

☒ LIFE OF JESUS

February 28, 2021 | Jesus Teaches Nicodemus

PREPARATION

GETTING READY

Read John 3:1–21

Pray that God would help you see what habits of the mind may be keeping you from knowing Him as you ought.

THIS WEEK

☒ KEY BIBLICAL TRUTH

God is at work to bring His kingdom into our lives through the work of the Holy Spirit.

☒ THEOLOGY APPLIED

We often inhibit the work of the Holy Spirit through our false theories of how God works in the world. We need to see the light that Jesus shines in these dark places. .

☒ MEDITATE

“God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble” (Psalm 46:1).

GETTING STARTED

+ Use this section to prepare your heart for the truths you will encounter this week and to connect this passage’s main point to your own life.

🗨: *Before you heard the gospel, how would you have explained Christianity?*

Q: *How did your understanding of Jesus and God change after you became a Christian?*

A common principle in nature and in life is that sometimes that which is old or dead must be cleared out for there to be new growth. Gardeners must “deadhead” their rose bushes so the plant’s energy can be devoted to new buds. Cities must tear down old buildings to make way for new, modern projects. A home remodel usually requires “gutting” the existing structure to prepare the way for new appliances and fixtures. Parents must purge their children’s toys and clothes to make room for the onslaught of new gifts at birthdays and Christmas.

A similar process must happen at the start of our lives as Christians if we are to grow in our faith, and it must continue throughout our lives. We must be continually replacing the old, sinful vestiges of our lives with the truth of the gospel and a delight in the holiness of God. As John 3:1–21 makes clear, this is not merely a thought exercise but the result of the Holy Spirit’s ongoing work in our lives. Being saved is a work of God, not just the replacement of one thought with a better one.

Nicodemus was interested in Jesus’s ministry. It is unclear why he approached Jesus on this occasion. Perhaps he wanted to learn from the teacher who had come from God and had performed the miraculous signs that Jesus had. Or perhaps he wanted to simply express his solidarity with Jesus. Whatever the case, Jesus showed Nicodemus that he could not retain his old ways of thinking about God, Israel, and the Messiah if he wanted to become a disciple of Jesus. To be Jesus’s disciple, Nicodemus must be prepared to purge his old beliefs to follow Christ. The same is true for us.

Q: *What beliefs are you holding on to that are incompatible with the gospel?*

Q: *What will it cost you to jettison these beliefs?*

APPLICATION POINT – Habits of the mind are difficult to break. Even after we accept Christ as Savior, we often find it hard to give up many of the ways we formerly thought about God and about life. Sin can root itself so deeply into our being that it continues to influence our thought patterns and actions. The legalism and moralism that once characterized our understanding of Christianity can linger and influence how we think about God, the gospel, and our fellow Christians. Take time this week to pinpoint these lingering influences in your life.

❏ UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

+ In John 3:1–21, Jesus seeks to transform Nicodemus’s understanding of the kingdom of God. It is not through family heritage that one enters the kingdom but through the work of the Holy Spirit.

1. WHAT KEEPS US FROM GOD?

2. THE KINGDOM OF GOD COMES THROUGH THE HOLY SPIRIT.

3. MARKS OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

GOING DEEPER

+ *This section will investigate John 3:1–21 to understand Jesus’s conversation with Nicodemus about the kingdom of God and the Holy Spirit.*

1. WHAT KEEPS US FROM GOD?

❏ JOHN 3:1–7

🔍: *What do we know about Nicodemus from John 3:1–21?*

🔍: *Based on his own words and Jesus’s remarks, what did Nicodemus get wrong in their conversation?*

Nicodemus was seeking. Jesus must have seemed quite radical to him. He disrupted the business at the temple by driving people out with a whip (John 2:13–22). He associated with John the Baptist, who was a polarizing figure in Palestine at this time. And most of Nicodemus’s peers had likely written Jesus off as another idealist or, worse, condemned Him as an unorthodox radical. But there were the signs Jesus had performed. Unlike most of His contemporaries, Nicodemus must have thought Jesus’s ministry was ultimately positive. What he heard from Jesus this night would challenge him in ways he never thought possible.

The Jewish people are descendants of Abraham. In the Old Testament, God established a covenant with Abraham in which He promised him a land, a people, and a special relationship with Him. God also made a special covenant

with Abraham's offspring in which He declared the Israelites to be His special people. Thus, the Jews of Jesus's day believed they were part of the kingdom of God simply because of their physical ancestry. Jesus challenged a belief that would have been basic or fundamental to any Jewish person such as Nicodemus. It is not Jewish ancestry that makes people part of God's kingdom but the work of the Holy Spirit that transforms them into a part of God's kingdom. Jesus compared this work of the Holy Spirit to a new birth. Nicodemus was unprepared for this metaphor, but it vividly captures the point Jesus was making. Nicodemus had always depended on his ancestry as his access into God's kingdom, but Jesus confronted this belief by saying a fleshly birth (Nicodemus's ancestry) does not guarantee access into a spiritual kingdom.

