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**“NOT RELIGION....LIFE!”**  
**John 3:1-17**

☑ I have a confession to make. I used to be much more “religious” than I am now, as some people define it.

I worked hard to acquire biblical knowledge, confess true doctrine, and be on my best behavior. I strove to be the one who had all the right answers, who did as he was told, and who stayed as far away from sin (and sinners) as was humanly possible.

Consequently, a lot of grownups called me a “good boy.” I was a favorite with my teachers. At church I was sometimes held up as an example of the ideal child.

And it was good for me to know something about the Bible, to be faithful in worship, and to participate fully in Sunday school and Trailblazers and VBS and Bible camp. It was good not to believe in heresies, not to swear, not to tell dirty jokes, not to smoke, and not to be an alcoholic or a junkie (though, in retrospect it did not take a great deal of effort for a 10-year-old to stay drug-free in small town Minnesota in 1976).

Yet, much about me was *not* good: I was proud; I did not love sinners; and, my goal was to impress God and other people. For all my knowledge, effort and so-called virtue I neither knew Jesus nor loved him.

In fact, it wasn't until I came to the edge of suicide and literally cried out to God that my eyes were opened, my mind was enlightened, and my heart was warmed. He freed me from dead religion, poured his life into me, and started changing me from the inside out. I have been far less “religious” ever since. I have a long way to go, but I do know Jesus and I love him.

I share this because I have a lot in common with Nicodemus. (As an aside, I have known about him for most of my life, but I never saw our similarities until this week, when I was preparing this message!)

Please turn with me to John 3:1-17 {p 1,081}.

☐ V 1: **“Now there was a Pharisee, a man named Nicodemus, who was a member of the Jewish ruling council.”** Nicodemus is a good man. Of all the groups he could belong to: the profane Tax Collectors and Sinners, the hyper-liberal Sadducees, the power-hungry Herodians, the revolutionary Zealots, or the isolationist Essenes – the Pharisees are the ones who look and sound most like Jesus.

☐ V 2: **“He came to Jesus at night and said, ‘Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him.’”**

Nicodemus' statement is not as candid as it sounds. It conceals some questions: Are you really **“from God”**? Are you the Messiah? We might expect Jesus to answer directly; instead, He turns the dialogue in a whole different direction.

☐ V 3: **“Jesus replied, ‘Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born again.’”** How does that connect with what Nicodemus said?

◆ This is not at all confusing if we put it context. Take a look at Jn 2:23-25 {TNIV}: **“While he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Festival, many people saw the signs he was performing and believed in his name. But Jesus would not entrust himself to them, for he knew all people. He did not need human testimony about them, for he knew what was in them.”**

The people look at Christ's outward actions and “believe” in him; but He looks at their inward being, and

He does not believe in them. That is the context against which this interaction in vv 1-17 is set.

Nicodemus comes with praise and a kind of belief, but Jesus knows what is in him. For all his knowledge, religious effort and so-called virtue, Nicodemus neither knows God nor loves him. His eyes are blind, his mind is dark, and his heart is cold. He cannot grasp the Truth.

① 1<sup>st</sup>, Nicodemus is prideful.

He calls Jesus, “**Rabbi.**” It is a term of honor; but since he is also a Rabbi he is speaking *as one holy teacher to another*. Nicodemus wants to determine whether Jesus is the Messiah, yet he deals with him as if they were peers on an equal footing!

To be sure, Nicodemus is courteous and even complimentary. Pride can be *nice* when it needs to be.

But it is fatal to our relationship with Christ. Why depend on God when I can do it myself? Why cry for mercy when I can earn forgiveness with good deeds? Why cast myself on God’s grace when everyone knows how good I am? I speak from experience: pride blinds the eyes of the heart. We cannot receive salvation and follow Jesus without humility.

② 2<sup>nd</sup>, Nicodemus is superficial.

His faith hinges on externals. “**No one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him,**” Nicodemus says.

