

Religious People Need to Believe

John 2:23-3:21

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Do religious people need to believe? Does being a “spiritual” person mean you believe in a saving way?

Do you think that it is possible to believe in Jesus’ Name and not be saved? John does. John says that there is a belief in Jesus’ Name that does not save. Look carefully at verses 23-24, “Many people saw the miraculous signs He [Jesus] was doing and believed [trusted] in His Name. But Jesus would not entrust [believe] Himself to them, for He knew all men.” Any way you look at it, John is saying that there is a way of believing that does not result on Jesus responding.

Now that’s shocking. I will never forget seeing this text for the first time. It shook me and my religiosity and caused me to rethink my faith. I had to ask myself this question, “Do I have this kind of belief?”

Religion: Its Dilemma

(2:23-3:2)

²³ Now when he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, many believed in his name when they saw the signs that he was doing. ²⁴ But Jesus on his part did not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people ²⁵ and needed no one to bear witness about man, for he himself knew what was in man.

¹ 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.”

The Situation Described

(v.23-25)

Their belief was based on what Jesus was doing for them (miracles). Is this a saving belief?

The same root word is translated *believe* and *entrust* in these verses. Jesus’ intimate acquaintance with humanity’s heart caused Him not to believe them.

The Bible shows us other examples of a belief that does not actually save. In James 2:19, “You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe [that]—and shudder!”

In Acts 8:13, we even have the same kind of belief as Luke writes, “¹³ Even **Simon himself believed**, and after being baptized he continued with Philip. And seeing signs and great miracles performed, he was amazed.... ²¹ ‘You have neither part nor lot in this matter, for your heart is not right before God. ²² **Repent**, therefore, of this wickedness of yours, and pray to the Lord that, if possible, the intent of your heart may be forgiven you. ²³ For I see that you are in **the gall of bitterness and in the bond of iniquity**’ ²⁴ And Simon answered, ‘Pray for me to the Lord, that nothing of what you have said may come upon me.’” (ESV)

The Illustration Presented**(v.1-2)**

John wants us not only to see this generally, but specifically. It is as though he says to us, "Here is the principle in the crowd. Now let me flesh out for you with an individual. Here is Nicodemus."

Here is a Religious Man**(v.1)**

Pharisee - Conservative, Bible believing, outwardly holy. By any measurement we would use today, Nicodemus appears to be a godly man.

Ruler of Jews - A theologian, a scribe and a member of the Sanhedrian. Now this is difficult because we do not like to see this sort of mix. But here was a man who was both a Bible student, a teacher and was a religious and political leader of his day.

Here are Religious Words**(v.2)**

This man not only has the credentials, but he has the vocabulary right. He acknowledges Jesus as being:

Rabbi	Religious equality
Teacher from God	Religious authority
God with Him	Religious authenticity

Nicodemus fully expected to be accepted, received, and acknowledged as being a man of God. It is quite clear that he thought this of himself, not in an arrogant, puffed-up prideful way, but in all sincerity. His whole religious background had trained him to see himself as a godly man, a teacher and a leader.

I am struck by Nicodemus' coming and expecting to place his approval upon Jesus and finds himself in a bit of a controversy with the Lord.

Regeneration: their Dialog**(v.3-13)**

John records for us the conversation that went on that Judean evening. Jesus simply responds by making a theological statement. Jesus challenges his religious experience with truth.

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?" 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. ⁶ That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷ Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' ⁸ The wind blows where 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."

The Necessity of the New Birth**(v.3-5)**

What Jesus asserts or declares is that believing requires that one be born again or from above. The new birth is utterly necessary. If one has not been born again, one:

Cannot See the Kingdom (v.3-4)

It is impossible even to see the Kingdom of God without the new birth. This is because the lost are spiritually blind and spiritually dead. Nicodemus shows that he does not see by his reaction in verse 4. Jesus says the new birth is necessary to see; Nicodemus demonstrates it by his blindness (v.4).

Cannot *Enter* the Kingdom (v.5)

It is impossible to *enter* the Kingdom without the new birth. The reference here to water may be to the Word, something John uses often, or to physical birth, parallel to Nicodemus' objection. Both would be true. The emphasis is on the Spirit. Entering the Kingdom of Heaven is by a birth by the Spirit just as entering the physical realm is by a physical birth.

