

Sermon by Terry Trivette
That's a Good Question – 20
John 3:1-10
“The News of the New Birth”

1. Because of his writings and inventions, Benjamin Franklin was probably one of the most famous men of his day. As a result, many people wrote letters to him, and corresponded with him. Probably the most important letter Franklin ever received was sent to him by the great revival preacher, George Whitfield. The letter said, “I find that you grow more and more famous in the learned world. As you have made such progress in investigating the mysteries of electricity, I now humbly urge you to give diligent heed to the mystery of the new birth. It is a most important and interesting study and, when mastered, will richly repay you for your pains.”ⁱ

2. In what is probably the most famous Bible chapter, John chapter 3, there is recorded the story of a man who came to investigate Jesus.

3. The conversation that occurred that night between this man and Jesus constitutes one of the most significant theological discussions in history.

4. The man’s name was Nicodemus, and in his conversation with Jesus he was confronted with the revolutionary news of the new birth.

5. Before Nicodemus could even begin his interview, the Lord very abruptly said, “Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.”

6. Though these words were first uttered some 2,000 years ago, and have been read and reread, preached and proclaimed by millions since, the new birth is still news to the vast majority of people.

7. It could be that you are like this man Nicodemus. That is, it could be that there is something very important that Jesus wants to impart to you. Perhaps, like this man, you need to hear (possibly again) the news of the new birth.

8. There are three things that I want us to observe about this man Nicodemus, and the truth that Jesus conveyed to Him. Notice first of all:

I. THE POSITION NICODEMUS HELD

1. John chapter three opens with an introduction. Verse one says, “There was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews.”

2. This biographical information is important, because it tells us something about the rank and stature of this man who came one night to meet with Jesus.

3. Nicodemus reminds us that no matter who we are, high class, low class, or no class, we all need to have a meeting with the Lord Jesus.

4. Notice a couple of things about this man Nicodemus, and his position in life. Notice first of all that:

A. He was a respected man

1. Verse one tells us that Nicodemus was “a ruler of the Jews.” This phrase indicates that he was a member of the ruling body in Israel, the Sanhedrin.

2. The Sanhedrin was the highest authority for the Jewish nation. It was the “Supreme Court” of its day. It controlled religious as well as civil affairs in Israel.

3. Only the most educated and important men of the day would have had the privilege of sitting on this council.

4. It is likely, therefore, that almost everyone in Israel would have known Nicodemus by name. They would have looked up to him with respect and reverence.

5. On Thursday of this past week, an organization called “The Reputation Institute” released a report on “2008’s most admired CEO’s”. Amid the scandals surrounding so many business leaders, the Reputation Institute polled Americans to see which leaders they most admired. In order, the most admired CEO’s for 2008 are: 1. Bill Gates, 2. Donald Trump, 3. Warren Buffett, 4. Oprah Winfrey, and 5. Steve Jobs.”

6. Had there been such a thing as “The Reputation Institute” in that day, it is likely that Nicodemus would have made their list.

7. Nicodemus had what so many people strive for – the respect and admiration of others. He was a respected man.

8. Notice something else about this man Nicodemus and the position he held in life. He was not only a respected man, but notice also that:

B. He was a religious man

1. Look again at verse one. It says, “There was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews.” Notice that he was “of the Pharisees.”

2. When most church people hear the word “Pharisee”, they think “hypocrite”. While that certainly was true of many of the Pharisees, that is not what the title originally meant.

3. The Pharisees were a devout, Jewish religious party. They were the fundamentalists of their day. They held to the authority of Scripture, and the traditional doctrines of the Jewish faith.

4. They would have been the “religious right” of their era. They were meticulous in their observance of the Law, and strict in their doctrine and theology.

5. No one would have ever accused Nicodemus of loose living, or of being a theological liberal. He was religious in every sense of the word.

6. Nicodemus was a highly respected and openly religious man. Yet, in John 3 we find him sitting down at a meeting with the radical and controversial new preacher – Jesus of Nazareth.

7. There is an indication here that all his societal respect and all his strict religion were not sufficient to answer the deepest needs of his soul.

8. Notice a second truth we observe about this man and his meeting with Jesus. Notice not only *the position Nicodemus held*, but notice also further:

II. THE PRINCIPLE NICODEMUS HEARD

1. It is interesting to me that in this meeting, Nicodemus doesn't get to say very much before he is hit with the blow of a strong truth from the lips of the Lord.

