

Living in God's Kingdom

Lesson 6: Being Born Again

Notes for the leader: This is the sixth in a series of lessons about "Living in the Kingdom." This lesson focuses on the conversation Jesus has with Nicodemus, in which Jesus tells Nicodemus what he must do to become a member of the Kingdom of God.

Introduction

Jesus told people that the Kingdom of God is not a **place**. He said that if you **have given your life to God**, and let Him become your Lord and Savior, "**The Kingdom of God is within you.**" (Luke 17:21) This means **you can be part of the Kingdom of God** now, today. It's not something that will happen someday, it's something you can be part of **here and now**, if you're willing to let Jesus be the Lord of your life, and it lasts **forever!**

This lesson focuses on a late-night conversation Jesus had with a powerful political and religious leader named Nicodemus.

John 3:1

Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council..

The **Pharisees** were **super-religious** people, who had taken a vow to live their lives by perfectly following the smallest details of the Jewish religious law. The "ruling council" was called the Sanhedrin. It was the highest office one could hold in Israel in those days. It was like being a senator or a supreme court justice. Nicodemus was an important and powerful man.

John 3:2

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 miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him."

The Gospel doesn't say why Nicodemus chose to visit Jesus at night. Some interpreters think this means that Nicodemus didn't want the other members of the Sanhedrin to know that he was meeting with Jesus. The Sanhedrin was debating what to do about Jesus. Some members had already concluded that Jesus meant "trouble." They were already trying to figure out how to discredit Jesus, or even to get rid of him. But Nicodemus recognized that Jesus was not just a troublemaker – there was something about Jesus that Nicodemus recognized could come only from God. He wanted to know more about Jesus.

John 3:3-6

In reply Jesus declared, "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again." "How can a man be born when he is old?" Nicodemus asked. "Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born!" Jesus answered, "I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit.

There is a lot going on here in these verses. Jesus knows that Nicodemus has come to talk with him about a relationship with God. Jesus goes right to the heart of the problem -- if you really want to know God, you must be willing to give up everything, and be "born again."

When you first read this conversation, it might seem that Nicodemus is being dense -- choosing to take what Jesus is telling him in the most literal way. But Nicodemus is an educated and very intelligent man. It seems likely that he knows quite well what Jesus is telling him he must do. What Nicodemus is really saying is, "What you are asking is too much for a man of my age and my status and my position in life! I've invested too much in getting to where I am to start all over again."

The problem Nicodemus was struggling with was the same problem we all face – **sin**. Our sin is what has separated us from God, and if our sins are to be forgiven, so that we can be reconciled to God, we must (in a sense) go back and "start over" – be "born again."

The only way back to God is to admit that we are sinners and to surrender ourselves to him. This means **trusting** Him with our very lives ... and **following** Him ... and **doing what He says**. This is what Jesus was referring to when he said, "Unless you become like a little child, you cannot enter the Kingdom of Heaven." (*Matthew 18:3*) Little children **know** how to **trust**.

But all this is very hard for Nicodemus to accept. He is an important man! He has devoted his life to following the details of the ceremonial religious law! If he accepts what Jesus is saying, it means throwing away some major investments he has made. He has devoted his life to learning and following religious rules! And he didn't reach his position of political power by trusting **anyone!**

The "rich young ruler" came to Jesus with a similar question: "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus looked into his soul and saw that his problem was that he was putting his trust in wealth rather than in God. So he told him, "... go, sell your possessions and give to the poor... Then come, follow me." (*Matthew 19:21*) The young man went away very sad, because he wasn't willing to give up what he was trusting in to follow Jesus.

Nicodemus has the same problem, except what he's trusting in isn't money, it's his political power and his religious status. Jesus responds:

John 3:7-8

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.

To understand what Jesus is saying here, it helps to know that the Greek words for "wind" and "spirit" are the same: "pneuma," as in a pneumatic tire, filled with air. Jesus is saying, "We are talking about spiritual things, here, Nicodemus, and the standard we must deal with is what **God** says is important, not what **you** think is important."

What “spirit” is Jesus talking about? The **Holy Spirit**, one of the three members of the Trinity (the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit). Through his **sacrifice** and **resurrection**, **Jesus** made possible our **justification** -- being declared “**not guilty**” in the eyes of God – “just as if” we had never sinned. (That’s a good way to remember what “justification” means.)

The special role of the **Holy Spirit** is our **sanctification** – helping us become **holy**, which means “**set apart**” for God’s work. The Holy Spirit **indwells** every believer and is our **comforter**, **guide**, and **counsellor**. If you go to court, your **lawyer** is often called your **counsellor**. He or she gives you advice and **guidance** as to what you should or shouldn’t **do** or **say**. But, as in court, whether or not you **follow** that advice is always up to **you**. It’s the same with the Holy Spirit – he will give you guidance, but **you** have to decide each day whether or not to follow it.

Perhaps you’ve seen one of those “makeover” TV shows, where a team of experts takes over a person’s house and life and gets everything organized and looking great? You have to wonder what it would be like if the TV show did a followup several months later. Would everything still look great? Or would things have slipped back to the way they were before? That’s why God **implants** his Holy Spirit in you – he’ll **stay** with you – never leave you – and keep **guiding** you each day.

John 3:9-15

"How can this be?" Nicodemus asked.

"You are Israel's teacher," said Jesus, "and do you not understand these things?"

I tell you the truth, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony. I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things? No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven --the Son of Man. Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.

And here are the famous words that capture the message of the gospel in three verses:

John 3:16-18

"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 the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son.