But what happens when the miracles lose their novelty? What happens when our diseases are healed and our bellies are full? What happens when Jesus pairs his miracles with challenges to {Mt 5:39} “**turn... the other cheek**” and to {Mt 10:38} “**take up [our] cross**”? And what happens when He chooses not to do a miracle at all?

Nicodemus should invest his faith in Christ, who sometimes does miracles; instead, like many others, he

puts his trust in the miracles themselves. If we choose to follow Jesus on that basis, our faith will fail.

③ 3<sup>rd</sup>, Nicodemus is worldly.

In v 4, he asks, “**How can anyone be born when they are old? Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother’s womb.**”

○ Yes, he is being overly-literal; but his real problem is his unthinking ethnocentrism. Nicodemus believes (rightly) that Gentiles need spiritual rebirth. At the same time, he assumes (wrongly) that all decent Jews will inevitably “**see the kingdom of God.**”

And so Jesus’ statement that even a law-abiding Pharisee needs new birth makes no sense to him. It is not just that Nicodemus *disagrees* with the idea; it is so far off his radar it has never *occurred* to him, and he can barely *make sense of it*. Worldly thinking will blind us.

Are you really “**from God**”? Nicodemus asks. Are you the Messiah?

Jesus does not answer. Instead, He jolts him from spiritual slumber with a series of shocking statements.

□ V 3: “**Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born again.**”

□ Vv 5-6: “**Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit.**”

† We need a 180° reorientation of our being.

† We need an entirely new relationship of *agape* love to God, self, and others.

† We need transformation from the inside out.

Following Jesus is not about religion. That will trap us in a downward spiral of pride, superficiality, and worldliness every time.

Biblical knowledge, faithful doctrine, and appropriate behavior are essential – but as the fruit, not the root – of discipleship.

Like Nicodemus, we might well ask **“How can anyone be born when they are old?”**

□ In vv 14-15 Jesus says: **“Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him.”**

☑ The event He refers to is recorded in Numbers, when Israel was journeying through the desert. The Lord had just liberated them from Egypt, led them through the Red Sea, and was giving them water to drink and manna and quail to eat. It was gift after gift, miracle after miracle. Yet the people complained bitterly {Nu 21:5-6} **“against God and...Moses... ‘Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? .... We detest this miserable food!’”** Consequently, God sent **“venomous snakes among them ...and many...died.”**

Israel realized their sin, confessed it, and cried for help. God told Moses to make a bronze snake and put it on a pole. All who were bitten and looked at it were healed. Having been under a sentence of death, God gave them new life. It was as though they were reborn.

When did this happen? It happened *after* God gave the Ten Commandments and the purity laws and the kosher laws. It happened after God established the priesthood and the system of sacrificial worship. Israel had religion – they had all the religion they were going to get -- and it could not save them. What they needed was that primitive cross and the faith to follow God’s instructions, to look at it and be saved.

Jesus uses that narrative with Nicodemus because what religion can never achieve, Jesus can. If, by faith, we are united with him in his death we will also partake of his new, resurrection life. We are reborn!

□ V 16-18: **“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save it. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already.”**

Religion leaves us with blind eyes, a darkened mind, and a cold heart. Jesus does not give us religion: He gives us life – life {Jn 10:10} **“to the full.”**

In the end, Nicodemus was full of life. He became a faithful, courageous, vibrant disciple. When the Sanhedrin railroaded Jesus on false charges, Nicodemus demanded that the Lord be given a fair trial. And after Jesus was crucified, Nicodemus went to the authorities, requested the body, and buried it in the tomb he had built for himself. In the end, Nicodemus risked his seat on the Sanhedrin, his social standing, and even his life for Jesus. No one does that unless they love him!

By the grace of God I, too, have left religiosity behind to follow Jesus.

Jesus invites us to repent of pride, superficiality, and worldliness. He calls us to shed religion. He offers us a 180° reorientation of our being, a new relationship of agape love to God, self, and others, and transformation from the inside out.

Thanks be to God!