

# MESSAGE TRANSCRIPT //

YOU MUST BE BORN AGAIN | RED LETTER TALKS PART 2

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Well, it is so good to be with everybody today across all of our locations and those of you joining us online wherever you may be tuning in from as well as all of our first time guests. Man, we're so glad to have you with us today. We are honored that you would be with us.

And I hope that before you leave today you have some sort of meaningful interaction with somebody. I hope you don't just scoot out of here. We'd love to get a chance to talk to you, including me. I would love to get a chance to meet you. So, if you see me at any one of our campuses, come up, introduce yourself, say hello.

In fact, one of the things I love about the weekends when I don't preach is that it gives me the freedom to go around and visit other campuses, which is what I've been doing over the last few weeks. I got a chance to spend some time with our Carmel and Downtown campuses over the last few weeks.

Can I just tell you guys that they were packed, they had such a sweet spirit, so many difference makers, people manning their stations. And I parked myself in the lobby and just had so many great conversations with people. You know who you are.

And I just want Plainfield, Midtown, and Fishers to know that I'm coming for you. Alright? In the weeks coming up, I plan trying to get over there. If you see me in the lobby, that's why I'm there. I want to meet you. So come up and say hello.

Those of you who are here at our Northwest location are like, "Eh, we see you in person every week. You're not that big of a deal. But I would actually like to meet you too. And so, I'm usually right down here on my left, your right, after the service, in between services. Would love to get a chance to say hello to you.

I don't know what you walked in here feeling, what you came carrying with you. How many of you just had a week—you just had a week. Right? It's just like, "Man, I almost didn't come today because there are just some things that I've got going on in my life." And we can be real. We can talk about that.

There is something that we like to say around here a lot. We want to come ready. And what we mean by that is regardless of whether we had a week, or regardless of whatever we're experiencing: physically, emotionally, spiritually that we would show up here because there is power in that. We come ready expecting to have an encounter with God and to hear a word from God.



Now, we just come expecting that. We're just leaned in ready to hear from God. Anybody want to hear from God today? "Man, Aaron. I don't want to hear from you, I want to hear from God." And I want to hear from God. So, regardless of what you came in here with, I want you to have an encounter with God. That's what I have been praying toward.

In fact, today's service is a little bit different. Some of you picked up on it already. We've only sung one song. In fact, some of you are still kind of coming in. We have backloaded the worship set to where we are singing all of our songs at the end. I just want you to know the end of the sermon is not the end of the service. So, that's not your cue to leave.

We did that intentionally. You see we've got these tanks down front here and they are filled with an amazing 91-degree water temperature. We are not doing cold plunges for Jesus today. In fact, these are so comfortable you're probably going to want to get baptized and just hang out for a bit.

And we are praying and hoping that there would even just be one person who would spontaneously decide to give their life to Jesus. We've already seen dozens and dozens of baptisms today. It's been amazing. So, I'm just praying that there would be one more, just praying for one more.

So, if you have a Bible, go ahead and head to John, chapter 3. That's our passage today. Today we're kicking off a brand-new series of messages that we are calling Red Letter Talks. And what that means is, if any of you have a red-letter edition of the Bible, the red letters signify the very words of Jesus.

Now, if you were here last year right around this time we did the same series called the Red Letter Talks leading up to Easter. The response was so overwhelmingly positive that we decided to run it back and do it again this year. But we're not preaching the same sermons because Jesus has so much more to say. So, we're going to stay in John's gospel. We're going to cover some more things that Jesus said in the red letters that we weren't able to cover last year.

Now, how many of you have ever heard the phrase straight from the horse's mouth? Any of you heard that phrase? How many of you know where that came from? Why do we say that? Now, when we say straight from the horse's mouth what we mean is like, "Hey, I heard it from the person in charge, the person who has the authority to say so." It's kind of like, "I know because I heard it straight from the person."

I didn't know why we called this straight from the horse's mouth, so I did a little bit of research and found out that back when horses were much more the center of our culture—we used them for transportation and that sort of thing—the way to determine...

If you were to purchase a horse that was a big deal. And it was a big investment. So, if you were buying a horse from somebody, you didn't just take his word on whether or not



it was a good horse or a low milage horse. They didn't have Horse Facts during that time or Kelley Blue Book for horses or whatever.

So, what they would do is they would open up the horse's mouth and look at the teeth, because by the teeth you can determine its age. So, they would say, "I've got to go straight to the horse's mouth to see." That's where that term came from. Aren't you glad you came to church today? If nothing else, this was educational.

I'm super glad that we don't have to do that anymore. But here's what we're doing in this series. We are going straight to the horse's mouth, so to speak. Now, it's not weird to say that about Jesus. I don't mean that in any disrespectful way. Actually, I mean the opposite. We are going to the source, the most accurate and reliable information is from Jesus, the Son of God.

