

Intro: Garrison. Elder Candidate.

New mini series. This series takes four weeks to hear the “greatest hits” from pastors, leaders as we hear what God has shown them in His Word. We just wrapped up 2 sermon series, we have a huge summer campaign rolling out here mid may, so we thought it'd be fun to just have some space to do some stand alone sort of one-off sermons from some leaders both inside and outside of our church. Grab a bible and go to John 3. **Pray.**

Over the past month leading up to Easter we looked at the Story of God. That God created the world, humanity turned to sin, Jesus came to redeem us and all of creation on the cross and one day He will return to restore creation and consummate His kingdom forever.

Essentially, we've laid out how the gospel unfolds at a macro level throughout the Bible. This is the good news. But..if this is such great news why do we, both as a society, and even us as followers of Jesus have such a hard time believing it? And not only believing it, but for those of us who would claim to believe it, why do we have such a hard time living as if it's true?

Now, there are plenty of complexities as to why people reject it, but I think two helpful overarching categories can be this:

1. We believe we're too good for the Gospel
2. We believe we're too bad for the Gospel.

Based on my own life experience, based on my time in ministry, and based on the Scriptures - there seem to be two major resistances to us embracing the Gospel. To us wanting to embrace what Christ has done for us through our life, death, and resurrection.

That's true for both Christians and non Christians. And you can flip flop into each category.

I think we can all identify in some way or shape or form with each type of person. Jesus himself not only tells stories about these types of people, but He actually dealt with them in his life. And that's what we're going to be looking at this week and next. We're going to look at two stories in the Gospel of John that are told back to back. This week we'll be looking at:

The Gospel for the 'Too Good'.

So open a Bible to John 3. We'll see how Jesus deals with the too good

John 3:1-2 *Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. 2 This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him."*

This is a pretty famous interaction in the Gospels. Nicodemus coming to Jesus at night.

Here's the thing about Nicodemus. He's culturally, intellectually and spiritually elite. He was older which means people tended to defer to him in this culture. He's a Pharisee, which means he's a religious leader and learned. As a Pharisee, he knows more about the Bible than any of us probably ever will. Pharisees studied the OT in depth and knew all the 613 distinct commandments in the OT scriptures.

The Pharisees also took morality seriously. At least outwardly. So not only did they know and follow all the 613 commandments, they built even more rules around them. Heard one person say it as, if the commandment was "don't drink milk from a cow" the Pharisees, in order to protect their own righteousness and make others do so too, would say "Don't even go near the barn." If you go near the barn, then you're in sin!" They built this framework around the commands. So they were thought of as incredibly moral.

Not only is he a Pharisee but he's part of the Sanhedrin. The Sanhedrin was a group of anywhere between 20-70 men, depending on the area, who were the leaders that formed a council that oversaw all religious teachings, education, legislation and even politics. He's the establishment.

So the establishment is coming to Jesus. Jesus has gotten a following, people are talking about this new teacher, and Nicodemus is doing a little homework. Who is this guy? He's interested, and it seems he comes to Jesus with some affirmation, 'God must be with you'. But Jesus answers in a way that's a little unexpected for Nicodemus.

3 Jesus answered him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God."4 Nicodemus said to him, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?"

It seems like they're missing each other here. Nicodemus starts with, 'Hey Jesus, seems like God must be with you.' And Jesus goes, "You've got to be born again to be able to see the Kingdom of God.' Excuse me what? Nicodemus is a little thrown here. What do you mean reborn? He keeps unpacking it:

5 Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is ^fflesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.³ 7 ¹Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You⁴ must be born ^uagain.' 8 ^vThe wind^b blows ^wwhere it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."

Again, unless you're reborn you cannot enter the Kingdom. He's talking about spiritual new birth. The phrase "born again" in v. 3 - "gennao another" can mean born again, but it can also mean born from above. It's sort of a dual meaning. You need new birth and it must be from above. We'll get to why that's important. Look back and see how Nicodemus responds:

9 Nicodemus said to him, ^a"How can these things be?"

Once again, Nicodemus responds with a big 'HUH?'. What are you talking about Jesus? How can I be born again, I'm an old man? This isn't clicking for him. Look back in v 10, and see where Jesus takes this:

10 Jesus answered him, "Are you the teacher of Israel^v and yet you do not understand these things? 11 Truly, truly, I say to you, ^zwe speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen, but ^zyou^z do not receive our testimony. 12 If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things? 13 No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.

