

# Sermon Outline

## “LIFE IN HIS NAME”: THE PURSUIT OF WHOLENESS AND THE GOSPEL OF JOHN

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### YOU MUST BE BORN AGAIN (JOHN 3:1-8)

#### I. Introduction

#### II. Nicodemus Everyman (John 3:1)

- A. Chapter 3 begins on this note: “Now there was a *man* of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews” (v 1).
- B. Read 3:1 with 2:25.
  - 1. We saw at the end of chapter two that Jesus “needed no one to bear witness about *man*, for he himself knew what was in *man*” (2:25).
  - 2. By starting chapter three with a statement about “a man,” John is elaborating on the little comment he had made at the end of chapter two.
  - 3. At the end of chapter two, John gave us Jesus’ evaluation of sinful humanity. And now in chapter three, we are confronted with just one representative of this sinful humanity.
- C. Of all the members of society that could be held out as an example of sinful humanity, John chooses a *Pharisee* who was a *ruler of the Jews*.  
—Implication: If the top guy in society stands condemned apart from the grace of God, what more the rest of humanity?
- D. A closer look at Nicodemus
  - 1. He is Pharisee.
  - 2. He was a ruler of the Jews.
- E. How does Nicodemus relate to us?
  - 1. Nicodemus the Pharisee
    - a. We see the link between Nicodemus and us more clearly once we consider that the Law of Moses was the very Law of God.
    - b. When Jesus addresses Nicodemus, he was indirectly addressing every devout religious or moral person in the world.
    - c. If Jesus is addressing the best that society has to offer, it follows, in this case, that he is also addressing everyone else who falls way below such people in the area of moral conduct:
  - 2. Nicodemus the ruler

- a. By addressing Nicodemus, Jesus was also addressing everyone who has some level of standing or influence over society.
- b. Consequently, Jesus is also addressing everyone who falls way below that rank in the eyes of society.

F. Summary:

1. Rabbi Nicodemus is truly a good representative of the world outside the grace of God.
2. He is the natural man at his best.
3. But if Nicodemus is considered under the rebuke of the Word, what more the rest of us who have neither his learning, moral character, nor social standing?

### III. Nicodemus Comes to Jesus by Night (John 3:2)

- A. Perhaps Nicodemus “came to Jesus by night,” because he was afraid of what his colleagues might think of him if they had seen him having a serious, cordial dialogue with Jesus.
- B. The fact that Nicodemus wanted a serious dialogue with Jesus might indicate that he was genuinely curious about Jesus, though he was not yet ready to commit.
- C. Nicodemus says to Jesus, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him.”
  1. Nicodemus addresses Jesus as a rabbi, a teacher.
  2. Nicodemus acknowledges that Jesus is a teacher sent by God, “for no one can do these *signs* that you do unless God is with him.”
- D. Nicodemus is like someone who agrees that Jesus is a prophet, but doesn’t want to dismiss the other great religious teachers of the time.
  1. While this is some kind of faith, it is not faith that receives Jesus for who he is; or rests in Jesus alone for eternal life.

### IV. How One Gets to See the Kingdom of God (John 3:3)

- A. Jesus doesn’t appear to accept Nicodemus’ complement. Instead, he turns right away to the topic of the Kingdom of God and who can enter it.
- B. He does this perhaps because he knows that this was the main topic that Nicodemus had come to ask him about.
- C. For many Jews of the day, the kingdom of God was *The Thing* that people were looking forward to.
- D. Since Jesus had been preaching about the kingdom of God and performing signs of power (cf. Mt 4:17), Nicodemus may have wanted to know Jesus’

thoughts on the matter. Most of all, he wanted to know how one could enter the kingdom of God.

- E. It is to this question that Jesus speaks: “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God” (v 3).