🔗: *What strongly held beliefs do your peers, coworkers, and neighbors hold that you must challenge in order to lead them to Christ?*

🔗: *How can you challenge these beliefs in sincere but delicate ways?*

APPLICATION POINT – In a secular culture, people are depending more, not less, on personal beliefs. Interestingly, the belief in one's identity, a concept remarkably similar to Nicodemus's belief in his Jewish birth, has become the center of how people understand themselves within a destabilizing world. People define their identity by their gender, race, nationality, socio-economic status, political affiliation, career choice, education, height, weight, and an endless number of other aspects. It is the combination of these factors, they believe, that makes you uniquely you and helps guide you along in life. From a Christian worldview perspective, there are a lot of difficulties with this approach, but the primary difficulty is that, like Nicodemus's ancestry, identity will never save. People who place their hope in their own identity rather than the work of the Holy Spirit, will never enter the kingdom of God. As you go into your workplaces, your neighborhood gatherings, and your extended family, listen for those who are seeking fulfillment in their identity and be prepared to challenge them with the truths of the gospel.

🔗: *How did Nicodemus conceive of Jesus and His mission on the earth?*

🔗: *What attracted Nicodemus to Jesus?*

Nicodemus was attracted to Jesus because of the signs He performed. He was correct to recognize that these signs were an indication of the presence of God. Nicodemus underestimated, however, the implications of these signs. He called Jesus a teacher, which is not incorrect, but we know from earlier in John's Gospel that Jesus was much more than just a teacher. He is the Son of God (John 1:14). Nicodemus's confession was part of the reason he could not enter the kingdom of God. When the Spirit is at work in our lives, we can see clearly who Jesus is.

Q: *What are some common misconceptions about who Jesus is and what He came to do?*

Q: *Why are these misconceptions so common in our culture?*

APPLICATION POINT – Nicodemus called Jesus a teacher. Jesus was, of course, a teacher, but his conversation with Jesus revealed that Nicodemus had an incomplete understanding of who Jesus was. The same problem is prevalent today. Many people are willing to confess Jesus as a teacher, philosopher, religious leader, and even as an all-around good person. But Jesus demands that we know Him as Lord and Savior. This week, prepare yourself to challenge those who would give an incomplete explanation of who Jesus is and what He came to do. Memorize one or two Bible verses that acknowledge Jesus's divinity (John 1:1; Titus 2:13; 2 Peter 1:1). Also, memorize one or two verses that identify Jesus as Savior (2 Timothy 1:10; 2 Peter 1:11; 2 Peter 3:2). These are small but essential steps in challenging our culture's insufficient misconceptions about who Jesus is.

2. THE KINGDOM OF GOD COMES THROUGH THE WORK OF THE HOLY SPIRIT.

■ JOHN 3:8-17

Q: *What analogy did Jesus offer to help us understand the work of the Holy Spirit?*

Q: *What is the meaning of Jesus's analogy?*

Jesus told Nicodemus that he must be born again in order to enter the kingdom of God. This new birth, however, comes from the work of the Holy Spirit. It is a spiritual rebirth. Jesus compared the work of the Holy Spirit to the wind. We can see the effects of the wind, but we cannot see the wind itself. Furthermore, we do not make the wind blow. It is out of our control. The same can be said of the Holy Spirit. We can see the effects of the Holy Spirit's work, but we cannot see the Holy Spirit itself working upon someone. Furthermore, we cannot manipulate the Holy Spirit.

♀: *If the kingdom of God comes through the work of the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit is beyond our control, what is our responsibility in leading others to salvation?*

♀: *The modern mind is quite critical of God in general and the Holy Spirit in particular. Skeptics have little room for the non-material universe. How can you respond to them?*

APPLICATION POINT – Salvation is ultimately out of our control. Many faithful Christians have prayed for friends and loved ones to confess Christ as Savior and Lord to no avail. We cannot force the Holy Spirit to work in the life of another. What then is our role in bringing someone else to Christ? Our role is to remain faithful. We are to remain faithful to the Bible's command to be witnesses to the ends of the earth. We are to remain faithful in prayer. We are to remain faithful in trusting the wisdom of God to move in the lives of others. If you are not already, begin praying for the salvation of two or three people you know.

♀: *What was Jesus's response to Nicodemus's questions?*

♀: *What are the two ways that God reveals Himself to us?*

Jesus seemed disappointed and amazed that Nicodemus would be so oblivious to the dynamics of the kingdom of God. The primary reason was that He believed this to be revealed truth. He pointed to two modes of revealed truth. The first is Himself. Jesus descended from the Father to dwell among us. Thus, He is able to perfectly reveal God the Father to us, including how the kingdom of God will come among us. The second mode of revealed truth is the Bible. Jesus pointed Nicodemus to a passage in the Old Testament (Numbers 21:4–9). The Israelites had

been complaining of their circumstances, and God sent an infestation of snakes into their camp. When the people repented, Moses was instructed to construct a bronze snake at the top of a long pole which was erected high over the camp. When the people looked at the image of the serpent, they were healed from their snake bites. According to Jesus, this story is a testimony to how the kingdom of God is at work in the world. Instead of a bronze serpent, it would be Jesus who was lifted up for all to look upon in faith. Thus, Jesus was amazed that Nicodemus was so unaware of the kingdom of God.

