



Sermon Growth Guide

March 24, 2024

Can You See?



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March 24, 2024 All for Love - Can You See?

John 3:1-15

Key Verse: John 3:3

“Jesus replied, ‘Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.’”

Big Idea: Jesus had a conversation with a Pharisee named Nicodemus about what was required to see the kingdom of God. Jesus told Nicodemus that being born of *water and the Spirit* was the key to entering God’s kingdom. This new birth involves a fundamental and spiritual transformation in which our very souls are regenerated into new life.

Foundations

This week we continue our **All for Love** sermon series as we journey on our Lenten pilgrimage toward celebrating the resurrection of Jesus on Easter.

Today’s passage is John 3:1-15 which contains the conversation between Jesus and a Pharisee named Nicodemus. Unlike most of the Pharisees, Nicodemus found something attractive and intriguing about Jesus. He visited Jesus at night (secretly) and affirmed Jesus’ ministry.

This led to a dynamic conversation about what is needed for a person to enter into the kingdom of God. Jesus boldly proclaimed, “unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.” This puzzled Nicodemus because his sight was limited by an unregenerated spirit. Nicodemus could only see and understand things in a simple and human way, but Jesus invited Nicodemus to be born again and be transformed into a new spiritual reality and perspective.

The conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus was ironic. The Pharisees were the experts in the Old Testament Law. If anyone should know truth about God, it most certainly should have been the Pharisees. Yet, for all of Nicodemus’ education, Jesus noted, “If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things?”

Understanding God’s Word

Read John 3:1-15.

What do you think was behind Nicodemus’ curiosity as he came to Jesus?

What prevented Nicodemus from understanding what Jesus said to him?

How do you understand what it means to be *born again*?

Applying God’s Word

In what ways has your spiritual sight been impaired so that you haven’t been able to see (or understand) the things of God?

As you encounter others whose spiritual sight is impaired, how can you guide them toward greater clarity and understanding on spiritual matters?

Witnessing God’s Word

If you have been truly born again, you have an immense privilege to tell your story to others! The ways to do this are abundant and powerful. You can testify through your words, your attitudes, and how you respond to challenges. When your witness confounds people because it doesn’t follow the normal pattern of the world, people may ask you why you seem different, right? Then you have a great opportunity to share how you have seen the power and presence of God in your life!

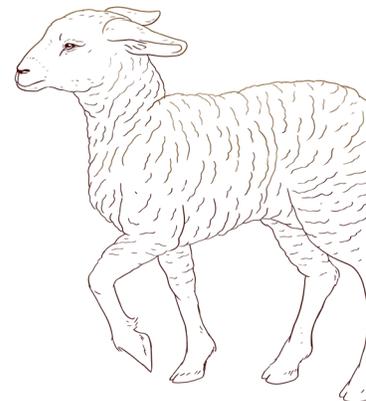
You have to be on the same level to see one another. Have you ever been to Scheels? Have you ever been in Scheels trying to track a child on Find My iPhone? You have to be on the same level. "I'm right here!" "No, you're not!" Same level. Everybody wanted to see Jesus on Palm Sunday. Those who loved Him, those who hated Him, they all wanted to see Him. This year, we take a slightly different tack for Palm Sunday and study a man named Nicodemus who came to see Jesus at an earlier time. They met at night. Maybe Nicodemus didn't want to be seen seeing Jesus, but he did want to see Him. Looking at may not be seeing, just like knowing someone may not be loving. Something more needs to happen. Jesus calls it being born again. **Can You See?**

Nicodemus and Jesus were on two different levels. Ironically, Nicodemus probably thought he was on the higher level. "Now there was a Pharisee, a man named Nicodemus who was a member of the Jewish ruling council." (John 3:1) This is a community leader of high standing, devout and respected. Jesus was an itinerant, homeless Rabbi with a ragtag cadre of disciples. Let's meet at night. But there was something Nicodemus did see, and something more Nicodemus was still looking for. "He came to Jesus at night and said, 'Rabbi, we know that 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.'" (John 3:2) He saw something in what Jesus was doing. Could Jesus be a messenger from God? Sometimes we see what God is doing without seeing the power, the Kingdom of God, behind it. We see the gift; we don't see the Giver. A man was desperately late to a meeting and looking for parking, so he started to pray, "Lord, just give me a parking spot, please! I'll do anything. I'll go to church." No space. "I'll give up drinking." Nothing. "I'll tithe ten percent of all my income." Suddenly a space! "Never mind, Lord," he said. "I found one." Signs faith, what-have-you-done-for-me-

lately faith, doesn't always mean we are really seeing the Kingdom of God. Can you see?

