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Most of us, if not all of us, have had the privilege of growing up in a society that was free and rooted in a spiritual legacy of Christianity. Sure, there have been things, events, movements, laws sometimes, cultural norms, that are anything but Christian, but the prevailing influence in the culture has been a historical faith in Jesus Christ. I believe it's the reason for the centuries long prosperity the U.S. has enjoyed. Even though we see all this eroding in our day, it is our heritage.

Imagine growing up somewhere like Syria or Lebanon or Iran and somewhere along the line you realized what you had been taught all your life was not true. Imagine turning to Christ in one of those countries. What would life be like for you?

That's somewhat the setting for the story we're going to look at today. This story is about a devout Jew, Nicodemus, who had risen in the ranks to Pharisee and even a ruling Pharisee. Then he hears Jesus, and something pierces his heart to make him inquisitive about this new teacher. Could He be the true Messiah? But he is torn because all his pals down at the Pharisee house have branded this Jesus a fraud and dangerous. He was to be avoided or contended with regardless of the cost. He was the enemy. But curious Nicodemus had to know the truth, so somehow a meeting was arranged so he could meet and speak with Jesus. But it had to be in secret so that his Pharisee friends wouldn't find out he was meeting with the enemy. Here's the beginning of the conversation:

John 3:1–9

¹ Now there was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews; ² this man came to Jesus by night and said to Him, "Rabbi, we know that You have come from God as a teacher; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him." ³ Jesus answered and said to him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." ⁴ Nicodemus said to Him, "How can a man be born when he is old? He cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born, can he?" ⁵ Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. ⁶ "That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷ "Do not be amazed that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' ⁸ "The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going; so is everyone who is born of the Spirit." ⁹ Nicodemus said to Him, "How can these things be?"

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We are not completely sure where this meeting takes place but chapter two ends with Jesus in Jerusalem, so that is probably where this happens. Nicodemus comes to Jesus because he recognizes that Jesus has something he lacks. He sees God in Jesus, and it produces a curiosity, even a hunger to find the truth. He had everything the religion of Judaism could offer, yet there was still a void, something missing. Inside, his spirit was dead.

Religion is Deadly

Religion is a system or framework that gives people a structure to monitor their behavior. There are do's and there are don'ts. Religion says things like if you're baptized as a baby, go to religious training classes as a 12 year old, live a clean life, obey the edicts of the church, attend church, give a proper portion of your wealth to the church, and volunteer your time as directed by the church, you will be rewarded with an eternity in heaven. None of that is true. Religious people

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don't make it to heaven. Why is that? Because religion is all about what you do and the bible is explicitly clear that there is nothing, absolutely nothing you do to make it to heaven.

Ephesians 2:8–9 (NASB95)

8 For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; 9 not as a result of works, so that no one may boast.

John 14:6 (NASB95)

6 Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me.

Acts 16:31 (NASB95)

31 They said, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.”

John 3:18 (NASB95)

18 “He who believes in Him is not judged; he who does not believe has been judged already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.

Salvation, new life, going to heaven has nothing to do with your spiritual performance. It is believing in the finished work of Jesus that you place all faith upon.

NEXT SLIDE

So why do I say religion is deadly? Because it leads people to believe that they are spiritually Ok and don't need to seek a Savior, a Redeemer, Jesus. They have done what the church has told them to do to get to heaven so nothing else is required. “I'm good to go.” No, you are not.

Nicodemus sensed in his spirit that even being a renowned Pharisee left him insufficient. There was something about Jesus that made him curious, made him a seeker. He wants to know the truth despite his upbringing or what he had been told all his life. Jesus knows exactly what he needs and says this:

“Truly, truly, I say to you” which is a way of saying listen up, this is going to be good. “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.”

Nicodemus is stunned. All his life, he's believed entry into God's kingdom was based on lineage and law — being a child of Abraham and keeper of commandments. Doing the right things was supposed to be enough.

Here are three statements embedded in the meaning of what Jesus is saying:

You don't need improvement; you need transformation.

For all my life the church has been trying to get people to improve their spiritual performance. Be a better example, give more, attend more, sin less, etc. But none of those things bring life to us. They don't satisfy the hunger of our souls for

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love, for forgiveness, for joy, for wisdom. Those only explode is us when the very presence of God comes through the transforming work of Jesus Christ.

You don't need reformation; you need regeneration.

This is like when churches ask people to rededicate themselves to Christ which is like saying recommit yourself to working hard to be holy. You've wandered away and its time to straighten up. That's a setup for failure because you are incapable of holiness. You need the complete death of the old me-centered life and a birth of something brand new only given by Christ Himself.

You don't need to turn over a new leaf; you need a new life.

Instead of making plans on how you're going to change how you approach everything in your life to make it more holy, why not approach the Holy One who will become holiness in you. When you find yourself far from God or spiritually stale or maybe you've wandered into some sinful patterns of your past, when these situations come, don't look to yourself for answers. Don't commit to more church attendance or longer bible study times, come to Jesus. He is life.

Now, all these centuries later, we in the Christian church get this, don't we. We're not like Nicodemus who thinks his behavioral performance somehow qualifies him for heaven. We're not like Nicodemus who thinks his church attendance, generosity to the poor, strict adherence to the rules of the bible will somehow merit redemption and eternal life. We're not at all like Nicodemus, are we?

I'm going to admit something to you this morning and I don't want any judgment from you, ok? I like watching YouTube videos. I happen to be a premium subscriber. You get all kinds of things on YouTube. A lot of it, you can't believe because it's not true. But a lot of it is true and you won't hear it through the mainstream media. I watch a lot of preachers, and it amazes me that the majority of things I hear is preachers trying to coerce behavioral change out of their congregants.