Now, not just what others heard Him say or saw Him do. And there is some validity of what others heard Him say or saw Him do, but we're going to His words. Not just what others said about Him, but what Jesus said about the three most important things that we need to know. What He said about Himself, what He said about the world and its creation, or the created order, if you will, and then what He says about you. And if we want to know what Jesus has to say...

If you haven't noticed there are a lot of people talking now a days. You guys notice that? There are so many people offering their opinions, so much noise, so much chatter.

Have any of you ever gone to a restaurant? Maybe you meet up with somebody, have coffee, and you are trying to listen to him, you're trying to have a conversation, but there are so many people in the coffee shop or the restaurant that there is this constant murmuring all around you and it's very difficult to hone in and listen to the conversation right in front of you?

To me (I don't know how you are wired) that is just drains my emotional battery like having a bunch of different apps open on my phone. And I want to stand up sometimes and just bang my glass and say, "Hey, hey. Can everybody just kind of tone it down so that way I can pay attention to the person in front of me?" I've never done that, by the way. But I want to do that sometimes.

You know what? That is true in life. There are so many things distracting us, so many things vying for our attention. So much noise. There is a lot of chirping, texting, DMing, commenting, and emailing and it's difficult to discern which voices are speaking truth and those that are misleading and deceiving.

You all know this. I don't even need to point this out to you. Did you know that people will deceive you? Just nod your head yes if you know that to be true. Nod your head yes if you've ever been deceived. People will deceive you.



Did you know that even AI will deceive you? I don't know about you guys, but in the last six or seven months I've probably used ChatGPT and some other guide programs, mostly to do some research on statistics or, "Hey, can you find an illustration?" That sort of thing. It's just kind of helping with research.

And here's one of the things that I've learned about AI. When you get done doing research with AI, the last question you need to ask it is, "Is the information you've given me accurate?" And I've had AI actually say to me, "Oh, I didn't know you wanted accurate information."

So, people will deceive you. AI will deceive you. Did you know that even you will deceive you? You know who will never deceive you? Jesus Christ.

And what we want to do in this series, running up to Easter, is collectively and directly and kindly say, "Hey, can everybody else just kind of tone it down but Jesus? We want to hear from Him."

Jesus said in John, chapter 8 that Satan is the father of lies. He is constantly deceiving and twisting the truth, which means that we've got to be discerning. And the way that we are discerning is that we get so accustomed to listening to the truth, lower case t, and spending time with the Truth, upper case T—that's Jesus.

And when you learn the truth and spend time with the Truth the lies become way more pronounced. Jesus Christ tells us the truth and He is the Truth. And I just want you to know Him. I don't want you to know about Him. I want you to know Him. That's relationship talk.

So, we're going to look at some of His words together. What I want you to know going into this is that sometimes Jesus' words will confuse you, they will confront you for sure, they will convict you, comfort you, and challenge you. They will do all of those things. But the primary thing that they will do, if you let them, is they will change you. And He will meet you right where you are regardless of where that is right now. But in His love and His mercy He refuses to leave you where you are.

So, we are in John's gospel today, chapter 3. What I want you to see in this passage that we are going to look at is that these red letters aren't a sermon that Jesus preached, they aren't a parable that He teaches, they aren't a miracle that He performs. These red letters are a conversation that Jesus has with a guy by the name of Nicodemus. So, let's start in verse 1.

Are you guys with me today? It just helps me to know that you are with me. Because if you are responsive I preach better, and shorter, by the way. I just need you to know that. Alright? So, starting off in verse 1 it says this:

"There was a man named Nicodemus, a Jewish religious leader who was a Pharisee. After dark one evening, he came to speak with Jesus. 'Rabbi,' he said, 'we,'"



I want you to circle that little word we if not literally, mentally. I'm going to come back to that.

"we all know that God has sent you to teach us. Your miraculous signs are evidence that God is with you." John 3:1-2 (NLT)

First thing I want to point out that you need to know about Nicodemus is that this guy is a well accomplished, well respected religious leader. And he's not just any religious leader, he was varsity with a capital V. He was advanced and high-ranking. This guy had more degrees than Fahrenheit, if you know what I mean.

And it was likely that he was older than Jesus because you can almost pick up in the text, if you look at it again, that it seems as if he was giving Jesus some compliments. But there is a little bit of a condescending tone to his words. It's a combination of respect, he calls Him Rabbi, and he acknowledges that Jesus has done some miraculous things. But if you notice, he says, "It's clear that God is with You." Nicodemus is not at that place yet nor does he see or acknowledge that Jesus is God.

