

"Born Again." I don't know if there is a more contested phrase or fraught relationship with that phrase, right now. What exactly does that mean? This phrase has deep roots, but in the last 50 years or so in American history, it's picked up several different connotations. It's become a catch-all for a lot of different things.

First, since the 1970s, the phrase has come to mean a particular Christian. I date it to the '70s because that's when President Jimmy Carter was the first to publicly identify himself as born again. The '70s gave way to the '80s, and eventually the moral majority emerged, and they began to use this phrase as well: born again. It got meshed in with both a particular Christian as well as a political understanding of the world.

Then fast-forward many years, and it became a type of voting bloc. Usually, that is what it is referenced to, but if it isn't referenced as a political understanding or a voting bloc, the second way this phrase is often used outside of Christian circles is a metaphor to talk about a highly committed or overly zealous person of faith.

Maybe they once lived a morally loose life, and they had a moment where their life dropped out, the bottom fell apart, and they came to faith. Sometimes you'll hear it as, "Oh, they're one of those crazy born again Christians." We've equated this term to mean maybe an emotionally broken person who needs a crutch, so they found religion. Or maybe it's someone who can identify with a particular viewpoint or understanding of the world.

But what does it mean to be born again? Because the text today is the very first instance, at least that I can understand, in all of human history, in which the phrase born again is used. The first time it's ever used is right here in John 3 in the story of Nicodemus. The one who coined the phrase is no one less than Jesus. So I just want to propose that whatever it means to be born again, we should come back to the original source. What if we allow Jesus to define this phrase that we have grown familiar with?

It's really interesting that the two ways in which we have associated this phrase are either someone who is hyper-moralistic or hyper-religious, yet who is the first person whom Jesus calls to be born again? Nicodemus, and what do we know about him other than he was hyper-religious and hyper-moralistic? So whatever it means to be born again, it can't mean the things that it's become in this moment. What does it mean when Jesus calls the most religious and moralistic man that we've encountered in the Book of John thus far to be born again?

Last week, we preached through this text of Jesus clearing the temple courts. Jesus caused quite a stir when he went in and took down the religious establishment, essentially saying, "This is no longer needed. I am

now the fulfillment of all of this." Then we arrive at the end of chapter 2 and move into chapter 3. John is the artist of the gospel writers. He's the crafty, creative one. Everything in John means what it is as well as something else. Think of John as less of a documentary film director and more of a feature film director.

John is a literary genius. We have to pay close attention to all of these little nuances, because they may seem insignificant to us, but along the way, he is playing with themes and ideas and weaving them together to craft a profoundly beautiful book and depiction of who Jesus is.

So let's pick up at the end of chapter 2, because there's a little bit of context that will help us understand the story of Nicodemus. *"Now while he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Festival, many people saw the signs he was performing and believed in his name" (v. 23).* It is a very common theme for Jesus to do things and then people believe in his name. That word belief can also mean faith, so just keep holding that with you.

"But Jesus would not entrust himself to them, for he knew all people. He did not need any testimony about mankind, for he knew what was in each person" (vv. 24-25). John inserts this short section that details the success that Jesus had in the wedding at Cana and the temple scene in bringing people to believe in his name. It's a bit of a transition statement, but then you get this strange one where it says Jesus wouldn't entrust himself to any person.

What does that mean? This idea of entrusting himself is more or less that early on in Jesus' career, he wasn't quite ready to just say, "I am the Messiah," mainly because of his knowledge of people. He has a deeper knowledge to understand that people are fairly fickle in where they give their allegiance. The word *pisteuo* in Greek is one of my favorite translations for faith; it pertains more to allegiance. It isn't just blind, stepping out over the ledge, faith. It's much more than putting your faith in someone and acting as if everything they say is true. It's to step into a way of life that is both trusting and holding them in the highest regard. It is to quite literally to declare "All hail King Jesus." To say you are king, and so therefore my life must be arranged around that reality.

Jesus understands people enough to know they're fickle in this. They struggle with this. So he says, "I couldn't trust anyone yet. I held it to myself because I knew all people." But here's where it gets interesting. Remember that the chapter differentiations, the subheadings in your Bible, and the verse numbers were all added in your Bible way later than the original text.

