What Jesus is doing for Nicodemus is what I believe he would do for all of us. So often we take that phrase born again, those of us who consider ourselves to be Christians, who name our name among the Christian community, we think born again is a phrase we've heard so much, so many times that we take it for granted, don't we? We think, of course, I'm born again. And what Jesus is doing with Nicodemus is something that I think is good medicine for us.

He's asking Nicodemus, can you see what you seek as being worth a complete realignment and rearrangement of your whole life? So often for us, Christianity is a tack-on to a really full life. We come to God and we give mental assent to faith. And yet what Jesus is suggesting about being born again, born anew, born from above, about seeing God's kingdom and starting over into a radically new way of living, is something more rigorous than what we often assume with regard to Christian conviction.

He's challenging an insider by saying, are you willing to start over and know me on my terms and not your own? He's placing Nicodemus in a vulnerable position. He's challenging him. And I want to ask you today, before we really get into this text in any kind of detail, do you see your Christian conviction as being connected to a radical realignment in your world view and your way of life? Or is this a decision that you made and then you just keep going like you've been going? I believe that God would have us examine the import behind this conversation with Nicodemus and begin to see our faith for what it can be and frankly what it should be, which is a radical right life realignment that results in a whole new way of being and living and doing.

The status quo is what Jesus is challenging here. He's looking at Nicodemus and he's saying, are you willing to see things really change and shift in your life before God? And to make this point, he says further, no one truly can enter this kingdom unless they're born of water and spirit. This is where it starts to feel like Jesus is just saying religious catchphrase after religious catchphrase.

Here's the problem that we have in our context. We are not truly a people of the book, really. So much of the New Testament, so much of the teaching of Jesus is lost to us because we're not a people who are immediately imaginatively familiar with the Old Testament and the Scripture.

We sometimes treat the Bible like a daily vitamin or an apple. We have just a little bit of it, but we lose this sense of big narrative, of giant story. And when Jesus says these phrases, water and spirit, when he speaks later about the wind, what Jesus is trying to do is aim Nicodemus' good pharisaical imagination to the Bible, to the story of the Bible, to jog his memory and his imagination.

And because so often we are relatively anemic in our biblical worldview, we miss so much of the beauty. And so what I want to do today is help you in short order to see what Nicodemus would have seen, to think of what Nicodemus would have thought of, to begin to get what Jesus was trying to do. Because make no

mistake about it, it's my conviction that Jesus was aiming Nicodemus to a place in the Bible so that he would get what he is saying he wants.

And what Nicodemus is really asking for is what we ask for. He is saying, I do all of these things. I pray, I fast, I try my best.

But when my head hits my pillow, I feel like there is a lack of congruency. There is distance between what I say I am and what I actually am. And that's a problem that has plagued people of faith and conviction since the very beginning, right? This feeling that things are not quite as connected as we wish they were.

And I believe that's exactly what drove Nicodemus to come to Jesus that night. He knew, I've got all of this practice, but I need something else. I'm missing the peaceful connection that I hoped that I would have before God.

And so Jesus says to him, you'll never get there unless you are born of water and spirit. And what Jesus is trying to do here, in my opinion, is get Nicodemus to begin to think about two chapters in the Old Testament. Ezekiel 36 and Ezekiel 37.

What he says in this conversation about water, about spirit, about wind. I want you to think of those words, water, spirit, and wind, as I tell you these stories and read a couple of passages of scripture from the Old Testament to you. From Ezekiel 36, verse 25 and 6, the Lord says this, I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean.

I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you. I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.

When Jesus says, you have got to be born of water and spirit, I believe he's forcing Nicodemus' imagination where it ought to go. And Nicodemus is confronted with what I believe is the fundamental question in this text. And it's the fundamental question in front of each and every one of us.

And that is, can we really change? Can an adult develop a new character late in life? Can your hard heart be supplanted by a soft heart? Can the dirtiness of our life, can the shame of our sin actually be washed clean? Not just positionally clean, but functionally, vibrantly, robustly clean. Not just, I'm a miserable sinner forgiven by God, and I will continue to be a miserable sinner my whole life. I'll continue to fail and falter and cheat and steal and gamble and lie and do all those things.

But can God actually create a change in me to where I become the kind of man or woman that he has longed for me to be? That's the question in front of Nicodemus. That's the question in front of us. And if we analyze the data of our life, we don't get great answers to that question.

If we look at what's actually going on, oftentimes, we can begin to think that Jesus is just simply speaking about a positional reality or a metaphorical kind of imagery. I think Jesus was being fiercely real in what he was saying to Nicodemus. And Nicodemus looks at Jesus, tilts his head and says, What? And then Jesus goes, the wind blows where it blows.