I just want to point out really quickly, that John finds it important to tell us in verse 2 the time of day that Nicodemus came to see Jesus. Actually, the time of day isn't as significant as the fact that John uses these words after dark. Now, a lot of speculation to that. And if you are familiar with this passage or if you've done any study on it, maybe you've heard some of the potential explanations for this.

One potential explanation is that some just assumed that Nicodemus had a reputation so he was kind of managing that, not risking the shot that it would take to his career if people saw him with Jesus. So that's why he went to Jesus after dark. That's certainly possible. John never says that to us. So, we don't know for sure.

Others assumed that both of these guys were just really busy dudes, and this was the only time that they could find on their outlook calendars to get together. They were busy all through the day. So, at the end of the day maybe they had a little more margin. And besides, if they were to meet up at Starbucks, both well-known guys, they were probably going to get interrupted, so this is a chance for them to be uninterrupted late in the day. That is certainly also a possibility, although John never says that. We don't know for sure.

Honestly, the reason as to why Nicodemus comes to Jesus after dark, I don't really know that it matters a whole lot. I will point this out, though. I think this is worthwhile noting. The term night, n i g h t, in the gospel of John, every time John uses it it is usually a representation not of the time of day but of a spiritual darkness, a theme representing the realm of evil, untruth, or unbelief. Just an observation. The only other figure who appears at night is Judas Iscariot who went to betray Jesus.

I think it is entirely possible that Nicodemus had a mask that he wore during the day, appearing successful, appearing like he had all of the answers, appearing that he had it all together. But then, at night, when the mask comes off, when he's getting authentic and real he knows something is not quite right. He has so many accomplishments under his belt. But, for all of his knowledge that he has about God, and all of the moral effort that he's extended for God, he knows that there is something missing in his relationship with God.

And maybe some of you know exactly what that feels like. Maybe that's how you feel right now. You've got a lot of knowledge about God, you've done a lot of moral things for God, but there is something missing in your relationship with God. There is not an intimacy that is there.

You've been spending a lot of time kind of managing the way that other people see you at work, at school, at home, at church, on social media. We're all kind of curating ourselves so that people see our highlight reels but never the real us.

And, man, if you grew up in church, maybe you served, maybe when I said turn to John 3, we're going to look at this Nicodemus character at night, you were immediately like, "I know that passage. I've taught small group lessons on that passage. I've heard dozens of sermons on that passage—nothing more for me to learn there. That's a good indicator that you might be in a very similar camp to Nicodemus.

And Nicodemus, I think he tries to flatter Jesus by giving Him a compliment. It's a backhanded compliment. And what I want you to see is how Jesus responds. Nicodemus says, "Hey, You're a Rabbi. It's clear You've done some miraculous things. God is with You."

And Jesus could have been flattered by that, "Man, thanks. That means a lot coming from somebody like you." But that's not what Jesus says. He responds in verse 3. Look with me at the text:

"Jesus replied, 'I tell you the truth, unless you are born again, you cannot see the Kingdom of God.'" (NLT)

I just want to point out that He doesn't say, "Unless you are born again you will not enter the kingdom of God, or you will not go to heaven." He did not say that. He says, "Unless you are born again, you cannot see it. You can't see the kingdom of God."

Now, if you go back up to the very end of chapter 2, I want to show you this. Our Bibles have numerical chapters and verses, the original manuscripts did not. So, actually in my Bible the heading over chapter 2, verse 23 says: Jesus and Nicodemus. So, actually it backs up before they even enter into the conversation. And I want to show you this in verses 23 to 25. It says:

“Because of the miraculous signs Jesus did in Jerusalem at the Passover Celebration, many began to trust in him. But Jesus didn’t trust them,” why? “because he knew all about people. No one needed to tell him about human nature, for he knew what was in each person’s heart.” (NLT)

Man, that is a mic drop passage right there. And it is why Jesus is not distracted or flattered or derailed by Nicodemus’s position, his posture, or his flattery. He mentions these miraculous signs that Jesus did because it’s quite possible that Nicodemus was with some crowds of people at the end of chapter 2, which is why he uses the word we.

And it says here that Jesus knows all about human nature, which means He knew what was in Nicodemus’s heart. He knows what is in your heart and in mine. He is bypassing all of this flattery with his words and he says to this older man who has religious degrees and who is well-respected in society—Jesus looks at this guy and says, “You ‘ve got to be born again because if you aren’t you can’t even see the kingdom of God.” That would have been offensive to Nicodemus. And you can see it in his question in verse 4. Look with me:

“What do you mean?”

And I think that when Nicodemus said this I think he said it with a bit of exasperation, “Man, what do you mean?”