2. Verse two says that Nicodemus opened the conversation with a compliment. He said, “Rabbi, we know that thou art a teacher come from God: for no man can do these miracles that thou doest, except God be with him.”

3. Almost as if Jesus paid no attention to this statement, verse three says, “Jesus answered and said unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.”

4. With that statement, Nicodemus was confronted with principle of the new birth, an event that Jesus said was essential to seeing the kingdom of God.

5. Notice with me a couple of things about this principle, and what it meant to Nicodemus. First of all:

A. It contradicted his learning

1. Jesus told Nicodemus that no man could see the kingdom of God without experiencing a second birth. Later on in verse seven, Jesus repeats emphatically the same principle, saying, “Ye must be born again.”

2. Never mind for the moment what it meant to be born again, the fact that this event was necessary for entering the kingdom of God, and experiencing salvation, was something that would have totally contradicted what Nicodemus had learned as a devout Jew.

3. Nicodemus had been taught that being a part of the kingdom relied on two simple things – being Jewish, and obeying the Law of Moses.

4. That was only one birth, and one behavior. Nothing else was necessary, according to the religion Nicodemus had followed so carefully.

5. In reality, the concept of the new birth doesn't just clash with Judaism. The idea of a second birth goes against what *most* people believe to be true.

6. Most people, like Nicodemus, suppose they are right with God. Most people assume, like Nicodemus, that the path they are on is the right one.

7. When the Bible tells them that the life they are living is in fact wrong, and that they need a whole, new life, nothing short of a second birth, it goes against what they thought was true.

8. In his 1976 presidential campaign, Jimmy Carter made the phrase “born-again” part of his résumé. Since that time, the term has become a part of our cultural vocabulary.

9. Yet, we need to understand the implications of that term. When Jesus said, “Ye must be born again”, He was saying that the life you have lived is not good enough. You need a new life, a new birth, if you are going to make it to heaven.

10. Just as it was for Nicodemus, this principle is contradictory to what most people believe. Notice not only that this principle contradicted his learning, but notice also further that:

B. It convicted his life

1. As Nicodemus sat there that night, hearing this teaching about the necessity of a new birth, he realized that though he the respect of his neighbors, and though he was deeply religious, he had never experienced a change so radical that it could be described as being “born again”.

2. Nicodemus had been born once, and in all his years his life had never been changed by any sort of “second birth.”

3. If this “new birth” was required in order to see the kingdom of God, then Nicodemus was in trouble. He knew that nothing like being “born again” had ever happened to him.

4. While no one remembers being born the first time, if you have been born again, you will remember it. Being born into a brand new, altogether different life is an experience that you will know when it happens.

5. Listen again to the words of Jesus in verse three. He said, "Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God."

6. Now look back over your life. Can you pinpoint a time when that sort of experience happened to you? Can you remember a point where your old life ended and a new life began?

7. Nicodemus, for all his public respect and pious religion did not possess the requirement of the new birth. The teaching of Jesus convicted his life.

8. Alexander Pope was a British poet that lived during the 18th century. His work is revered only behind that of Shakespeare and Tennyson. One day, in frustration with himself, Pope muttered the prayer, "Lord, make me a better man." His spiritually minded assistant said, "It would be easier to make you a *new* man."

9. It is exactly that teaching that so cut the heart of Nicodemus. He *was* a better man. He was better than most all of the people in Israel. Yet, Jesus looked him in the eye, and confronted him with the principle that a better man was not enough. He had to become a *new* man.

10. There is one more truth that I want us to observe from this text. Notice not only *the position Nicodemus held*, and *the principle Nicodemus heard*, but notice also thirdly:

III. THE PROBLEM NICODEMUS HAD

1. Look at the response Nicodemus gave to the notion of a "second birth". In verse four, he asks, "How can a man be born when he is old? can he enter the second time into his mother's womb, and be born?"

2. Then, in verse nine, this great religious leader's last recorded words in this chapter are, "How can these things be?"

3. Warren Wiersbe said, "Nicodemus came 'by night,' and he was still in the dark. He could not understand the new birth even after Jesus had explained it to him."ⁱⁱⁱ

4. Nicodemus, in spite of all his theological training and religious experience faced a critical problem. He could not grasp the basic teaching about a man's need to be born again.

