

Jesus teaches a very religious man

John 3:1-21

July 23rd 2023

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Many of you will know that my parents were called to preach the Gospel in Wolverhampton, to people from South Asia in the early 1970s. They had spent 20 years as missionaries in India and Pakistan, so they knew the culture and spoke the languages fluently. And sure enough, little by little people were converted to Jesus Christ from Hinduism, Sikhism and Buddhism—that was no surprise. What was not expected, were the conversions from “Nominal Christianity.”

What is nominal Christianity?

Well suppose a hundred years ago a man and his wife were truly converted to Christ. They shared the Gospel with their children and perhaps most of them were converted too. But as the generations came and went, fewer and fewer of the family members were true believers—but here’s the thing—they *continued to call themselves Christian*. They were no longer Hindu, Sikh or Buddhist, they self-identified as “Christian.” Christianity became their family identity, though in reality they lived just like everyone else in the world. Over the decades they became “nominal” Christians, “nominal” means “name”, they became Christian in name only. Paul describes nominal Christianity in 1 Timothy 3:5 like this, “having a form of godliness but denying its power.”

One of the surest signs of nominal Christianity is this: “everyone is a Christian.” “Everyone in my village”, “everyone in my family” is a Christian. But these universal claim don’t stand scrutiny by Scripture. Jesus says in Matthew chapter 10, “*Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. 35 For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. 36 And a person’s enemies will be those of his own household.*” It is unlikely, says Jesus, that everyone in a family, everyone in a village, everyone in a geographical region will be a true Christian.

Anyway back to Wolverhampton: “*My family were nominal Christians” one of these Asian converts told me in an interview, “They had religion but no relationship with the Lord. They thought they were on their way to heaven because they were born into a*

Christian family but came to realise they weren't. They didn't know they needed to know the Lord until Mr Summers preached on being born again."

Jesus was surrounded by nominal religion: every Jew thought of herself or himself as a true believer. Right from the top of society, I don't like that phrase at all, but you know what I mean, from the religious leaders, all the way down to the man or woman on the street (I don't like that phrase either!) If you had walked up to a random Jew or Jewess, and asked them "Do you believe in the God of Abraham" they would have all said without exception, "Yes, of course, we are true Israelites, true children of Abraham." They may even have been offended by the question! But today we are going to learn from Jesus, that the only way to become a true believer, is not to be born in a Christian family or a Christian country, but to be "born again." To have had a miracle performed in your heart by the Holy Spirit, which makes you new.

The Story

We've been making our way through John's Gospel and we've arrived at chapter 3 where we meet Nicodemus, a top religious leader and teacher, who until he met Jesus was a nominal believer. The great JC Ryle, a pastor in Liverpool in the days of Queen Victoria, wrote: *"learning and rank and high ecclesiastical office are no proof that a minister is taught by the Spirit."* Just because a man, or these days a woman, calls themselves a vicar, priest, minister, bishop or archbishop, does not mean that he or she is a true believer! Do not be deceived! *"Ignorance like that of Nicodemus is unhappily far too common in the Church of Christ."*

I am going to suggest we apply this wonderful story in two ways as we run through it, this morning: If I am speaking to a religious person, may the Lord speak to your heart and convict you to be born again. And to those, who by the grace of God, are true believers, may the Lord teach us this morning how to reach religious people with the truth. Perhaps you have a friend or relative who is a nominal Christian, and you wonder how you can reach them. Well let's watch the Master at work and learn from him.

Notice with me, in the first place, how....

#1 Jesus loved Nicodemus!

As mixed up, misinformed and confused as he was, Jesus loved him. How do we know that?

Jesus took risks, he agreed to meet him. Nicodemus belonged to an enemy group—the ruling Jewish council, the Sanhedrin, who were plotting to kill him. Jesus agreed to see someone who belonged to an enemy organisation! That is love! And after nightfall too! Without street lights, the moment the sun went down everyone stayed behind

locked doors! But Jesus allows himself into a potentially dangerous situation, because he loved Nicodemus.

Jesus gave him time! Jesus' days were full and exhausting, but he made time for Nicodemus, because he loved him. Love can be spelt T.I.M.E.

Jesus listened to him! Jesus did not have a "pat Gospel message which he was going to get across come hell or high water." No, this was dialogue where Nicodemus put the questions and Jesus gave answers.

Love takes risks, love spends time, love listens. What tremendous lessons in loving not only religious people, but non-religious people too! Jesus loved Nicodemus, Jesus loves religious people! In fact God loves the whole world, "For God so loved the world..." That's everyone! That's me and that's you!

#2 Jesus shared the Good News with Nicodemus

But love is not enough! Jesus went on to share the Good news with Nicodemus. It's never enough to love religious people, them. We've probably all heard someone say, "my life is my witness." "I don't need to share the Gospel verbally, I just have to love them and live a good life in front of them." But brothers and sisters, no-one, is ever converted by love or life alone—as important as those are. People are saved only as they hear the Gospel message: *"How can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?" (Romans 10:14)* "I am not ashamed of the Gospel, because it (the Gospel Message) is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes.." (Romans 1:16)

We sometimes fail to share the Gospel because we are ashamed of its simplicity, we're embarrassed by it's lack of cultural or philosophical sophistication. But Paul knew that the Gospel, and the Gospel alone, is the dynamite that saves the lost, so he was not ashamed of it.