What do you need to be able to see? You need to have your eyes opened. "Jesus replied, 'Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.'" (John 3:3) You can't see, no one can see, until you are born again. Like an infant opens their eyes when they're born, we need a spiritual regeneration, a rebirth from above, God to do some remarkable work on us so we can see. Nicodemus wonders how to do it. Tell me what to do. How can this happen? Jesus says it is a spiritual thing. "Jesus answered, 'Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.' The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.'" (John 3:5-8) Jesus explains that this experience, being born again, it is not a religious work, it is not a self-help program, it is not something to put on your task list. What is it? It is like the wind. It is uncontrollable by human programs, unexplainable by human logic, unpredictable in outcome, but undeniable in its reality. You feel it when it happens. Yes, they were on two different levels, but not like Nicodemus thought.

How can a person have a relationship with God? How can there be love between unequal parties? What can make up that gap and get the two on the same level? Nicodemus was a Pharisee. I can't emphasize enough how rigorous a program that was. He was trying hard to please God by his actions, every moment, every day. That's one way. Maybe the lower party can work their way up to the level of the higher party. That's what most religions offer. Do this. Act like this. Perform



this. Perfect your life and then you will see the divine. Build up a perfect life and offer it to God. That's one way. Or a second way would be if the higher party maybe sent down some power to help lift the lower party up. Do this, I'll help you.

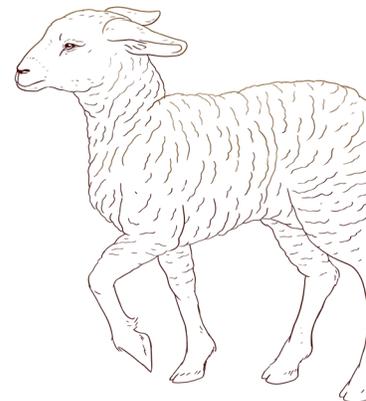
Nicodemus was somewhere in number 1 or number 2, "I'll do it myself," or "I'll do it; you help me." If that's you, either way you never feel that you are enough. You can't climb the tower high enough to reach God, and inside you hear this needling question, "Is there something wrong with me? Why can't I do it?" As Brennan Manning said, "Am I the only one whose cheese keeps sliding off his cracker?" We have taken up some training a friend in Young Life shared with us about questions Gen Z asks as they make sense of life. Gen Z asks, "Am I enough?" Am I enough? Do I have what it takes? Is there something wrong with me? Why can't I just do it right, turn it in, and get my reward? Whether you are trying to earn your way into divine perfection, or trying to earn your way into perfection with a little help from the divine, either way, you can't get there and you feel deficient. Insufficient. Am I enough? There's something you need first. How do we bridge the level gap? Option 1, climb on your own. Option 2, climb with a little help. But there's a third way. The higher one could come down.

Danish Christian existentialist Soren Kierkegaard told a story about a king who fell in love with a peasant maiden. The king immediately fell into great despair. Kierkegaard loved despair. Despair is his favorite. We try to avoid despair, but Kierkegaard believed despair is where we finally open our hearts to God's grace. Crisis is where the existential moment happens. So, a love story, and it starts with great despair. "Woe is me!" Why? The king wants true love. How will this love be real when we are on two completely different levels? "Just tell her to marry you," his counselors say. "She'll love it."