5. In much the same way, there are multitudes of people today who know Scripture, and understand theological principles, and yet they have a major spiritual problem. That is, they have missed the most basic doctrine of Christianity. "Ye must be born again."

6. Notice a couple of things that Nicodemus failed to grasp. First of all, He did not:

A. Realize the priority of the new birth

1. Look again at verse seven. Nicodemus was obviously baffled by the teaching he was hearing. When Jesus saw his surprise, He said, "Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be born again."

2. Can you hear the arguments swirling in Nicodemus' head? He probably said to himself, "I thought if you went to the Temple regularly, you would surely make it to heaven." "I believed that if you read the Scriptures, and tried to obey what God said, that would be enough to earn the favor of God."

3. Nicodemus failed to grasp something that so many have missed as well. Religion can't save anyone. Good works aren't good enough to make up for a man's sin.

4. All men are born into the race of Adam. Adam was a sinner, and he passed on that sinful nature to all of his descendants. The only way for a man to escape the curse of that sin is to be born again, into a new family.

5. I recently had some work done on my truck, and the mechanic told me something interesting. He said that some parts manufacturers had been deceiving customers by taking old parts, repairing them, cleaning them up, and then selling them as new.

6. I fear that many people are trying to fix their old lives, cleaning them up, attempting to repair what is broken, in hopes that their efforts will get them into heaven.

7. What those people fail to realize is that salvation is not a reconditioning or a reformation. Salvation is regeneration.

8. Your old life, cleaned up and fixed up won't do. You must be born again. The new birth is a priority and a necessity!

9. Nicodemus' problem was not only that he failed to realize the priority of the new birth, but notice also further that he did not:

B. Recognize the process of the new birth

1. Nicodemus asked, "How can these things be?" Notice verse five. Jesus said, "Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God."
2. He went on in verse six and said, "That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit."
3. Nicodemus didn't understand the process of the new birth, but it was not because Jesus did not try to explain it.
4. Jesus explained that the new birth was first of all *a supernatural experience*. In verse five, Jesus said that the new birth was the result of the "water and of the Spirit."
5. The "water" there refers to the Word of God. The "Spirit" is the Holy Ghost. These two are supernatural elements. They are not something that a man can create or control.
6. In other words, the new birth is not something you do; it is something God alone can do. Jesus explained that the new birth is a supernatural experience, and also, it is *a spiritual experience*.
7. Look again at verse six. Jesus said, "That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit." Our first birth is a physical birth. It involves flesh giving birth to flesh.
8. The new birth, however, is different. It involves the Holy Spirit giving birth to a new spiritual nature. It is a spiritual event.
9. Salvation is a spiritual work. It is not, "...the reformation of the outward man, it is not the education of the natural man, it is not the purification of the old man, but it is the creation of a new man."^{iv} The creation of a new man is a supernatural and spiritual process.

1. Look back at the text, and notice the question that Jesus posed to Nicodemus in verse 10. He asked him, "Art thou a master of Israel, and knowest not these things?" That is a good question.
2. Nicodemus knew the Bible, and knew religion, and yet he did not know the fundamental truth that a man had to be born again in order to enter heaven.
3. The old preacher from Memphis, Dr. R.G. Lee said, "Nicodemus was blind – and blind to the fact that he was blind. Nicodemus was ignorant – and ignorant of

the fact of his ignorance. Nicodemus was dead – and dead to the fact that he was dead. Nicodemus was lost – and lost to the fact that he was lost.”^v

4. Perhaps Jesus would say to you today, “Are you a Baptist, and yet you don’t know that you must be born again?” “Are you a church member, and yet you don’t know that you must be born again?”

5. Of all the things you must know, nothing is more important than the news of the new birth. Have you been born again?

ⁱ Wiersbe, Warren, Be Alive, (Victor Books, Wheaton, IL, 1987), p. 34

ⁱⁱ Reputation Institute Announces 2008 Most Admired U.S. CEOs, 10/22/08, *PRWeb*, 10/23/08, <http://www.prweb.com/releases/2008/10/prweb1498944.htm>

ⁱⁱⁱ Wiersbe, Warren, p. 38

^{iv} Pink, A.W., Exposition of the Gospel of John, (Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids, MI, 1975), p. 115

^v Lee, R.G., The Must of the Second Birth, (Fleming H. Revell, Westwood, NJ, 1959), p. 54