It is there for good reasons, and it helps us navigate, so it's not a bad thing, but it does something to us when we read the Bible. We often have these breaking points in the text that aren't really there, and this is

one of those places where John wants you to read directly from verse 23 right through the story of Nicodemus.

Here's how we see that. When John says that Jesus knew all people, that's the Greek word *anthropos*, from which you might hear anthropology. It means man, people, person, human, or humankind. But now let's hold that for a minute.

Look at the way chapter 3 begins. So Jesus just said he knew all people. He did not need any testimony about all people or mankind, for he knew what was in each person. "*Now there was a Pharisee, a man named Nicodemus who was a member of the Jewish ruling council*" (v. 3). If you were to read this literally in the original language, it sounds like this from chapter 2 directly to chapter 3. "For he knew what was in each *anthropos*. Now there was an *anthropos*." He's saying that he knew what was in every single person, and then John says, "Now let me give you an example of one person."

So he's saying that something in this story speaks much broader than just this one interaction with Nicodemus, but rather it's speaking to the human condition. He's saying, "There is something I know about every person who's ever lived, and yet here comes one person, and let me tell the story of everyone through the one person."

So here's the invitation through all of that: he invites you to read yourself into the story of Nicodemus. Here's where we have to be careful. We have this tendency to want to read ourselves as Jesus in the text, but we should really read ourselves as Nicodemus. My invitation is for you to do that as we read through this story. Jesus and John are saying, "Here's a story about everyone, but also about you." So read yourself into that story. Now let's come to chapter 3.

Now there was a Pharisee, a man named Nicodemus who was a member of the Jewish ruling council. 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." vv. 1-2

So who is this representative figure that we're reading ourselves into? It's the man Nicodemus, and we know a few things about him. We learn something before we even learn his name, which is that he's a Pharisee. The Pharisees get a pretty bad rap, and it's well-earned. However, some of the connotations that we have of the Pharisees are not as warranted. Yes, they were missing the mark tremendously, and Jesus has harsh words for them, but don't forget how devout they were. They had all sorts of zeal and desire to follow God. Their intentions were bent in the right direction, albeit distorted later on.

For Nicodemus to be a Pharisee meant he was a very religious man. He likely had the entire Old Testament memorized. He would have organized his days with multiple times of prayer throughout every single day. He would certainly not have missed the Sabbath. He was morally rigorous. He had all of the religiosity that the world could offer. Even more so, John tells us that he was a member of the ruling council, which means he is not only super religious, but he actually held a position of authority within the culture. He was an elite. He likely would've been a

little bit older. He would've learned. He was a teacher of the law. That's what we learn later from Jesus.

So he was an aged, educated, academic elite who taught religious studies. Now we come back to the question we started with, which is, what does it mean to be born again? The reality is, whatever it means to be born again, it cannot mean that it's a call to be more religious. It can also not mean a call to be more moral. You quite literally couldn't invent someone who is more religious and moral than Nicodemus. That's the picture of who this person is. So what does it mean to be born again? Well, let's keep reading the story. I just want to keep that question before you.

In verse 2, we learn that Nicodemus came to Jesus at night. There we're picking up the odd nuance. Why would you go out of the way to say, "at night"? That seems a bit of an odd detail to just drop in there. I don't think it's just because it was chronicling the events. There must be something more going on. Remember how John started his gospel. Look back at this in John 1. In this beautiful prologue, the introduction to his gospel, speaking of Jesus, he writes,

The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world. He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God. John 1:9-13

Nicodemus is someone who came at night. That seems to be a reference to this play in which John has set up the whole of his gospel around light and darkness. Also, what we just learned about Nicodemus is that he is a Jew of Jews. He is one of Jesus' own. So what did we just learn if we put that all together? It means that John is using Nicodemus to exemplify what we just learned in chapter 1, that the true light came into the world, that is, Jesus, and yet someone was stuck in darkness, that's Nicodemus. Jesus' own rejected him. That's certainly Nicodemus. All of these are showing this picture in which Nicodemus is the example par excellence of what Jesus is doing in this story and what John wants us to see.

We'll circle back to the story of the Samaritan, as John is explicitly contrasting Nicodemus, an elite insider who rejects Jesus, with a Samaritan woman, who is on the lower end of the social structure, and the outsider who accepts Jesus. These are two people he wants us to contrast in our minds as we read this story. They become examples of how we view and understand our lives in the story.

So Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night, and he begins with a bit of flattery. He's like, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who's come from God," which is the Jewish way of saying, "You are the Messiah, aren't you?" There's some debate around this, but I actually think Nicodemus may be coming with a genuine pursuit. Some would say that he's coming really built out of the last scene of the temple destruction, and

they're trying to do some backdoor politicking with Jesus. That may be true, so I hold this loosely, but I actually read this as a bit of Nicodemus not quite willing to lose all that he's built in his life, and so he's coming in the shadows, but he's genuinely in pursuit of who Jesus is.

This is less of flattery for the sake of flattery, but I wonder if it's, "Jesus, are you who you say you are? Are you actually the Messiah?" I love this because Jesus doesn't fall for it. He doesn't look into the flattery at all.

Jesus replied, "Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again. "How can someone be born when they are old?" Nicodemus asked. "Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother's womb to be born!" John 3:3-4

There is the phrase—born again. Nicodemus starts with the flattery, but Jesus responds with the very thing that Nicodemus would have been an expert in, this idea of the Kingdom of God. Here's where the conversation gets a little bit tense, because Jesus is essentially looking at him and saying, "Listen, you are asking about these things. You are the teacher of Israel. You know some of these things, but no one can enter or experience the Kingdom of God unless they are born again." To which Nicodemus responds, "How could I crawl back into my mother's womb?"

This is where the Bible is using sarcasm. Nicodemus does not actually believe that Jesus is saying, "Crawl into your mother's womb." This is actually Nicodemus responding with sharp cynicism. "Jesus, what do you think you're saying?" So why would Jesus say born again? Well, your Bible may have a different word there than "again." It likely has a footnote that says not just born again, but it could say born from above. Those are two very important understandings of this word, both valid translations.

The Greek word there is *anōthen*, which the most literal translation would be from above, but it can also mean from the first or anew, which is where we get the English word "again." Two very good translations, but they have different connotations. Here's where Jesus is brilliant. We do this all the time with different phrases, where we say one word that can mean a couple of different things. An example would be, "You nailed it." That could mean I just hung a picture, or I told a really great joke. It's a word that means two things, but we do this all the time, and sometimes we get tripped up in this thinking that Jesus is playing hard to get or something. That's not at all what's happening. Jesus is brilliantly taking a concept and allowing it to do the heavy lifting in different ways.

So what are we to understand from born again and from above? When Jesus says born again, it could mean a new beginning, start fresh, or start something new. But what about born above? What exactly does that mean? When Jesus allows this connotation of being born from above, it means a new source. Jesus is looking at Nicodemus and saying, "If you want to encounter the kingdom of God, you need to begin your life over and do it from a different source," which is why Nicodemus responds the way he does.

There are layers in Nicodemus' response. He's picking up on the word-play that Jesus is doing, because if it were a new beginning, that seems to sound like Nicodemus, in his response, "How can someone be born when they are old," picking up on the begin anew or fresh. Then secondly, "How can they enter the womb again?" It seems that he's asking the question that's pointing towards the source. Essentially, he's responding with cynicism and saying, "Jesus, how in the world do I begin again, and how do I come from a different source?"

Here's the point where we're tempted to ridicule Nicodemus. But we must be cautious. Let's read ourselves into the story. What we just found out, and the reason that Nicodemus responds the way he does, is that with this understanding, you start to see how offensive it must have been to Nicodemus. Nicodemus has dedicated his life to the study of scripture and the pursuit of God. Yes, he has missed the mark in a thousand different ways, but he has climbed the ladder. He's been a success. He's risen through the ranks. He's done everything to build a life that he believed would bring him the encounter of the Kingdom of God, and Jesus comes along and says, "You need a new life. You need to start over."

Read yourself into the story. For you, it may not be the religious achievements that Nicodemus has, but do we not all do this? Do we not all build a life on something, assuming it will bring about the good life? For him, it was his achievements within the religious sphere, but don't limit it to that. These are the things that are the subtle nuances deeper in our human soul than it is explicitly obvious.