That's the way it is when people are born by the Spirit. He was already in chapter 36 of Ezekiel. In chapter 37 of Ezekiel, we have that picture from the prophet of a valley of dry bones, don't we? If you've been in church, if you've listened to the Prairie Home Companion, at some point you've heard that dim bones, dim bones, dim dry bones.

We know that story. It's in our popular imagination of this vast army, dead as a doornail, bleached white bones from the sun. Useless, but massive.

And the pneuma, the breath of God, breathes onto and into those bones and brings them to life, quickens them, takes them from being useless and empty and dead to being alive and full of vibrancy. When Jesus speaks of water and Spirit and then wind, he's got Nicodemus right where he wants him. And Nicodemus, like us, is then confronted with the real question, which is can fundamental change occur? And if it can, how? Is it me? Is it God? Is it us? Nicodemus' mind at this point is spinning as Jesus is moving him along this pathway, getting him right where he wants him to be.

Because Jesus is trying to get Nicodemus to see that what he needs is the breath of God to breathe into the practices that he's already been living into. And what I say may challenge some of us today, but I think it's worth saying, this fundamental struggle in front of us, the lack of congruency between what we say we believe and what we actually believe and do, brings us to this place of saying, how does positive life change happen? Do I just make it all happen? Do I just work really hard? Or do I do nothing and sit around and wait for God to do everything? How do we go from being guilty, shame-based, trying to follow the rules, people, to being men and women who are full of a whole new kind of life? And I want to be very clear about this. I believe Jesus is saying in no uncertain terms, if you let me give you what I want to give you, you will be born anew, which means living into a whole new kind of reality.

He's not just talking about you'll be forgiven and pitiful. I think he's saying you'll be forgiven and therefore transformed, but not without the breath of God. Without the breath of God, our best efforts are like dry bones.

But with the breath of God, the things that we do, the practices that we practice, are all of a sudden energized by the life of God and become something so beautiful, something so vibrant, something so full of life and power. We need the breath of God. And up until this moment, Nicodemus is a rule follower.

It's no coincidence that this is a Pharisee coming to Jesus, because Jesus is looking at him and saying, you fast, you give, you study, you pray, you serve, you do all of the right things, and yet there's still a gap, isn't there? And the problem for us is that we're not rule followers, most of us. The problem for most of us in this room is that unlike Nicodemus, unlike St. Paul, unlike Jesus, we were not given a spiritual ethic of spiritual practices and disciplines. And we can go, oh, you don't need that stuff.

I want to ask you a question. Do you think for a minute that St. Paul, when he was solemn, persecuting the church, and a Pharisee of Pharisees, rigorous and devout in his faith, do you think for a minute that when Paul met Jesus on the Damascus Road, he said, I don't ever have to read, pray, study, fast, serve. I'm good, I'm liberated.

And he did a little Holy Ghost dance, and that was it. I believe that Paul's practices moved into a place of the breath of God breathing on them, and there was a vibrancy that allowed him to say with conviction, follow me, be an imitator of me as I imitate Jesus. I believe that Nicodemus had all of this stuff, and it was like Kinlan waiting for the fire of God.

It was like an army waiting for the breath of God. And so very real, very honestly, in many ways we are at a disadvantage when we read a text like this. Because Nicodemus had all of this practice, all of this discipline in place, and we're a pretty darn undisciplined people.

We weren't taught how to fast and pray. We weren't taught how to study. We weren't taught how to meditate and to be quiet.

We weren't taught all these things that are a given in the New Testament. And so sometimes we just hope that we're going to catch it, and then we're going to become whole and holy without any kind of participation under the fire and the grace and the breath of God. And yet what I believe we see when we look at a text like this is something that is so hard for us to get our hands around.

And it's this. Grace is violently opposed to earning, but it is not opposed to working. Grace is a friend to participation with God.

Now make no mistake about it, we cannot earn any goodness or merit from God on our own. But He does call us to see our life come into a place of submission to Him where the breath of God actually can breathe on those dead bones. See, spiritual practice for you and me are dead dry bones apart from the breath of the Holy Spirit.

But when the Holy Spirit breathes on spiritual practice, a kind of life emerges that is so powerful. It's what was being referenced by St. Paul in Romans 8 and what we just read about putting to death the deeds of the flesh. God is calling us, I believe, to see our life before God, not just as a prayer that we pray at an altar, not just a mental intellectual ascent that we make at a given time in our life, but an invitation to a whole new kind of way of living.

And here's the deal, y'all. We have very flawed worldviews, especially if you grew up in the church. Especially if you grew up in the church in the South.

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