I imagine very graciously, Jesus says, you really don't get it? You're just missing it. Jesus is cutting to the heart of who Nicodemus is and why he's even talking to him in the first place.

Before we finish the story, we've got to answer some questions:

Nicodemus is a Pharisee. Why's he talking to Jesus? If you read the Gospels it's pretty clear that the religious elites did not like Jesus. So why's he talking to him in private? Hard to know but an interesting detail is that he's there at night.

Night tends to be associated with sneakiness. Why are you sneaking around at night, Nicodemus? According to most biblical scholars there's 2 viable options on why Nicodemus is coming at night.

Option 1 - Nicodemus is legitimately interested in Jesus; he's spiritually seeking with heartfelt sincerity, but he's embarrassed because Jesus was unpopular with his Pharisee peers, so he's coming at night out of fear/secretcy.

Option 2 - Nicodemus being part of the Sanhedrin would possibly have a job to identify false teachers. They were the final authority on Jewish law which meant part of their job was to investigate any teacher, any rabbi, any scholar and make sure their teaching was kosher. They took this job very seriously. Any teacher who was out of line could be put to death as a rebellious elder. In this option, nicodemus is investigating Jesus as part of his job

Regardless of which stance you take, Nicodemus is putting Jesus on somewhat of a trial. Whether for himself or for the Sanhedrin - he wants to know - "are you legit?"

And Jesus flips the trial on its head. The exact guy who should be able to see and understand who Jesus is and what he's doing has completely missed it.

Jesus is pointing the whole time—> You must be born again Nicodemus. In order to see and enter the Kingdom of God, you must have spiritual new birth.

So what's spiritual new birth? Now to be born again" might be less of strange language for you depending on your church background. It's one of the ways Jesus talks about this idea of salvation. It's talked about a good bit in the NT. 2 Corinthians 5:17 puts it clearly:

17 Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new.

In Christ, we become new creations, that our old ways, old life would pass away and we'd be new people being sanctified by the Holy Spirit.

Now, Nicodemus is missing might be missing it bc its new info. We'd probably respond similarly if we were where he was. But there's more to why he's missing it than just it being new information.

To be born again spiritually would imply that the man needs it. That he's not spiritual. That he's in great need. Jesus saying a man needs to be reborn doesn't click for him. Why would it?

He's got all the commands memorized, has lived an incredibly moral life, is the epitome of what godliness should look like in his culture. He not only knows the rules, he's following the extra rules built around the rules. Imagine what that does to a person?

So Jesus saying, you need to start over, you will need to be someone completely new in order to see the Kingdom of God, what in the world are you talking about Jesus?

Why would this guy need to start over? He's done a great job so far right?

That's his issue.

Nicodemus' issue is that he thinks he's too good for the Gospel.

His problem is his work's righteousness. That's the theological term. Or in more common language; he thinks he's a good person on his own. It can also be called self-righteousness. He thinks He's good in and of himself; of his own doing; because of his own good deeds and record. **Why would he need to be born again?**

To Nicodemus, his sin is sort of under control. At least that's what he thinks. He's got no character issues that need sanctifying. He appears to be squeaky clean.

But in the midst of all his religious goodness lies the problem: **he thinks he's good on his own and therefore has no need of Jesus.**

Now there's a little bit of Nicodemus in all of us. There's always something that we build our righteousness on other than God.

I think a helpful picture of self righteousness is the idea of building a moral, spiritual resume. My dad growing up. Always be updating your resume. Always be shopping yourself around looking for better job opportunities. At the heart of it we're asking: What makes me attractive to employers? What will get me there? What makes me right for employers? Not always a bad thing to be looking for a good job.

But at a spiritual level, this is devastating. Spiritually we're asking: What makes me right with God?

And to the Pharisees. It's clear: Being perfect! Follow the rules perfectly.

Another way to say it is, what makes me a good person? I'm worth it. This is why you should like me. This is how I contribute and make the world a better place.

You can find this everywhere. So there's a secular version(doesn't have to be religious) of resume building that has nothing to do with God or religion. I try to be kind to others. I'm tolerant of people who aren't like me. I don't cheat at my job. I care deeply about animals. I even shop at Whole Foods and bring my own bags. Recycle. Environment.