Q: *Is God's revelation of Himself in Jesus Christ and the inspired Word shaping your understanding of the world, or are you resisting living in accordance with revealed truth as Nicodemus was?*

Q: *One of the ways the Holy Spirit works in our lives is through simple acts of faith, such as when the Israelites looked at the bronze serpent. Are you willing to seek God through simple acts of faith, or do you demand that every detail be figured out and every risk absolved before following the Holy Spirit's lead?*

APPLICATION POINT – Modern people are becoming more and more skeptical of the Bible, but for Christians, the Bible is the standard for how we live and believe in the world. If the Bible is the Word of God, then it should confront us at some point in our lives because we are finite, fallible human beings. Does the Bible ever teach anything you do not like? Does the Bible ever change how you would approach a certain situation? Or, have you become adept at explaining away the parts of the Bible that infringe upon how you think the world should be? Make a list of the ways the Bible changes how you make decisions in the following categories: money, sex, politics, time management. If the Bible does not radically alter your life, you are either super holy or resisting what it teaches.

3. MARKS OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

■ JOHN 3:18–21

Q: *Who will be condemned by the life and ministry of Jesus?*

Q: *Why did God send the Son into the world?*

Entering the kingdom of God is accomplished by the work of the Holy Spirit. We cannot see the Holy Spirit working but we can see the effects of His work. What are some of those effects? One of the primary effects or indicators that the Holy Spirit is working is belief. When followers of Christ believe in Him and in His mission on this earth, it is a mark of the work of the Spirit. When Christians believe the Bible and follow its teachings, it is a mark of the work of the Spirit.

Q: *Are you consistently believing in the person and work of Jesus Christ?*

Q: *Are you embodying that belief through action?*

APPLICATION POINT – Jesus’s remarks about belief are a wonderful reminder of the His gospel. The forgiveness of our sins is not based on our good works or righteous deeds. We must merely believe in the gospel. That belief will transform our hearts so that we pursue righteousness in life and deed, but our good works are the result of our salvation, not the cause. The freedom we have in the gospel will also spur us on to worship. During your next church-wide worship service, allow your freedom in Christ to elevate your heart to God in worship.

Q: *Why do people fail to believe in Jesus Christ?*

Q: *How did Jesus describe those who do not believe in Him?*

The mark of the Holy Spirit’s work is belief, but Jesus did not choose to describe the absence of the Holy Spirit’s work as unbelief. Instead, Jesus described it as loving darkness and hating the light. Unbelievers love what is evil and hate what is good. This does not have to cover every arena of good and evil. Unbelievers can and often do good things. Unbelievers can live moral lives. But in the arena of who Jesus Christ is and what He came to do, unbelievers

cannot help but do the evil of denying the person and work of Jesus Christ and love any other explanation of what is good and true.

Q: *How do you define good and evil?*

Q: *In what ways does our culture love the darkness (anything that is contrary to the perfect will of God)?*

APPLICATION POINT – Goodness is that which corresponds to God’s moral character and will. To know what is good demands that we seek to know and understand God. Humans, however, often attempt to offer their own explanations for what is good and evil. They depart from using God as the standard for what is good and evil, right and wrong. As a result, their morality will always fall short of what God demands. Christians also can fall into the trap of devising our own standards of good and evil. This attempt to redefine good and evil underlies the health and wealth gospel. Good is a life of ease and luxury. Evil is illness and poverty. One will look in vain for this explanation of good and evil from the Bible, however. What other standards of good and evil are Christians tempted to adopt? This week identify some of your top vocational, financial, and family goals. You would naturally believe these goals to be good, but how do they compare with God’s standard for goodness? How easily can you trace a line from these goals to God being glorified in your life and in this world?

NEXT STEPS

Many of the applications in this lesson involve self-reflection. It is good to reflect often about your Christian faith. The problem, however, is that we usually have blind spots when examining ourselves. It is helpful to have an accountability partner to help you examine your Christian walk. This should be someone you know and trust, at least to a large degree, and someone who is able to address instances when you do not live according to God’s will. This week, consider who in your group you could start an accountability partnership with.

PRAY

+Use these prayer points to instill the lessons you learned from God’s Word this week.

God, help me to identify the ways in which I misunderstand the gospel. Help me to confront others who deny Jesus



Christ because they deny He is the Savior of the world.

Father, help me to find my identity in Jesus Christ, His life, His death, and His resurrection. I am a Christian before I am anything else.

Lord, the salvation of others is beyond my control. Help me to be faithful to share and let me be content with however your Holy Spirit moves.

Lord, help me to believe and not to love the darkness.