“How can an old man go back into his mother’s womb and be born again?” John 3:4 (NLT)

Now can you just pick up on the snarkyness in that? See, he thinks that Jesus is like way off here. And so he’s coming back with a little bit of sarcasm to him. Here’s what he’s saying if we put it in everyday vernacular, “You telling me that in order to go to heaven I’ve got climb back into my mom’s womb? Number one: that’s gross. Let me just get that out there. Number two: that’s impossible. Number three: Jesus, she already worked so hard to get me out when I was only seven pounds. Now, as a 200-pound man... And then number four: this is going to require, if that is the case, some serious counseling and therapy. We will be in for the rest of our lives.”

He’s being sarcastic. He’s being snarky. And he’s actually trying to derail the conversation. And Jesus is not phased. What Jesus says next... I don’t think that Jesus smiled. I don’t think Jesus looked away. I don’t think Jesus broke His gaze. I think that he would have been like, “Look right at Me, Nicodemus.” Verse 5:

“Jesus replied, ‘I assure you, no one can enter the Kingdom of God without being born of water and the Spirit. Humans can reproduce only human life, but the Holy Spirit gives birth to spiritual life. So don’t be surprised when I say, “You must be born again.” The wind blows wherever it wants. Just as you can hear the wind but can’t tell where it



comes from or where it is going, so you can't explain how people are born of the Spirit." John 3:5-8 (NLT)

Realize what He is saying in that last sentence? You can't explain how somebody becomes a Christian. It's a miracle. You can't explain it. It is a work of the Spirit. He's like, "Nicodemus, even you with all of your accomplishments and accolades. You've got to be born of water," Jesus says.

Now, what does that mean? Well, I think that there is a physical, tangible meaning to this and there is a spiritual, theological one.

When a pregnant lady is about to give birth, how do you know? Yeah, her water breaks. Her water breaks, you better get her to the hospital because the baby is coming. So, that's certainly signifies some of this.

But it's also a reference to Ezekiel, chapter 36, verses 25 to 27 when it says, "I will sprinkle clean water on you and you will be clean," symbolizing a washing to be made new. When you become a Christian you are made new. And He says, "You are born of water, which means there was a cleansing.

And that just makes sense. Try doing your dishes, doing your laundry, or taking a shower without water. Water is there for a cleansing.

He also says, "You need to be born of the Spirit." Now, I want you to follow the logic here. Right? Human beings reproduce what? Man, all three services have had the same response. It's not a mystery question. Right? Humans reproduce what? Humans. Way to go. I'll also accept babies. Alright? Humans or babies. Alright?

How about this? Dogs give birth to what? Dogs or puppies. I prefer puppies. Chickens give birth to chicks. And not fast enough man. We need eggs. Can I get an amen? Somebody? We need some eggs. That was for my teen-aged daughter. She did not want me to use that joke. That's for you, babe.

So, the Holy Spirit...

So, listen. Follow the logic: humans give birth to babies, dogs give birth to puppies, chickens give birth to chicks, the Holy Spirit gives birth to Spirit filled Christians.

Listen to me man. Nobody becomes a Christian based upon their own decision. Some of you are like, "Well, I wasn't forced." I'm not saying you were forced into it. You are a part of it for sure.

Sort of like, you were a part of it when your momma gave birth to you in that you participated in it, you were there. That's about it. You didn't cause it. You weren't aware of it. You didn't have a say in it. You didn't get to pick your parents. You didn't get to pick your birth date or birth year. It was something that happened to you. Well, how do I know that I was born? You're here.



In a very similar way becoming a Christian is not merely a decision that you made or a work that you did. It is a result of the Holy Spirit's work in you. You cannot explain it, you cannot contain it, and you cannot maintain it. It is a work of the Spirit.

I know I'm speaking to somebody right now because maybe part of the reason why you almost didn't come today and why some of you are flirting with walking away and some of you have or are destructing your faith, and the reason why is you would say, "Hey, this whole faith thing isn't working."

Look right at me. I'm going to say this very gently. It's because you're trying to do it in the flesh. You're trying to read the right things, do the right things, attend the right things, know the right things, get the right answers to your questions, get it all buttoned up really nice and tidy, and some of you, instead of submitting to God in humility are continuing to bargain with God in your pride. And you cannot become a Christian without the Holy Spirit and the Holy Spirit does not come without humility. When pride marches into your life, the Holy Spirit marches right out.

The word Spirit in the Old Testament is translated as:

Ruach

Everybody say that with me. Ruach. You're not saying it right if you didn't hock a loogie on the person sitting in front of you. It's Ruach. Do you know what it means? Very literally it means a wind or a breath. But not a normal breath—a violent exhalation. It's like a blasted breath.

The Holy Spirit comes with power

In the New Testament for it is translated as:

Pneuma

Pneuma, which means, a wind. It is a current, a blast of breath.