We all know not to say, "I build my life on my career," yet when you work an 80-hour week over and over, it begs the question of whether you have actually built your life on your career. Maybe it's not the religious zeal, but it's the way you project yourself to the world, the influence, the relationships that you have centered on so much that it is everything in your life. You may not have built your life like Nicodemus, but have you built your life on something to which Jesus might be saying, "You need to be born and from a different source"

Nicodemus had built his life on himself, everything that he could achieve, everything that he tried to accomplish, and so when he looks at Jesus, it's as offensive as Jesus saying, "Your life, wherever it is, whichever career you have, wherever you've dedicated and built your whole sense of being around, start over and build from a different source." This confronts every single one of us. I'm reminded of a familiar text. Jesus is confronting a group of Pharisees, and he says,

Jesus said to them, "Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you to show you the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes did. And even after you saw this, you did not repent and believe him. Matthew 21:31b-32

Don't miss it, and don't dull this text. Jesus just looked at the group of religious elites and said, "The pimps and the prostitutes are getting into the kingdom of God ahead of you." Why? Well, it has something to do with the human condition that we all understand, I'm speaking in

generalities here, that those who are at the end of their life, when the bottom drops out, they are much more ready to understand their need for a savior.

Think about all the other teachings of Jesus. It's hard for the rich to enter the kingdom of God. The first must become last. Paul in the New Testament wrote, "In our weakness he is made strong." Nicodemus had a life that made sense to him. It was pretty well put together. He knew how to go about his daily life and receive the acclaim that he desired. He knew how to animate his life in such a way that everything was going well for him, and Jesus goes to people like that and says, "You need to be born again." Those whose lives seem to be in shambles tend to have an easier time accepting their need for a savior. That was the obstacle that Nicodemus was experiencing. He had it all put together, and yet Jesus meets him in that and says, "You need to start over from a different source."

This is the beginning of being born again. It's coming to grips with the harsh reality that your life is not okay. It's realizing that the beginning of experiencing life is what it's always been through the teachings of Jesus—death. You lay your life down to take up the resurrected life. Unless a seed falls and dies, it cannot grow. Jesus, over and over, is reminding us, most readily in communion, that the death of Jesus gives us life. It's the same principle over and over, and the harsh reality is coming to grips with the fact that it is through surrender that you take up life.

So Jesus, understanding that Nicodemus isn't quite seeing this, shifts in verse 5 to start using language that certainly Nicodemus would have been familiar with. *"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'"* (vv. 5-6). Now, in short, this is talking about baptism, and there's a whole argument around this of whether it's one or two baptisms, meaning the baptism of water and the baptism of the Spirit.

I believe it is one. That is what the scholarly consensus is: that what's happening is that to be baptized, to enter in and follow and place your faith in Jesus, is to be filled with the Holy Spirit, to which that new source has now been implanted within you.

Here is where Jesus is picking up this language, trying to help Nicodemus see this. This idea of water and spirit is often linked throughout the Old Testament. Here are two examples that were probably on the mind of Jesus when he said that, which is conjecture because we don't know, but these are pretty famous passages that would have been at the ready of Jesus' imagination as well as Nicodemus.

In Isaiah 44, the prophet is speaking. He says, "For I will pour water on the thirsty land, and streams on the dry ground; I will pour out my Spirit on your offspring, and my blessing on your descendants" (Isaiah 44:3). Regarding the descendants, Isaiah's talking about the faithful remnant of God's people who had accepted their failure and begin the road of repentance, which simply means laying down, naming that which is wrong and moving in a different direction.

Isaiah is saying that God will pour out his water, and this pouring out of water and Spirit is akin to dry ground just soaking up the moisture. It's like when you're thirsty, and you finally find water. It's like when a shriveled-up sponge is reanimated by the water that fills it. He says this is what it is like. And then another example is from the prophet Ezekiel.

I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.
Ezekiel 36:25-27

Ezekiel shifts the metaphor. It's not so much like the dry land absorbing the moisture, but here it's more like the griminess of a dirty heart, in which it will be cleansed through water. So it's the thirsting, the longing that you're looking for, as well as the cleansing that we see in Ezekiel.

What we're starting to see in this picture is that when Jesus says, "You must be born of water and Spirit," to Nicodemus, he's saying to be born again is to allow the new life to satisfy you fully but also give you a radically different source that is no longer built on the self but on the Spirit of God.

To be born again is to name that my life is not turning out the way we anticipated. It is not leading to the Kingdom of God. It's self-sufficient. It's in some ways a rebellion against the way of Jesus. To repent is to say, "Spirit, would you fill me with a new beginning? Would that become the center point of my life?" Now we're talking in the realm of loves and longings.