Jesus shared the Gospel with religious Nicodemus.

First he told him that he must be born again. To give him credit, Nicodemus saw something in Jesus that attracted him, *"Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no-one can perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him."* He may have been confused spiritually, but at least there was a spark of interest—enough to arrange an appointment with Jesus. (At night, most probably because he didn't want his mates to know.) Jesus puts his finger on Nicodemus's central problem—he is spiritually blind! *"I tell you the truth, no-one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again." "I tell you the truth no-one can enter the Kingdom of God unless she is born of water and the Spirit."*

The spiritual problem of every nominal believer—indeed of all of us before we were converted—is our spiritual blindness! We can't see spiritual realities! We cannot see God, the greatest reality in the universe; we cannot see our own sin, the greatest problem in our lives; we cannot see Jesus Christ, the Saviour of the world.

Nicodemus reveals his spiritual blindness when he says: *“How can a man be born when he is old? Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother’s womb to be born?”* He thinks Jesus is talking natural birth but Jesus is talking spiritual birth. Being born again is a supernatural miracle in which God gives to that person a new heart with new desires and a new power to change. *“If any one is in Christ he is a new creation, the old has gone, the new has come.”* (2 Corinthians 5:17). John Newton was a rough sailor who worked in the slave trade when one day he was “born again.” *“Amazing grace how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me, I once was lost but now am found, was blind but now I see.”*

Has this miracle taken place in your heart?

It’s a mysterious miracle says Jesus: *“The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound but cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.”* Can you see the wind? Can you predict what direction its’ going to blow next? No, but when it blows, the effects are unmistakable: trees bend and waters wave! Being born again is as mysterious as the effects of the wind. Some people can tell you the very moment it took place, others can’t remember the year! Some can remember the place, others not. But however it happened, everyone who is born again knows it took place, because of the divine changes that followed in it’s wake.

Are you still with me? The problem with religious people—and indeed all people—is that we are spiritually blind, dead and lost, and we need God to perform a miracle in our hearts.

How does this miracle take place? As we hear the Gospel, as we hear God’s Word: *“For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God.”* (1 Peter 1:23)

So Jesus goes on to share the Gospel with Nicodemus. Because it’s through hearing new birth takes place. “Nicodemus remember that story in the OT, Numbers 21? The people were grumbling against the Lord and against Moses. Though they had been provided with everything they needed—and in abundance—they winged and moaned. God is not pleased with thankless grumblers and he sent venous snakes among the people, and many Israelites died.” “But in his mercy God told Moses to make a bronze snake and put it on a pole and lift the pole high so that everyone could see it, and everyone who had been bitten by a serpent who merely looked up at the bronze serpent lived! They didn’t have to do good works, they didn’t have to offer a lamb at the temple, they just had to look and they lived!”

In the same way one day Jesus would be lifted up on a cross to suffer and die for our sins, and everyone who just looks to him, which means just believes in him will be forgiven and live!

As the Gospel is explained, verses 16-21 the miracle of new birth takes place.

Brothers and sisters, if we are seeking to reach religious people, we must share the Gospel with them. Loving them is not enough! Living a good life before them in itself won't bring them to Christ. No we must ask God for the courage to share the Good News with them, give them Mark, Matthew, John, Luke, go through it with them perhaps, invite them to hear the Gospel on Sunday. Because the miracle of new birth happens mysteriously through the preaching of God's Word!

3 Jesus converted Nicodemus!

Nicodemus became a follower of Jesus, a true believer! How do we know? Well his life changed! The proof of a changed heart is a changed life, right? In John chapter 7 we find Nicodemus publically defending Jesus! No hiding in the dark, he's out there, courageous! And after the death of Jesus, Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea ask for the body of Jesus so they can give him a dignified burial. This was a dangerous time to be connected to Jesus—all the disciples had scarpered in fear, but not Nicodemus!

Isn't it interesting how someone who began so fearfully ends up so courageous? Do not despise the seemingly small beginnings of a young believer's life! The weakest little baby often turns out to be a sturdy healthy child (and contra wise, sometimes the strong baby, turns out to be the sickly one!)

As Jesus loved and patiently shared the Good News with this fearful religious man, the Holy Spirit performed a miracle in his heart, that transformed him in this life and gave him hope beyond the grave.

Conclusion

So I ask you this morning, have you been born again? I'm not asking you, do you come from a religious family, or a religious community, I'm asking if your heart has been made new?

If so, praise the Lord! It is a wonderful thing to have a new heart! Now you must guard that new heart! "Above all else, guard your heart for it is the wellspring of life." (Proverbs 4:23) Water it with God's word! "Let the Word of Christ dwell in you richly." (Colossians 3:16) Nothing purifies our hearts more than the Word of God, memorised, read, listened to, loved. My father used to say to his 6 kids, often, perhaps too often, "Sin will keep you from this book and this book will keep you from sin." Both are right.

And if you know you don't have this new heart, ask the Lord for a new heart today, and he will surely hear your prayer.