Now, on Friday it got pretty windy. And I know that because yesterday morning when I got up and I was in our back yard, there were some things blown around that I had to go pick up.

How many of you, on a windy day, have been able to tame the wind? Do we have any wind whisperers with us today? You walk outside and you tell the wind... No, man. You don't tame the wind. You're just a part of what happens. The wind blows into your life and blows where it pleases. It doesn't give you a heads up. It doesn't say, "Hey, man. Here's where I'm coming from. It doesn't care about your hairstyle. It doesn't get your permission—it just blows. It doesn't ask you to weigh in or provide feedback.



And listen. It is the same with the Holy Spirit. Becoming a Christian or living as a Christian is impossible without a prompting of the Holy Spirit, a work of the Holy Spirit, and a sealing of the Holy Spirit in your life.

“Well, I don’t like that because I can’t control it.” Exactly. You put yourself in a position to receive it. “How do I do that?” Through humility. You stop offering distractions. You stop offering smoke screens. You stop offering your opinions or perspectives and you come to Jesus, and you say, “Speak Lord. I’m listening.”

Nicodemus didn’t do that. So, look at what he says in verse 9. He says:

“How are these things possible?”

“Jesus replied,” Now this is Jesus’ opportunity to be a little condescending, Himself. I love it. “You are a respected Jewish teacher, and yet you don’t understand these things?”

I love that, man. Maybe I love that too much. He’s saying, “I got my GED. I went to the school of carpentry. You are the one with the doctorate. You don’t understand this? But:

“I assure you,” now look at this, circle that little word, Nicodemus uses that word we, now it’s Jesus turn to use the term we. “...we tell you what we know and have seen, and yet you won’t believe our testimony.” John 3:9-11 (NLT)

I’ve just got a question. What in the world is Jesus talking about? Why didn’t He say, “I” or “Me”? Now, if you remember back up in verse 2 Nicodemus comes to Jesus and he says, “Hey, we all know that You’ve come from God You’ve done some miraculous signs. We think God is with You.” In other words, Nicodemus is saying, “Me and all my important, educated friends we. We know that You’re just a representative of God.

And Jesus is like, “Well, I’ve got a crew of My own. We. Who is He talking about? The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The Trinity. What is that? It is the testimony of the Word, that’s our Bible, God’s word to us; it’s the testimony, the experience of the Son, Jesus’ sacrifice on your behalf; and it is the stirring of the Spirit.

Can I just ask you, do you believe or are you arguing with Them? You don’t want to be on the other side of that argument. Look at verse 12. It says:

“But if you don’t believe me when I tell you about earthly things, how can you possibly believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ever gone to heaven and returned. But the Son of Man has come down from heaven. John 3:12-13 (NLT)

Do you get what He is saying? It kind of reminds me of God’s words to Job. If you remember that book where Job is an upright, righteous man. He had all of these horrible things happen to him. And Job’s three friends offer their commentary as to their reasoning and what they think happened. Then Job actually has a chance to speak.

And then when God finally clears His throat and begins to speak, what were God's first words to Job? He says, "Well where were you at the foundations of the world?" In other words, "You're speaking way over your paygrade."

Now, we need to understand that the Bible was written with a Middle Eastern, cultural perspective. But Nicodemus, I just feel like I need to point this out, Nicodemus has perhaps more in common with our western cynical mindset than perhaps maybe anyone else in Scripture other than maybe Thomas, which, if you remember, Thomas—doubting Thomas—was one of the disciples. He wasn't there when Jesus appeared. He's like, "The only way I'm going to believe that Jesus has resurrected from the dead is if I see it and I can touch it." They have more in common with our western, cynical mindsets.

So, Nicodemus is like, "Hey, we know you are a great teacher, Rabbi. Nobody is denying that. You've given us some good moral lessons to live by. We like you, Jesus. You seem nice, wise beyond your years, pleasant even. We can even say the Mr. Rogers of the Middle East."

That's oftentimes what we do with Him today. But when He starts to say some hard things we're not so sure about that other stuff. We don't like it. It seems offensive, unrealistic, unscientific, and unreasonable. That's what many of us do with Him. We weigh in with our logic, thoughts, and reasoning as if God needed our perspective. We have our opinions about God, His word, and the way that it works, and we offer those up to Him.

Any of these sound familiar? Whether it's something that you've said or thought or something you've heard others say or do.

Well, I don't really like what God has to say about morality. It seems outdated.

I don't agree with what you have to say about sexuality. It seems restrictive and honestly unloving.

I don't like that you allow good, sincere people to suffer. It seems that You are playing a game. Where are You?

I don't like what You have to say about the way to be saved. It seems intolerant if you ask me. I think just as long as somebody sincerely believes what they believe and they are not hurting anybody, that should be good enough.