And there's a religious version of resume building - I go to church. I take God's Word seriously. I follow God's rules. I tithe. Christian spotify. I have some scriptures posted in prominent positions around my house. Have you seen my instagram bio or my stories? I shared at least 3 posts that had a verse in them this week, I'm obviously learning and growing a lot.

The heart is the same. It's the thought that on my own I'm good.

Maybe you don't think or do those things, or at least think/do them consciously. Let me show you some more internal things/symptoms:

- Maintaining image. Image management. Tie issues up in a bow before you share at cg
 - not being willing to confess sin to God or others in attempt to "maintain" an image
- Pride. Being mature. Experienced. Similar but different to image. (Go personal). Heard that before. etc . Being above sermons. Or the words you got from someone in group/ fellow Christian.
 - Got it figured out. I'm beyond the basics.
- Some of us are literally doing what Pharisees did. We are rule followers. And we are harsh about morality and rule following. When someone sins or seemingly sins, we want to ring the alarm and correct them. Can seem caring, but really we're Pharisees.
 - Quicker to point out sin in others/apply truth to others lives instead of self
- *Personal. Performance. Determine how God sees us based solely on how much time we've spent with him during the week, how long we've been a Christian, how we've treated others.*

Breakdowns(Here's what happens):

- Spiritual exhaustion. So tiresome to keep feeling like you have to perform for God.
- Should all over yourselves. Internal dialogue. Should should should.
- Self-reliance. I don't need help from anybody.

The scary part is that alot of times modern Pharisees don't know it. But when you judge others, maintain your image, feel like you've got to perform for God, the core is the same:

What makes me right with God, and other people and myself, is my goodness.

Here's the problem: It won't work. I heard someone once describe works righteousness as tying a mouse to an 18 wheeler stuck in a ditch. And believing that the mouse can pull the 18 wheeler out if it just keeps whipping itself harder and harder. Some of us this is what our entire spiritual life has felt like. Whipping yourself doing the best you can to try to follow the rules to make God proud. It's killing us.

And the truth is, if you're honest with yourself right now. you're exhausted. you're anxious. you're on this infinite treadmill of performance trying to impress yourself, trying to impress others and it never feels like it's enough

Because the root issue is: "You must be born again."

Jesus says it doesn't work. It's not possible. **So the Son of Man, a Savior sent from God had to descend from heaven.** Because we can't get there on our own. And what Jesus does is make a reference to an obscure little story in the old testament that shows us what **does it mean to be born again?**

Look back at v. 13

13 No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. 14 And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, 15 that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

Numbers 21:4-9. Short, weird little story. Only 6 verses long. The Israelites are actively being rescued from slavery in Egypt when they go into one of their nation wide temper tantrums; whining; losing faith; grumbling against God and Moses. "ughhh, it'd be better if God had just left us in Egypt." Completely forget God's kindness and goodness and start trusting in other gods.

So God sends fiery snakes into the camp. Everywhere. Thousands of them. Some of you this is your phobia. Planet earth 2. The people are being bitten and begin to wail in pain and cry out to God. And essentially Moses asks God to spare the people so God commands Moses to fashion a bronze serpent and to hold it up on pole. Anyone who looks at it will live.

If I'm being honest, it's a little bit of an odd story. You'll be surprised how quick it goes. It feels too simple. And I think that's part of why Jesus is using it on Nicodemus.

The story paints a picture that shows mankind's spiritual condition. It's corny, but we're snakebit with sin. Just like we talked about a few weeks ago. We are fallen. We're not as we should be because of sin.

And we need it bc, no matter how many times we hear that, we are still tempted to believe it applies to everyone but us.

And that's why this is the story Jesus is using on the religious guy. I gotta believe Nicodemus would've thought, I wouldn't have been like those Israelites. I wouldn't have been complaining. I wouldn't have been bit.

And Jesus is saying, this is you, Nicodemus. You're snakebit with sin and there's nothing you can do about it on your own. You're not Moses, you're the Israelites. You're helpless. You're not too good.