But no, says the king, "I don't want to be her king. I want to be her lover, her husband, her equal in love." "Well, then bestow riches and honor on her family. Make them rich and royal." "No," the king thought. "I would never know if she loved me for me, or for what I had done for her." What to do? Woe is me! There was only one thing to do: become a peasant. The king becomes a peasant. But not just acting or in costume, not just throwing a peasant's cloak over his clothes, so when he walked you could see the king underneath. No, it had to be real. If you love her, step down. Give it all up, "For this is the boundlessness of love, that in earnestness and truth and not in jest it wills to be the equal of the beloved." (Søren Kierkegaard)

But what if we are talking about God? What if God wants love, genuine, real love, between you and Him? That's just what God did in Jesus Christ. That's what Jesus is, if you have eyes to see and ears to hear, if you can believe it. God, Jesus the Son of God, "Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness." (Philippians 2:6-7) Not just a show, but in truth. Not just put on but become. Kierkegaard says, "But the form of the servant was not something put on. Therefore the god must suffer all things, endure all things, be tried in all things, hunger in the desert, thirst in his agonies, be forsaken in death, absolutely the equal of the lowliest of human beings—look, behold the man! The suffering of death is not his suffering, but his whole life is a story of suffering, and it is love that suffers, love that gives all and is itself destitute." (Søren Kierkegaard) That's Jesus. "Behold, your king is coming to you; righteous and having salvation is he, humble and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey." (Zechariah 9:9) God comes down. Jesus comes down. All for love.

This is the surprise Nicodemus could



not see standing right before him face to face. God came down. He had tried to lift his life up to God. Nicodemus had tried to perfect his life and give it to God for a reward. But the only way to be on the same level, the only way to see, is for God to come down. “No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of Man.” (John 3:13) Can you see, Nicodemus? Can you see? “We are not on the same level,” says Jesus, “but it’s not what you thought. You want to get to God. God has come to you, humble and riding on a donkey, and having salvation is he.” We sing Hosanna! God save! God save me! To see Jesus, Nicodemus needed to have his own personal Palm Sunday. Come save me.

“How can this be?” asked Nicodemus. We ask the same thing. What does it mean to be born again? How can it be? Jesus pointed to a moment in history Nicodemus knew very well. “Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up.” (John 3:14) This puts us back in Numbers 21 in the Old Testament. It’s a complicated story, but in short, the people were snakebit and the poison was enough to kill, so God told Moses to mount a bronze snake on a pole. When people looked at it, the poison stopped, the cure set in. This is Holy Week. Jesus was going to the cross. Like that bronze snake, Jesus was going to be lifted up on a pole, suspended between poisoned Earth and the cures of Heaven. The Son of Man lifted up, Jesus on the cross of Calvary, that’s the cure. How do you receive the cure? “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.” (John 3:14-15) Everyone who believes. Look at the snake, that’s all. Look at the cross and believe.

To believe is more than to give your consent to a group of propositions, to grant credulity to someone else’s ideas. “Sure, Jesus, I’ll give you that. That may be true.” No, to believe is to trust, to put your faith in, to rest all your hope on. When a doctor offers you a cure, you

open your mouth and swallow it trusting the medicine will have the promised effect, you take the needle into your arm, you allow the pick line into your bloodstream—this may hurt, but I believe, I hope, I trust, and I stake my whole life. That’s what Jesus means when He says to Nicodemus, “You must be born again. Believe.” We are on different levels. We want to rise up to God’s level, but we can’t, not even if God poured out riches and training and helps. Jesus made the only way possible. The only way is to accept the cure, believe in Jesus, reach out to Him and be saved. “I die so you can live,” says Jesus. God came down to our level. The high came down to the low, but not just to where we are, all the way down into death where we were headed. “Only this way can you be born again Nicodemus. For you to be born, I must die. It costs a life to buy rebirth. I give mine,” says Jesus. “I die for you to live.”

How does it happen? Let’s not leave this to the imagination. We can be very clear here. Rebirth happens when you put your faith in Jesus Christ. You receive this by faith, by believing. Cure by looking. Salvation by believing. Believe in Jesus Christ. Am I enough? Do I have what it takes? Am I deficient? Am I insufficient? Jesus is not waiting for you to put your life together and bring a perfect life to Him; Jesus lived a perfect life and laid it down for you. Now, believing in Him, you can be born again. You can experience new life, rebirth. Your eyes can be opened, like a newborn baby, and you can see. You don’t need to be sufficient and conquering. All you need is need. All Jesus wants is your want. All you bring is thirst. “Hosanna! God save me.” That’s all. “I believe in you, Jesus” That’s all. Will you pray and open your heart to Him? “Jesus, with everyone else I cry Hosanna!, come save me, I trust in you, I receive the forgiveness You offer for my sins, I want to be born again, eyes open, so I can see with new life. Thank you for giving your life for me, Jesus.”

