

Teaching the Teacher

John 3:1-17

Over 15 years ago, Pastor David Platt published a book called *Radical: Taking Back Your Faith from the American Dream*. In it, he talks about how American Christians have manipulated the gospel to fit our cultural preferences. He shows what Jesus actually said about being his disciple—then invites you to believe and obey what you have heard”. In fact, he put it this way: “A relationship with Jesus requires absolute, undivided, exclusive affection.” That’s quite the statement, and a standard few, if any, can live up to.

Of course, it wasn’t just him. Others have thought that. Christian denominations that claim a more visible role for the Holy Spirit, where people can speak in tongues and do miraculous healings, teach that if you haven’t had those gifts manifest, you don’t have enough faith. Groups that teach that you have to decide to follow Jesus often expect some sort of great conversion experience before your baptism as an adult. Martin Luther joined the monastery because he wanted to be more than just an ordinary believer, devoting his whole life to God.

Yet we see through the Bible that following Jesus wasn’t just one way. Yes, when Jesus called Peter, Andrew, James, and John, they left their nets and boats and families to follow him. Matthew left his tax booth when Jesus called him. Jesus told the rich young man to sell all he had and give to the poor to become a disciple. Yet he also told others to not leave where they were, but to instead stay. Paul didn’t call everyone to join him on his missionary journeys, but instead told people to bloom where they were planted. Being a disciple didn’t look the same for everyone.

That’s why it’s always interesting to look at the man featured in today’s lesson, Nicodemus. Nicodemus was a Pharisee, and Pharisees kept the Law. Pharisees followed the Ten Commandments. Pharisees paid tithes, guarded the Sabbath, and strictly kept Old Testament regulations and requirements. And they wore long robes.

Nicodemus was also a member of the Jewish ruling council—the Sanhedrin—the seventy-member Jewish Senate. The Sanhedrin judged people according to a book called the Mishnah. The Mishnah contains 613 commandments. There is no room for error in the Mishnah. Once you’re out, you stay out. Once you’re down, you stay down. You can never bounce back.

As a Pharisee and a member of the Sanhedrin, Nicodemus believed that there are no second chances. There is no grace. There is no forgiveness. None. Zero. Zilch. Nada. Never! So, you’d better be careful. And look over your shoulder. And second-guess yourself. You’d better watch what you wear, how you act, the length of your prayers, and the amount of money you give. Because there’s no bouncing back.

Nicodemus first came to Jesus at night (John 3:2). More, however, is going on than just the time of day. Darkness describes people who rebel against Jesus. “The light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness” (John 3:19). Remember Judas? He betrayed Jesus. When? “It was night” (John 13:30). Coming to Jesus at night describes Nicodemus. He’s in the dark, just like Judas. Nicodemus is lost in the spiritual darkness of legalism.

The same darkness engulfs us when we don't believe in second chances, when we won't forgive, when we refuse to embrace grace, when we won't turn the other cheek or walk the extra mile. It gets dark—very, very dark. That's why Jesus says to Nicodemus, "Unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God" (John 3:3). There is no chitchat here. No idle talk. Jesus goes straight to the point. Jesus says our best won't do, our works won't work. We must be born again. In John 3:1–8, Jesus uses the term "born" eight times—eight times in eight verses! Do you think Jesus is trying to make a point?

How active were you when you were born? Were you talking on a cellphone with your mother, telling her when to push? Did the doctor ask you to measure the contractions and report from inside the womb? Did you place your hands against the top of the womb and push yourself out? Postpartum celebrations applaud the work of the mother, not the child. Mom gets a medal. The child gets a pacifier and a blanket!

Here's the point. We were all passive when we were born. We didn't do a thing. We weren't born because of what we did. Our mother did all the work. The same is true for our spiritual birth. God does all the work.

Do you know the most quoted Bible verse in America? "God helps those who help themselves." But there's a problem with that. It's not in the Bible! God doesn't help those who help themselves, because God knows we cannot help ourselves. God knows that He has to do 100 percent of the work! That's why Jesus uses "born" eight times in eight verses! "Jesus answered, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God'" (John 3:5). We are born again of water and the Spirit! And

what's that called? Holy Baptism! The Holy Spirit is really present—in, with, and under the water—creating new life!

Martin Luther writes in his Small Catechism that Baptism "works forgiveness of sins, rescues from death and the devil, and gives eternal salvation to all who believe this, as the words and promises of God declare" (SC, Baptism, Second Part). The reformer writes in his Large Catechism, "There is no work done here by us, but a treasure, which God gives us and faith grasps" (LC IV 37). Also from his Large Catechism: "Here in Baptism there is freely brought to everyone's door such a treasure and medicine that it utterly destroys death and preserves all people alive" (LC IV 43).

If you've been baptized, you have new eyes to see God's beauty, a new mind to understand God's Word, a new voice to sing God's praises, new hands for service, and new feet to run the race of faith.

Nicodemus asked, "How can these things be?" (John 3:9). Start all over? Bounce back because you're baptized? Nonsense! Nicodemus is still living in the darkness of rules and regulations. And don't forget his long robes! Jesus answered, "Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?" (John 3:10). As Israel's teacher, Nicodemus should have understood that the Old Testament is all about bouncing back.

Abraham grew up in a house full of idols, tried to pass off his wife as his sister twice, and had a child with his wife's servant instead of waiting and trusting in God's timing. God called him to bless the world. Moses killed a man and doubted his abilities. God called him to lead His people out of Egypt. Aaron built a golden calf. God called him to be Israel's first high

priest. Jeremiah 31:31 promises a new covenant. Ezekiel 36:26 promises a new heart. And Lamentations 3:22–23 says that God’s mercies are new every morning.

God is the Giver. Grace is His idea. Forgiveness comes from Him. Can God really be that generous? that loving? that giving? Yes. Yes. And yes! In John 3:16, Jesus doesn’t say, “whoever achieves” or “whoever succeeds.” Jesus says, “whoever believes.”

One of the most genre of reality TV shows is that of home renovations. Chip and Joanna Gaines turned their Fixer Upper show into all kinds of spin off businesses. This Old House just celebrated its 47th anniversary. Property Brothers, Flip or Flop, and other shows create tension as houses get renovated. There is always more to do than first expected, there is always some sort of cost overrun and time crunch, yet the final product always looks wonderful because of the work of the contractors.

Buying a fixer-upper gives us a picture of what God did for each of us when we were baptized. We were dead, disobedient, depraved, and doomed. But when we were born again through water and the Spirit, we were delivered! God could have said, “I’ll make all new things. The old won’t do.” But instead, God said, “I’ll make all things new, even and especially you!”

Did Nicodemus believe? Did Nicodemus leave the darkness of legalism? Did Nicodemus embrace grace? John 3 wasn’t the end of the story. We read later in John’s gospel these words: “Nicodemus also, who earlier had come to Jesus by night, came bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds in weight” (John 19:39). When the other disciples, the ones who gave up everything to follow Jesus, had denied and fled, who was there to

help prepare Jesus for burial? Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea, two secret disciples, were the ones who got Jesus’ body from the cross to the tomb.

Imagine that! Nicodemus, the one who came in the dark, now lives in the light. The one who crept through the shadows now comes to the cross. And the one who was caught in the clutches of legalism is now living in the splendor of God’s grace. Nicodemus! He bounced back. And so shall we! Every single time! Amen.

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