

John 3 sermon

### **LOOKING LIKE A CHRISTIAN?**

**III** – Do you look like a Christian?

Can people look at you and your life and *see* that you are a Christian?

Do you read the Bible?

Do you attend a Bible Study group?

Do you use the right sort of words in your prayers?

Do you give more than 10% of your income?

Do you know the words to the Creeds and Confessions at Church?

Do you wear the right clothes to church?

Does the church you go to look, sound, and feel like a proper church?

If you answered yes to all those questions, Congratulations! That qualifies you to be a Pharisee. A good, *religious* person.

Nicodemus was a Pharisee. A very important one. He wore the right clothes, he knew the Scriptures and the Law, He gave at least 10% of his income. He fasted twice a week or more. He prayed with the right words. And when he walked up and down the streets, people *knew* that Nicodemus was a man of God. A Pharisee. A member of the Jewish ruling council. An impressive man.

But a man named Jesus caught his attention. A Jew. Not a very impressive man to look at. No fancy clothes. Didn't hang around the right religious people. But he was an incredible teacher. People really listened to him. And then there were the miracles he performed. Amazing miracles. Like no-one else.

Verse 2:

*2He 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."*

But Jesus ignores the compliment and cuts straight to the heart of the issue. Let me paraphrase:

"Nicodemus, you're not in the Kingdom of God unless you've been born again."

"Nicodemus, it doesn't matter what you look like. It doesn't matter how well you know the law. It doesn't even matter if you're a Jew or not. You're not in the kingdom of God unless you're born again."

It doesn't matter what you LOOK like! You can dress up the outside of your life, but if the inside isn't changed, it doesn't make a single bit of difference. You can't make a deaf person hear by turning up the volume! You can't make a blind person see by turning on the lights! You can't make a sick person well by dressing them in nice clothes! You can't come into the Kingdom of God by looking good on the outside. You need to be re-born!

### **BORN AGAIN**

And that's what this passage is about. We can know a lot about the Bible, a lot about God, a lot about religion and faith. We can dress up like a Christian and even dress our church up like a church, but we will not be a part of the Kingdom of God unless we are born again.

Nicodemus is confused by Jesus' words:

*4"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!"*

**III** – And isn't that one of the most disturbing images in the Bible! But it's true isn't it! A baby can't go into his mother's womb a second time! They're hard enough to get out the first time! A child being born is like watching a Champagne cork come out of a bottle! As soon as they pop out, there is no way they'll fit back in!

5 Jesus answered, "I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit."

Jesus says if you want to be a part of the Kingdom of God, you have to be born again in a **spiritual way**. Water is a sign of **cleansing**, the spirit is a sign of **renewal**. Jesus is talking about a birth that **cleans** and **renews**. A spiritual birth. A birth "from above". And how does this happen?

8 *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.*"

Think about the wind. Where does it come from? Where does it go? You can't control it and you certainly can't manipulate it! But we CAN see the **effects** of the wind.

And that's how the Spirit of God works. God's Spirit is like the wind. He's not controlled by people. We can't manipulate or control God's Spirit. For Nicodemus, as a Pharisee, being in God's Kingdom was something he thought he could control himself. **Do the right thing. Say the right thing. Know the right thing.** But the Spirit of God is what brings people into the Kingdom of God. It is the work of God, not men.

**III** – I've asked a lot of people over the years if they believe in heaven or God, and most people actually say "yes". When I ask them if they think they're going to heaven, most people actually say "yes". When I ask them WHY they think they're going to heaven, most people actually say things like "Because I'm a pretty good person. I haven't killed anyone, I don't steal. I hardly ever lie." That's legalism. That's the Pharisee. *"As long as I DO the right things, I will be saved."*

Nicodemus was **looking** like a man of God, by DOING all the right things and following all the right laws. But Jesus says **"Stop looking at yourself. You need to look at me!"**

He then takes us to a little passage in the Old Testament: **Numbers 21:4-9...**

[The people of Israel were wandering around in the desert and whinging at God... again! So God sent venomous snakes among them which bit them and lots of them died. They were all going to die. And then the people recognised they had sinned against God and they asked him to save them. So God had Moses make a bronze snake and put it on a pole and hold it up. When people were bitten by a snake, all they had to do was to look to the snake on the pole and they would live.]

Jesus says this is what **his** role is.

14 *Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, 15 that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.*

Jesus must be lifted up on a pole – to be crucified. And only those who *believe in him*, those who look to him on that cross, will live. We are as good as dead, like the Israelites with the snakes in the desert. Yet when they looked up, they were saved.

Notice the contrast for Nicodemus. *"Everyone who **believes** in him may have eternal life."*

Not "everyone who *achieves*". Not "everyone who *succeeds*". Not "everyone who *agrees*". But "everyone who *believes*".

16 *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. 17 For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. 18 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.*

**III** – Death row

Last year there were 3370 people on death row in the USA. That's a lot of people, isn't it?

The sad truth is that the world we live in and the people in it are all on death row. Already condemned. Every single person has been found guilty of sin against God and condemned to hell. And it doesn't matter how well you think you follow God's laws. It doesn't matter how good you are at reading your Bible. It doesn't matter how much you LOOK like a person of God. The only chance of escaping that sentence of condemnation is to believe in Jesus. To turn to him. To look to him on the cross – the place where he offered to pay for our sin and set us free from that condemnation. Believe.

**III** – One thing I despise is early mornings. And the thing I hate even worse than an early morning is when someone comes into my dark bedroom and switches the light on. I don't mind if there's noise. I don't mind if the phone rings or people bash at the door. What I hate the most is the blinding light in my eyes. The light pierces the darkness and rips me out of my deep sleep.

*19This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. 20Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed.*

The world loves darkness. In the darkness you can sleep. In the darkness you can hide. In the darkness no-one can see what you do. Nicodemus came to Jesus at night. In the darkness he stood face to face with the light of the world. And I imagine it made him very uncomfortable. Jesus challenged his faith. And perhaps he challenges yours today. If you **look** like a Christian, Jesus says "It doesn't matter." Perhaps you're like Nicodemus and you need to hear those simple words from Jesus – "Whoever **believes** in him shall not perish but have eternal life." Maybe you need to hear that freedom that Jesus spoke to Nicodemus. DOING will not bring you to heaven. **Believing** will.

Do you sometimes go to sleep at night and think "God, I'm not good enough. I've fallen into sin again. I'm hopeless with my prayer life. I've hardly picked up my Bible this week. I covet money and find it hard to even give 1% of my income." Well, that makes you a Pharisee too, but you don't have to be! Because the love of God is not about what WE have done at the end of the day. Those things are good. But that's not what brings you into the kingdom of God. It's not about what WE have done. It's about what HE has done.

*21But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God."*

We're born again by God's Spirit when we **believe** in Jesus. By looking to him on the cross to forgive us. And when we live in the light, the light shows what HE has done in us. Not what YOU have done, but what GOD has done.

I suspect there may be some of us here, even as Christians, who may be struggling occasionally with thinking "I'm not **good** enough. I don't **do** enough for God." Let go of the chains of legalism and **doing**. Let go of the idea that what you DO makes you part of the kingdom of God. If there are times that you feel like a Pharisee, then God is waiting for you to simply come to him and believe – believe once and for all not in what YOU have done, but in what JESUS has done.

Let's pray...

By the way, would you like to find out how Nicodemus responded to God's challenge? Turn with me to John 19:38-42, and read it for yourself now. Take a minute, and just read that passage.