Does any of that sound familiar?

And here's what Jesus is saying in verses 12 through 13. I need to say this gently but directly. Jesus is saying, "I didn't ask you. You don't have the credentials to offer those opinions." Why? Because "Nobody but Me," referring to Jesus, "has ever gone from heaven to earth, defeated death, and returned to heaven."

Listen. One day He'll return again as King of kings and Lord of lords. Do you know that the Scriptures say that every knee will bow, and every tongue will confess that Jesus is Lord? There is coming a day when every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus is Lord, either now or then. It is far better that you do it now. And that's not a threat. It's an invitation.

See the:

Christian faith is believing who Jesus says He is and believing what He says, even when it contradicts what you think

And that requires humility. It requires the possibility that in the flesh and in my sinful nature I've been deluded by the spirit of the age. And it means a constant invitation for the Holy Spirit to blow into my life like a wind, not just on the day of my conversion but every day after. It's why the Scriptures say to keep in step with the Spirit so that we are not influenced by the spirit of the age.

And it's not our reasoning, it's not our logic, it's not our understanding. By the way, all three of those are important and you do not need to check your logic, your reasoning, or your understanding to come to Christ. I'm just saying that those things can stand in the way of a genuine, authentic come to the end of yourself humility.

Man, we're not trying to argue anybody into becoming a Christian, because if somebody was argued into becoming a Christian, all it takes is a better argument to argue him out. It's a move of the Holy Spirit.

I love what the great theologian Vernon McGee once said about this. He goes, "This is God's universe, and God does things His way. You may have a better way, but you don't have a universe."

That's a valid point. That's just humility, man. It's recognizing, "I'm just a speck in time. God is infinite. He's been around forever. I've been here what—20, 30, 40, 50, 60 years?"

Pride says, "I don't like what God says about the created order, so I'm going to edit it, delete it, refute it, or rewrite it. The shorter version, a shorter term for that, is something called:

Progressive Theology

I don't have time to unpack it. I just want to introduce it to you. Progressive theology—here's just a few attributes of it. And I think Nicodemus is kind of teetering on this. It:

Believes the power of the Christian faith to transform lives does not require it to be exclusively true

So, there are some who call themselves Christians and who believe in God but are like, "Yeah, this is just my way. This is just my truth that has worked for me. But there are multiple ways."

Number 2:

Often emphasizes loving actions over sound beliefs

Now we would all agree that you need to have loving actions. In fact, the Bible says that if you don't have love you are like a resounding gong, but our loving actions need to be tethered to sound belief.

Number 3:

Have a low view of Jesus, seeing Him more as a moral example than the divine Son of God

Which then leads into the 4th:

Often denies the substitutionary atonement of Christ

That's just introductory. I'm just throwing that out there for you to kind of noodle on. Here's why I'm doing it. It's because this is what Nicodemus was susceptible to in his life. As a religious leader he was not seeing that Jesus was the Son of God. He thought that it was his work and accomplishments that got him in. And he was teetering on this. And what I want you to see is that Jesus ran right at him in love.

If you are here today and if I read those four attributes and if you agreed with one or all of them, where you are like, "You know what? I think there is some logic to that," you are teetering as well. And the good news is Jesus will run right at you and give you an invitation to get your eyes back on Him.

This is what I love. He references something next in the passage that is kind of strange. He's referencing Numbers 21. Now, I don't know how you are doing in your chronological Bible reading that we all started together at the end of the year. I just accomplished day 65 out of a 365-day reading plan. I've got 300 days to go, man. Stay with it. Stay with it.

I think it was two days ago I came across this passage, Numbers 21, when the Israelites were headed back to the Promised Land, and they forgot the goodness and the kindness of God upon them. So, they started complaining. Imagine that. They got impatient and they began doubting God. And they began turning their affections to run after other lower case "g" gods, which, by the way, is a pretty good definition of sin.

It's you just taking your affections and turning them toward other things other than the God who sustains you. We doubt God and that His commands are good. And we become impatient and dissatisfied. And we complain. And our hearts begin to wander.

And we turn our affections to not little gods made of gold, but to the false gods of sex, money, status, or power.

So, here's what God does in Numbers 21. It's kind of a strange passage. He sends venomous serpents into their camps to bite them, vipers of death. They were everywhere. It's a horrifying passage. I get freaked out if I see a little grass snake in our back yard let alone thousands of deadly vipers.

And honestly, it sounds kind of mean. Doesn't it? But it is an act of love because it is enough to bring them to their senses like smelling salts. Understand it was either going to be the quick venom of a snake bite or the slow drip venom of their sinful nature. You pick your venom.