God has not left us lost in sin. He has reached out to us, and has provided a means of salvation that we do not deserve, because he **loves** us. Paul wrote in Romans 5:8: "God demonstrates his own love for us in this: while we were still sinners, Christ died for us."

Here's where many people misunderstand the message of the Gospel. They think the message is that first you must clean up your life and become "good." Then God can love you and accept you. But that's **not** the message of the Gospel. The Gospel says that we **can't** escape this trap on our own, because of the way **sin** has seeped into us and affected our **minds** and **bodies** and **spirits**. We are **captives** – "slaves of sin" – but Jesus has come to set us **free**.

God **loves** us, and He is not willing that we should perish in our sins. He has provided a **way out** of the trap we are in. But we must be **willing to trust** him, and **surrender our lives** to him. This is what Jesus means when he talks about "**believing**" in him. He doesn't mean just **understanding** who he is. James says that the devil and his followers **know** that Jesus is the Son of God. But they're **not** willing to **trust** him and **follow** him!

Jesus was telling Nicodemus that a decision to follow him really **is** a decision to "start over." You have to be willing to **let go of whatever you have been holding onto** as your source of security, and **trust Jesus**.

Many people have the same problem that Nicodemus did. They have made investments in their lives that they aren't willing to let go of to follow Jesus. They are worried about what their family, or friends, or associates, will say if they become a real Christian. They are worried about putting their trust in Jesus instead of in themselves, or in money, or their retirement plan. But Jesus said that we must not let these worries keep us from eternal life in him: "*I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.*" (John 14:6)

Each of us, like Nicodemus, must face this choice ourselves. The Bible does not record how Nicodemus responded to Jesus that night. But interestingly, in the 7th chapter of John, we find Nicodemus arguing with his fellow members of the Sanhedrin against condemning Jesus without a trial. And in the 19th chapter of John, we find Nicodemus with Joseph of Arimathea, claiming the body of Jesus so that it can be buried in Joseph's tomb. Many scholars believe that Nicodemus had indeed become a believer. But that is a choice each of us must make ourselves.

If you are sincerely willing to make this choice, **you can become a member of the Kingdom of God**. To do so, you need to tell God that you **repent of your sins**, that **you accept Jesus as your Savior and Lord**, and that you are willing to **follow him and do what he says**. If you want to do this, you can pray this simple prayer:

Lord Jesus, I know I'm a sinner, and I want to change.
Thank you for dying for my sins.
I ask you to come into my life as my Savior and my Lord,
and to change me into what you want me to be.

***Notes for the leader:** This small-group discussion handout is different from the others in this series. This handout includes several key passages that summarize the Gospel message. Make sure that each group has a capable leader who can use these passages to reinforce the message just presented. Give each group a time warning three or four minutes before they need to reassemble as a large group, so they can bring their discussion to an orderly conclusion..*

***Notes for the leader:** Before the group leaves, make sure everyone has a copy of the "Take-Home Thoughts" handout. This will help them remember the things discussed in the lesson. Some of them may also use these handouts to explain the lesson to a cell-mate or in a letter they write to their families. You never know how far the lesson materials may travel, or whose life may be affected by them!*

God's Words About Salvation

1. SALVATION IS A GIFT FROM GOD

The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life through Christ Jesus our Lord. (*Romans 6:23*)

It is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God. (*Ephesians 2:8*)

2. OUR SIN IS WHAT SEPARATES US FROM GOD

If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. (*1 John 1:8*)

All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. (*Romans 3:23*)

3. GOD SENT HIS SON INTO THE WORLD TO RESCUE US FROM OUR SINS

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have everlasting life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned; whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son. (*John 3:16-18*)

God demonstrates his own love for us in this: while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. (*Romans 5:8*)

I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. (*John 14:6*)

Salvation is found in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved. (*Acts 4:12*)

4. YOU MUST PUT YOUR FAITH AND TRUST IN JESUS CHRIST

Unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. (*Matthew 18:3*)

Whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life. (*John 5:24*)

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come. (*2 Corinthians 5:17*)

Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will go in and eat with him, and he with me. (*Revelation 3:20*)

5. YOU CAN GIVE YOUR LIVE TO JESUS RIGHT NOW

Lord Jesus, I know I'm a sinner, and I want to change.
Thank you for dying for my sins.
I ask you to come into my life as my Savior and my Lord,
and to change me into what you want me to be.

Take-home Thoughts About ...

Being Born Again

(John 3:1-18)

Nicodemus was an important and powerful man. He was a member of the ruling council of Israel, the Sanhedrin. The Sanhedrin looked at Jesus as a threat to their power, and they had already started to discuss ways to get rid of him. But Nicodemus came to see Jesus secretly late at night. He said, "Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him." (*John 3:2*)

Jesus understood that Nicodemus believed in him and wanted to follow him – but Nicodemus was too afraid of what the other members of the Sanhedrin would say. That's why Jesus told Nicodemus he had to be "**born again**" (*John 3:7*). Jesus was telling Nicodemus that a decision to follow him really is a decision to "**start over.**" You must be willing to **let go** of whatever you have been holding onto as your source of security, and trust Jesus. That means being willing to **do what he says.**

Many people have the same problem that Nicodemus did. They have made investments in their lives that they aren't willing to let go of to follow Jesus. They are worried about what their family, or friends, or associates, will say if they become a real Christian. They are worried about putting their trust in Jesus instead of in themselves, or in money, or their retirement plan. But Jesus said that we shouldn't let these worries keep us from eternal life in him: "I am the **way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.**" (*John 14:6*)

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