For Nicodemus, regardless of his outward appearance, position and morality, there is venomous toxin coursing through his veins killing him. Yes, for Nicodemus it would be very easy to see how that's true of others but not himself. He hadn't done anything wrong! How could it be him? Don't we think the same? This is how Keller says it:

Keller - Nearly everyone defines sin as breaking a list of rules. Jesus, though, shows us that a man who has violated virtually nothing on the list of moral misbehaviors can be every bit as spiritually lost as the most profligate, immoral person. Why? Because sin is not just breaking the rules, it is putting yourself in the place of God as Savior, Lord, and Judge. We must learn how to repent of the sin under all our other sins and under all our righteousness — the sin of seeking to be our own Savior and Lord. We must admit that we've put our ultimate hope and trust in things other than God, and that in both our wrongdoing and right doing we have been seeking to get around God or get control of God in order to get hold of those things.

Here's what we tend to believe when we think we're too good for the Gospel: I am my own Savior and Lord.

Because if I'm my savior, then my relationship with God and others will always be on MY terms. I don't have to be vulnerable, I don't owe anyone anything and I have the upper hand. I'm the hero and I get to look good. God and others, they now owe me and have to be happy with me.

That's the real nature of works righteousness. It's why it's sneaky. Not about the bad things we do, It's about the best of the best are as the scriptures say, filthy rags.

And Jesus says no, you've missed it. It doesn't work. And it isn't working. You know it.

Jesus points him to Numbers 21. God's people are in trouble. Going to die. But God, rich in mercy, knowing the desperate sinful condition of His people and knowing what He was going to do the whole time, tells Moses to make a bronze image of one of the serpents, and put it high up on a pole.

And He tells His people that if they can get their eyes on that, and look on faith, they will be healed. So imagine people, riling in pain, gasping crawling in desperation to get a view of this serpent. That's what Jesus compares himself to:

14 so must the Son of Man be lifted up, 15 that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

Jesus, like this bronze snake would be lifted up on a pole, so that all who looked to him would be saved.

We cannot fix ourselves. Jesus lived the life we never could and died the death we deserved. And what we need to do to be born again is "Look." That's it. That's how we are born again. Through absolutely no works of

our own, but instead repenting of our self-righteousness and looking to the Son of Man who was lifted up on the pole; the righteous son of God who was snakebit for our sinfulness.

Jesus says to Nicodemus, in order to be born again, in order to enter the Kingdom of God, you've got to 'look.' That's what it requires.

I think I personally find Numbers 21 to be an odd story because in my personal belief that I'm too good I think there should be a bigger resolution. Wait, they just had to look? That's it? Surely there has to be more. Like they built an altar and did some crazy sacrifices, or Moses had to do something crazy. Nope, just had to look. Why?

To look requires an act of repentance. It's ironic. We want to do and perform. He says 'look'. We have to reject our own resumes to accept Jesus' resume given in our place. We have to repent from trying to ascend to heaven on our own and accept the one who descended to earth and was raised up on a pole in our place.

- It doesn't matter how good you are, how many times you come to church.
- It doesn't matter if you encouraged someone in group time so well that it led to a group revival
- It doesn't matter if you're the most on mission missional person.
- Yeah I know that, but I've got it on my own now.

You're not good enough on your own. And that's a good thing.

Trying to be too good for the Gospel is an attempt to make ourselves right with God and others on our own. But it doesn't work and it can't work.

We are snake bit with sin. And we needed the son of God to be snake-bit in our place. Look at Him on the cross. This is what separates Christianity from any other religion. Every other religion says work work work and be good. Christianity says stop trying to work and receive it as a gift of grace.

Communion.

Pray.

TT Thoughts:

- Tim - I would walk through until you get to v 11 and say clearly - "Nicodemus doesn't get it." Here's why I think that is. Then you do all Nicodemus' stuff on being a pharisee/wanting to obey/etc.
 - Feels like you're trying to just go - "Nicodemus is a pharisee so he doesn't understand grace! You don't either! Look at Jesus you snake bitten idiot!"
 - Gotta actually teach the text more, walk through the story - do the underneath work to talk about what Nicodemus is doing.
 - Get me on the same page in a more winsome/pull way of how I want to follow a bunch of rules too.
 - Land where you set it up. So set it up with - one of the dangers to embracing the gospel is thinking we're "too good".
- Let Tim know what the official title is.