So, God, in His mercy tells Moses to make a bronze image of one of the serpents, put it on a pole on top of a hill, and then notice this—we're talking Old Testament here—He's not asking them to offer burnt sacrifices, He's not asking them to shed any blood, He simply says this, "Tell the Israelites to get their eyes on that image. And if they can look at it in faith, they will be healed and they will be delivered."

And Jesus is quoting that passage to Nicodemus as we end this section of Scripture in verse 14. Look what He says here. He says:

"And as Moses lifted up the bronze snake on a pole in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up," Son of Man is a reference to Jesus, "so that everyone who believes in him," the invitation is open to anyone and everyone, "will have eternal life." John 3:14-15 (NLT)

Here's what this means. Jesus, just like the image of that serpent, would be lifted up on a cross for our sins. And all you've got to do is manage to get your eyes on Him and you will be saved. You are trusting in His finished work for you on a cross, not the work that you could do for Him.

Now, to be honest, I have never really enjoyed this Old Testament story of the vipers and the pole and all of that, because, honestly, snakes just creep me out. But the other reason is that Jesus is depicted as sort of like a snake. Did you catch that?

In my own logic, why would God tell Moses to make an image of a lamb? Put that on a pole because Jesus is our Lamb. That would be much better than a viper. What you need to understand is that because the serpent was the result of their sin, Jesus is cancelling the serpent by absorbing the bite unto Himself.

In 2 Corinthians, chapter 5, it says, "He who knew no sin became sin for us." And if you can just understand what Jesus is doing, He's inviting all of us, "Man, get your eyes on Me. Get your eyes on Me and you will be healed. Get your eyes on Me and you'll be saved."

Now, we come to the end of this conversation, not the end of the passage, but the end of the conversation and what bugs me about it is that I wish that Nicodemus would have dropped to his knees, confessed Jesus as Lord and Jesus would have baptized him in the Jordan river right then. That would have been amazing.

That didn't happen. Nicodemus makes no known profession of faith. But I do believe that he eventually gave his life to Christ. Here's why I believe it. He defended Jesus before the Sanhedrin in John, chapter 7, risking his reputation. Later he risked his reputation again by assisting Joseph of Arimathea in the burial of Jesus' body in John 19.

This is so critical for us to understand. Jesus isn't telling Nicodemus what he must do to experience the kingdom of heaven. He's telling him what must be experienced to enter the kingdom of God, and that's fundamentally different. A new birth is not something that we do, but it is something God gives. And that is an invitation that is open to anyone and everyone.

So, just like the Israelites in Numbers 21, bitten by those vipers, you and I have been bitten by the venom of our sin and rebellion. And you don't need to become a better version of you, you need to become a whole new you. You need to die to yourself and be resurrected as a new creation in Christ. You don't need a moral improvement. You don't need a spiritual booster. You don't need a fresh start. I'm going to say this gently, the wrath of God is upon you due to your sin. The curse of death is over you and at work within you.

And this is why we cannot get away from the word saved. To be honest it's not my favorite word because it sounds a little backwoods. Doesn't it? When I hear the word saved I get the image of a sweaty, pudgy preacher in a bad suit saying, "You need to be saaaveda." And I just have an emotional reaction to that. I have to say if you do too, I understand.

But in light of the reality of our sin that you now understand, can I just ask you what better word is there? You need to be helped? Not sufficient. You need to be improved? Doesn't go far enough. You need to be enhanced? Impossible. You don't need any of those things. You need to be saved.

And the Bible describes those of us in sin as dead, which, I don't know about you guys, dead people don't respond to anything. It takes the wind of the Holy Spirit to make you aware of it, to get you to respond.

This is why, when people say to me, and they say it condescendingly—you've probably had it said to you. Any of you remember this phrase somebody said to you kind of condescendingly, "Jesus is just a crutch for the weak minded."



Anybody had that said to you? Three of you. Okay. You just don't want to play? I know you don't.

Here's what you do the next time somebody says that, and they mean it as a criticism, "Jesus is a crutch for the weak minded," just look at them and smile and say, "Bless your little heart. Jesus is not a crutch. He is the whole stinking stretcher because I couldn't even limp into heaven without Him." You don't do any of this on your own. And it's your pride that will actually keep you from seeing it.

So, Nicodemus was suffering from something that many of you are suffering from, quite possibly, something that we call a spiritual immunization that keeps you from real faith. What's that? Well, if you ever got a flu shot, what happens is they're actually injecting you with the flu—just enough of it to make you immune from all of it.

And that happens all of the time. You get a little spiritual immunization shot that makes you immune from the real thing. So, you walk away thinking that you rejected the faith, but you actually rejected religion. And you end up walking away from Jesus. It's a bad trade.