So your life on the exterior may look the same, but it may look radically different as well. It all stems from where your loves and longings are anchored. Where are your loves and longings, the things that brings the whole of your life?

Think of the Proverb in Proverbs 4, which says, *"Guard your heart above all else, for from it flows your life."* It's Jesus saying all of your life comes from the core of who you are at your very center. He is saying that if that is bent in the wrong direction, it will ultimately, over time, lead to a life that's bent inward. Launch that over eternity, and it will do nothing but shrivel up over time. It must be built on something more solid.

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." "How can this be?" Nicodemus asked. **John 3:5-9**

This is Jesus saying there's a part of this whole thing in which you have no role. The wind blows where it goes. The word wind there is the word *pneuma*, which is the same word for spirit. Wind, breath, and spirit, all

the same Greek word and concept. It's Jesus saying the Spirit does what the Spirit does. You cannot coerce your own soul into this. All you can do is make yourself available for the movement of the Holy Spirit.

I remember when both my children were born, and I was so shocked at the whole process for a lot of different reasons, but one of which was just how out of control the whole thing is. The body's finally like, "It's time." And the doctors, I am so grateful for them. We had some complications with both of our daughters, that I was so glad they were there for. But it's like they're just organizing the chaos. They're just facilitating this process. But the reality is, when it's time, it's time.

The same is true of this born again thing. You cannot force the transformation in your own life or in the life of anyone else. The wind blows where it pleases. But one of the things I've learned over and over in my experience with the Holy Spirit is that when we make ourselves available, the wind tends to blow. Mark, my predecessor who pastored here for so many years, used to say, "We can't make the wind blow, but we can set our sails. We can get prepared to catch it."

It's the only role you have, my friends. You just set the sails, and the Spirit will blow, but you cannot force it. You cannot coerce a loved one. You cannot coerce your neighbor or coworker. That's not your job. Your job is to set your sail and allow the wind to blow. Regardless of our intentions, we cannot coerce the way of Jesus onto anyone or any society. We simply attune ourselves and our hearts and ask where we need to be born again.

"You are Israel's teacher," said Jesus, "and do you not understand these things? Very truly I tell you, 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. John 3:10-13

This is Jesus essentially expressing a little frustration here. He tried to explain this both in earthly means and in heavenly means. He used Nicodemus' language and otherwise. He was Israel's teacher, for heaven's sake, and yet he was missing the mark. Jesus was trying to get to this place, but then he shifted at the end. This is where it finally comes to a head for Jesus, where he's trying to communicate in all the ways he can.

It's there that he starts talking about snakes, which seems odd. It's how he ends his communication with Nicodemus. *"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"* (vv. 14-15). Now, this is an allusion to a story in Numbers 21. It's an odd one.

Essentially, the people of God are camped out in the wilderness as they were waiting to get into the Promised Land, and they're rebelling. There are all sorts of sins within the people, and these snakes start biting people. The people begin to get sick, they're dying off, and it's beginning to infect everyone. So Moses goes to God and asks what to do. God

said to melt down all the bronze, form it into a snake, hold it up, and everyone will be healed if they look at the snake. It seems odd, but that's what God has him do. The Bible is strange sometimes.

That's actually the imagery in many medical fields, that image is still used today. I don't know if you know that, but if you look, you can see it with the snake. It's rooted back to this story. So Moses melts down the bronze. He forms it into a snake and holds it up. And as God said, everyone who looked at the snake was healed. Jesus says to Nicodemus, "Don't you understand? You need to be healed. You need a new beginning from a different source." And He says, "Just like Moses had to lift up that snake, so too I, the Son of Man, must be lifted up."

That is, without question, Jesus pointing to his death, in which He says, "Just like that snake was lifted up and those who looked at it were healed, so too when I go to the cross, and I am lifted up, I will be the healing balm for all." Now catch the nuance in this story. It's interesting that God tells Moses to use a snake for a lot of different reasons.