## V. How Can We Be Re-Born? (John 3:4)

- A. What does it mean to be “born again”? Apparently, this was the same question Nicodemus had in mind.
- B. Nicodemus asks Jesus: “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?” (v 4)

## VI. Born of Water and the Spirit (John 1:5-7)

- A. But physical birth is precisely what Jesus did not mean: “Jesus answered, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of *water* and the *Spirit*, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.’”
1. “Born again” = “born of water and the Spirit.”
  2. “Born of water” sounds a lot like baptism.
  3. But the real key here is “Spirit.”
    - a. The Spirit of whom Jesus speaks is the *Holy Spirit*.
    - b. While water could very well refer to water baptism, the only reason water baptism is effective is because it is the symbol of the giving of the Holy Spirit.
    - c. The Holy Spirit is the One who brings about the rebirth of the human spirit, enabling him or her to enter the kingdom of God.
- B. There is basis to equate the symbol of water with the Holy Spirit.
- John 7:37-39: “On the last day of the feast, the great day, Jesus stood up and cried out, ‘If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink.  
<sup>38</sup>Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, ‘Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.’” <sup>39</sup>Now this he said about the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were to receive, for as yet the Spirit had not been given, because Jesus was not yet glorified.”
- C. When Jesus talks about water and the Spirit, he is referring primarily to the gift of the Holy Spirit.  
—While water baptism can be included here, the decisive reality is the Holy Spirit himself, the true Water of life.

## VII. “I Will Sprinkle Clean Water on You”

- A. When Jesus talks about being born of the water and the Spirit, he most likely has an Old Testament promise in mind.
- B. When we go back to the Old Testament prophets, we find passages that connect water and Spirit.
  - Isaiah 4:2-4: “In that day the branch of the LORD shall be beautiful and glorious, and the fruit of the land shall be the pride and honor of the survivors of Israel. <sup>3</sup> And he who is left in Zion and remains in Jerusalem will be called holy, everyone who has been recorded for life in Jerusalem, <sup>4</sup> when the Lord shall have *washed* away the filth of the daughters of Zion and *cleansed* the bloodstains of Jerusalem from its midst by a *spirit* of judgment and by a *spirit* of burning.”
  - Ezekiel 36:25-28: “I will *sprinkle clean water* on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. <sup>26</sup> And I will give you a new heart, and a new *spirit* I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. <sup>27</sup> And I will put my *Spirit* within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules. <sup>28</sup> You shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers, and you shall be my people, and I will be your God.”

### VIII. Two Orders of Existence (John 3:6-7)

- A. Our Lord explains why it is necessary that people be born again: “That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit” (v 6).
- B. By “*flesh*,” the Lord likely means human nature as it stands on its own, without the grace of God.
  1. A fleshly existence is life outside God. It is to have one’s heart devoted to life in this present age.
  2. “Flesh” defines the entire human race—even law-abiding types like Nicodemus!
- C. Because flesh is God-less life, flesh cannot possibly generate heavenly life for itself.
  1. Flesh can only perpetuate its own kind of life: “That which is born of the flesh is flesh...”
  2. Implication: The human race cannot possibly save itself.
  3. If we desire to be whole, something else has to happen.
- D. This brings us to the other great reality—the *Spirit*.
  1. Our Lord may be referring specifically to the *Holy Spirit*.
  2. Just as sinful flesh generates its own sinful, dull form of life, the Holy Spirit generates what is of the Holy Spirit.

- E. Since the Kingdom is of the Spirit, only those who have the life of the Spirit will see the Kingdom.  
—This is why the Lord says, “Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again’” (v 7).

## **IX. A New Life, Not a New Leaf**

**This is what moral, law-abiding, successful people like Nicodemus need to understand: In order to enter the Kingdom of God, much more is required of us than simply turning over a new leaf. What is required is the gift of new life, the life of the Holy Spirit. The only One who can give that life is God himself. And God gives this life through Jesus Christ his Son (Jn 5:21).**

### **Questions for Reflection**

1. Was there anything in particular about today’s sermon that blessed and encouraged you?
2. What is the possible significance of the use of “man” in 3:1? What is the possible linkage between 2:25 and 3:1?
3. What was Nicodemus’ place in Jewish society? How does Nicodemus relate to us?  
What significance is there for us in using Nicodemus as a representative “everyman”?
4. Nicodemus “came to Jesus by night.” What is the possible significance of this note?
5. What does Nicodemus say about Jesus? What does this tell us about his faith?
6. “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God” (v 3). What does Jesus mean by “born again” (see v 5)?
7. What does it mean to be “born of water and the Spirit”? How does John 7:37-39 help shed light on this phrase?
8. “That which is born of the flesh is flesh...” How does this principle help us evaluate human attempts at educating or legislating someone into goodness?
9. “...that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.” What does this principle teach us about how we can be saved?
10. How do we gain the new life of God’s Spirit?