The focus is on performance improvement, reforming your activities, what you give your time to, and new commitments to do better. It's exactly the same Pharisaical approach of the first century.

But Nicodemus gets confused by the statement of Jesus and asks what being born again actually means. He asks how a man can be born when he is old. He can't reenter his mother's womb. He is thinking in the physical world and not the spiritual world.

Religion is Physically Focused

Religion is completely focused on running an organization. It needs people to buy into the requirements of the organization so that it can run efficiently and so it can grow larger. But to what end, I ask?

This is the age-old battle between law and grace. Religion is law, Jesus is grace. Are you justified, declared a good person, by what you do or by who you are in Christ despite what you do. Jesus makes you a new creation transforming you from who you used to be into His new life. He gives you a whole new identity rooted in His life in you. That is what declares you righteous, His work in you and it is given as an unearned gift of grace.

In his book, The Rest of the Gospel, Dan Stone

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I used to pick out those parts of Mosaic law, Sermon on the Mount law, Baptist law, my personal law, and whatever other law I thought I could keep at least some of the time. I didn't see that law and grace are mortal enemies. I didn't see that you can't live under both. It made sense to me to be religious. It made sense to be an external Christian, trying to keep an external set of rules. I couldn't do anything else, because I had always been an external person. So were you. We all grew up as external people, defining ourselves in relation to other persons, things, and events that told us who we were. That's why as new Christians we were so prone to asking external questions: "What should I do?" Let's not talk about religion. Let's talk about life. Religion is law trying to become life. Life is life. They won't flow together. There's no life in the law. The only thing the law tells you is what you ought to do but can't do. It will never relinquish its demand that you ought to do it, because it's a divine ought-to; after all, God gave it to Moses. We'll keep ourselves under that divine ought-to, and the condemnation and death it ministers (2 Corinthians 3), until we learn to live from the Person who dwells within us.

Religion is all about the here and now, what can be seen in this temporal world. The kingdom of God is not seen and is eternal.

2 Corinthians 4:18

18 We look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal.

In His conversation with Nicodemus, Jesus uses the wind as an example. You don't know where it comes from or where it is going. You hear the sound of it, but you can't see it. So is everyone born of the Spirit. Nicodemus responds with a simple question, how can this be?

John 3:10–17

10 Jesus answered and said to him, "Are you the teacher of Israel and do not understand these things? 11 "Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know and testify of what we have seen, and you do not accept our testimony. 12 "If I told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things? 13 "No one has ascended into heaven, but He who descended from heaven: the Son of Man. 14 "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up; 15 so that whoever believes will in Him have eternal life. 16 "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life. 17 "For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him.

Religion is Destroyed by Grace

His answer to Nicodemus centers completely around believing in the Son to receive spiritual Life. The gospel is quite simple – God loves the world enough to give His only Son Jesus to us that if we simply believe in Him, we will never die but have eternal life. Jesus never came to judge you or point out your failures because He knows we're all failures at being good. Instead, He came to save us, rescue us, deliver us from the worldly, physical, behavior driven, knowledge of good and evil, earthly life. Praise God.

In this passage we don't hear anything else from Nicodemus, but he reappears two more times in Scripture. In John 7:50, he comes to the defense of Jesus, standing up against other Pharisees calling for Jesus to get a fair trial. In John 19, it is

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Nicodemus who helps Joseph of Arimathea to bury the dead body of Jesus. It was he, Nicodemus, who bound the lifeless body of Jesus in linen wrapped in spices. It was he who took the body of Jesus into the tomb. It was he, Nicodemus who carefully laid the beaten, bloody, pierced body of our Lord and Savior down into the tomb. Nicodemus, the Pharisee got it. Grace had changed him. His religion had turned into relationship.

If you've been in this church very long, you've heard many sermons similar to this one. You've heard that only Jesus can live the Christian life, so come to Him and let Him live it in you. You've heard that you, apart from Him, can do nothing of any value. You've heard that abiding in Him is the only way good, nourishing fruit pours out of your life. You know He's the only source, the only good, the only answer to the situations you face. You've heard it and yet here you are facing what you're facing, and your first question is: What should I do?

There's a relational conflict or wayward child or overbearing boss or an unexpected financial hit and we immediately turn to self-provision. How can I change this situation? How can I fix this problem? How can I . . .? Do you see how locked into past patterns we can be? So often, prayer is not our reflex, it's our last resort. If I asked you here today, how many of you face at least one situation where you're not sure what to do? Should you make that phone call? Should you ignore it? Should you confront? Should take another job? How many of you have a situation you wish would change and are at a loss to know how to change it? In Mark 5, there's the story of a woman who had an ongoing physical debilitation. There were no answers to her condition but one day she heard Jesus was passing through and she fought the crowds, pushing her way through saying to everyone, if I can just touch Him, I know I'll be healed. If I can just get to Jesus, I know everything will change. If I can just touch even a piece of His robe, I know my life will change. I need Jesus. Guess what, she made it and yes, she was healed.

Can you turn to Him with that kind of desperation? Can you let it go? Can you completely turn it over to Him? You realize those are absolutely dumb questions. There is this huge mountain of a problem in front of you and it's like you are a little kid with no ability, no resources, no strength and standing next to you is the wisest, strongest, supernaturally powerful God and I'm asking you the question are you willing to turn it over to Him or keep trying yourself. See how dumb that is. Of course you need to turn it over. Of course you need to let go of it. He's got you.

Ephesians 2:4–7

⁴ But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, ⁵ even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), ⁶ and raised us up with Him, and seated us with Him in the heavenly *places* in Christ Jesus, ⁷ so that in the ages to come He might show the surpassing riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.