Certainly, Genesis 3 comes to mind when the snake deceives Adam and Eve, and launches the whole mess that we're in. But don't miss that the very thing that was poisoning the people was transformed and refashioned to be the healing. In the same way, Jesus is, in fact, a human, but a different transformed human, where the human heart was broken within people, but is transformed in Jesus, which becomes the healing for the people. He says, "I must be lifted up, and when you look at me, you will find healing." Which makes a whole lot of sense, and maybe a great context for the most famous verse in all of the scripture in chapter 3.

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. John 3:16

So the whole thing is pointing to this reality that Nicodemus had built his life on something different. Nicodemus wanted to come to teacher Jesus, not savior Jesus. Nicodemus could not identify the sickness that was in his heart, and Jesus says, "Listen, I am a teacher, but I'm so much more than a teacher." He says, "I'm also a savior." So verses 16 through 21 are simply John's narrative voice coming into the feature film to say, "Hey, make sure you don't miss it." Whoever looks to the Son, like those who looked at that bronze snake, will 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 they have not believed in the name of God's one and only Son. vv. 17-18

This is where Nicodemus was. He was one of those who rejected him. That's what John said in chapter 1. It's this man who's caught in his own ego or understanding. He said, "I've built my life on me. I don't need anyone else." Jesus and John are essentially saying, "This Nicodemus stands condemned, not because of what God has said over him, but because his own heart is condemning himself."

He refuses to see the need that he has. He refuses to see Jesus as the Savior. He, like in that Old Testament passage, refuses to look at the snake where the healing is found, and he is caught in darkness. He stands there condemned already. There is a subtle tragedy in the life of Nicodemus. He will pop up a few more times in the Gospel of John, and we see him get really close to Jesus, but we don't know how his story ends.

Some think he came to the Lord. He'll help pay for the embalming of Jesus later on. I tend to think he didn't, but that's not for me to decide. There's a tragedy because he was comfortable with knowing about Jesus, but he couldn't lay his life down for Jesus. He wasn't willing to surrender his life.

This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed. But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done in the sight of God. vv. 19-21

The reality is that darkness, something in which Nicodemus just felt comfortable, made sense there. Life could still be put together there. The verdict is that those who love darkness get caught in that. Just this past week, I read C.S. Lewis' *The Great Divorce*. I don't know if you've read that. It's a short little book, and it had been 15 years since I'd read it. Lewis takes a bus ride to heaven, and in there is this allegory in which these different people are coming to God. Lewis exposes the ways that they're using God for other purposes.

So many of the stories ended with this tone. "They just loved whatever else they wanted to use God for, but they never loved God." In there, he talks about how condemnation is from the person who refuses to give their life. If you are in the presence of God and you want nothing to do with God, what else would you call that but hell?

That is the tone in these verses. Jesus is like, "I'm here, Nicodemus. I'm right in front of you. You're a teacher of this. You know everything, and I am the fulfillment of that." But Nicodemus just loved the darkness. He couldn't quite see it. If I were to summarize, it would be something like this: The life of the Kingdom of God can only be received through the surrender of the life that you've built. Jesus will always ask for full surrender. It will require everything from you to lay your life down. But please don't miss what it is you're stepping into.

Some of us, like Nicodemus, have built a life that has been successful and looks good. We've achieved everything we've set out to do, and the subtle tragedy of Nicodemus is that this just meant he had a lot more to lose. It's hard for the rich to enter the kingdom of heaven. The first must become last. "Nicodemus, you must be born again."

Many of us, as we enter into this story should see ourselves as Nicodemus. Maybe this is for you, maybe it isn't. Maybe you've gone the religiosity route, in which you've tried to do everything for Jesus, but it's all built out of a heart that's trying to prove yourself. However, the whole time God's like, "Listen, you don't need to prove yourself. You can simply engage in the Spirit that I've placed within you."

Maybe you've tried the success route. You've built a career of trying to achieve and accomplish, and that's where you're finding meaning. Maybe you've tried the acquisition of knowledge. You're like, "If I just know everything, then that'll lead me to the Kingdom of God." Or maybe you're just bent towards, "I have to experience everything," so you go the pleasure route, thinking it will certainly lead to the good life."

I don't know where you're at on this, but Jesus has been lifted up on the cross, died, and was resurrected. That is where life is found. The invitation is open. It's always been open. The question before us is, will we surrender our lives to take up the new one in Jesus? Will you surrender your life and come to see that it's the broken body of Christ and the poured-out blood of Jesus where salvation is found?

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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