Some of you, maybe you had your spiritual immunization shot growing up going to a church that was maybe legalistic, or you never heard the gospel, or the Bible taught. Or maybe you went to mass. Or maybe you prayed a prayer or went to church camp or walked an aisle or checked a box or raised a hand or got sprinkled or baptized and you believed in God, and you thought that was enough. But you were never really genuinely born again.

The question that I want to ask you is, has the Spirit of God blown into your life and occupied your heart? You might be like, "Well, how do I know that's happened?" Well, if changes you and you are changing. The Spirit of God blows into your life and your mind—a mind that used to be filled with thoughts of lust and pride and fear and greed. Now, it's not that you don't wrestle with those things, it's that you realize it when you do, and you're convicted of it, and you turn from it and now you're filled with humility and holiness and a desire to glorify God and His created order.

Contrary to popular opinion, the church does not exist to meet your needs. I'm sorry to tell you that. Now, I hope your needs get met here, but that's not the primary reason that the church exists. The church exists to glorify God. And when we glorify God, hearts get changed.

So, this doesn't mean that when the wind blows into your life, and you're born again that you are super holy and perfect and never make mistakes. It means that your passion for God goes up and you have a settled and contagious joy for the Spirit of God, and you are marked with humility.

Do you have that? Or are you better described by Nicodemus and all of his well-educated friends at the end of chapter 2. You believe in Jesus, that's not really changed anything about the way that you think, live, and how you talk. You believe in Jesus sort of in the way that you believe in favorite actor or actress. You've seen all of their movies, but you don't really know them.

And if you were to get ridiculed or cancelled for your faith, you'd pretty easily tap out because it's not legit. When suffering comes, you likely fail. When temptation emerges, you give in easily. You don't really walk with God. You just believe in Him.

And what I want to ask you to do is to have a relationship with Him because even the demons believe but that doesn't mean that they are saved. So, if that's you today can I just very gently and very directly say, you quite possibly might have a superficial religion which has a shelf life. And what you need and what Jesus is inviting you into is a supernatural rebirth.

Becoming a Christian is always a miracle because God is the one who brings about the change

Because becoming a Christian is always a miracle. Why? Because God is the one who brings about the change. And we all need to experience that second rebirth.

Listen. Everybody experiences a physical birth into this life and quite possibly a physical death one day. And if you've experienced a spiritual rebirth, you only have to experience death once. And I want to invite you to have a relationship with Jesus today. Transformation happens through a direct encounter with God, not just an intellectual understanding.

So, what I want to ask you to do across all of our locations, if you just close your eyes and bow your head... Today if you sense a stirring of the Spirit within you, then I want you to follow that lead and I'm just going to lead you in a prayer, and you can just make this prayer your own.

Father, God. I come to You right now just as I am with my mask off. I'm not curating my reputation. I'm not pretending to be somebody that I'm not anymore. I just come to You. You already know what is in my heart. So, I'm just going to come clean with it. Today I want my life to be marked by humility, not pride. So, I trust Jesus, that You are the Son of God, that You did create the world, that there is a created order. And I admit my sin, my pride, and my rebellion. I've tried to do things my own way.

Maybe, for some of you, you are like, "You know what? I grew up in church, but I never really grew up in Christ. I've just got that spiritual immunization shot that we've talked about. And so today, God, I want the real thing. I want the Spirit of God to blow into my



life and change me fundamentally, that there would be a switch that would flip right now, and I finally have the eyes to see.

“So, I confess my sin to You. I come to You in humility. I submit to You. I’ll no longer bargain with You. And I believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God. And I desire that You would be both Lord and Savior of my life. I confess my sin. I repent of my sin. I put my trust and belief in You. And I ask that You would make me a brand-new creation in and by Your Holy Spirit. I ask this in Jesus’ name: Amen.

Can I just say that if just one person prayed that prayer that we would just come around you and celebrate that with you, cheer you on in that?

And you know the Bible says that that is a transformational work that happened in your heart. And the first thing a person does when they make that their own is that they are physically baptized. The reason why is because it is a physical representation of what just happened spiritually. Just as Jesus went into a grave, was laid down for three days, was bodily resurrected defeating death on our behalf, now we are associating with that.

So, what happens is when you go under the water (these aren’t baptisteries, these are graves) you are being lowered into a watery grave, coming up is representative of your cleansing and even more than that it is a representative that you are now a resurrected creation in Jesus Christ. And you need to come, and you need to do that today. We’ve got everything that you need.

I’m going to turn it over to our campuses for the campus pastor to give instructions. Here at Northwest if you go right out these double doors we’ve got everything you need. We’re going to ask everybody to stand to your feet. This is not the end of the service. This is just the beginning. We’re going to worship, sing three songs together and would you just be praying and cheering on those who are going to come and experience a new beginning in Jesus Christ.

Let’s worship together.