The Character of the New Birth (v.6-8)

Jesus carefully describes what the new birth is.

God is active, man is passive (v.3,5)

Now understand something vital. Jesus does not use an imperative, or a command. He is not here telling Nicodemus to do something. The verbs are aorist passive subjunctive. Jesus is not saying, "You must hit yourself with the ball." Jesus is saying, "You must be hit by the ball." So the statement here is a statement of what is a necessary condition—but it is not something you can do. You cannot birth yourself into the Kingdom of God.

James 1:18 - Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures.

Is produced by spiritual means (v.6)

The principle stated here is so important in the Scripture and so forgotten in our day. The union of the Holy Spirit with the Word of God in a soul is regeneration. John is showing us the principle on which John 1:12-13 operates. Flesh can only produce what is fleshly. The Spirit gives birth to the spiritual.

1 Peter 1:23 since you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God;

Is basic to the New Covenant (v.7)

Jesus expected Nicodemus to have a grasp of this truth. He actually tells him not to be surprised. Nicodemus should have known about the new birth from the Old Testament.

Is solely under God's control (v.8)

Regeneration is a hidden, inner work accomplished by God's sovereign will that produces a spiritual result. It is a very simple illustration. We can see the effect of the wind on the trees. But have no control on where and how it blows. This is the way the Spirit works. We can see the effect of His blowing life giving air into the soul of a man so that he becomes a living spirit.

Rejection: his Demonstration**(v.9-15)**

As Jesus explains how these things are so, He exposes Nicodemus' unbelief.

⁹ Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" ¹⁰ Jesus answered him, "Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?" ¹¹ Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen, but you 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. 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.

Why He is not Believing**(v. 9-13)**

Jesus is demonstrating that Nicodemus does not believe in a saving way. Here is the evidence that he is not converted. You are unconverted because:

Your exposure to truth condemns you (v.9). When confronted with truth, you don't get it. Unbelief says, "How is that possible?"

Your rejection of Christ's witness condemns you (v.10-11). Here is the Word of God speaking. He came to His own and Nicodemus did not receive Him.

Your inability to comprehend spiritual things condemns you (v.12). If you do not understand what is plain here on earth, how will you understand what is spiritual? That you do not is evidence that you cannot.

Your focus on self instead of the Sovereign condemns you (v.13). Right before you is the anointed King from heaven where no man has yet been.

What He is must Believe**(v.14-15)**

Here is the gospel from the Old Testament. Jesus takes a story Nicodemus was familiar with and uses it to point to Jesus and to the cross.

The allusion here is to the bronze serpent being lifted up on a pole in Numbers 21:6-9. Sin was being judged. The serpent was raised up as an emblem of redemption if they would look and live. It is the turning point in Numbers. Chapters 10-20 are filled with failure and defeat. Chapters 22 onward are filled with victory. It was when they learned to look to the saving effects of a lifted up tree that victory came.

The term "be lifted up" was an idiom in Greek referring to death by crucifixion. The key here is the comparison *as*. Jesus' death on the cross is the heart of God's redemptive plan.

In Numbers and in John, there is a "lifting up". In Numbers, one must look to that which is lifted up; in John one must believe in who has been lifted up. The conclusion I draw—and it is supported by the rest of the Bible—is that saving belief, faith is a way of seeing with our understanding.

How then is the belief that saves different from the belief that does not? John shows us that saving belief is looking to a sacrificial death on the cross for life.

So the focus of saving belief is on the cross. That is where the crowd went wrong. It is Nicodemus' error. And it is a massive error today. Are we centered on the cross? Or are we searching for signs, miracles and self-centered solutions?

Saving belief looks intently on the cross of Christ and the Christ of the cross and passes from death to life.

Jesus lovingly and emphatically tells Nicodemus the truth. What He does here is not harsh or unloving. It is exactly what we should do also.

Redemption: John's Discourse (v.16-21)

Verses 14-15 are the hinge in the text. It is the last of what Jesus said to Nicodemus. Taking it as a text, verses 16-21 are John's exposition of these words.

In these words, Jesus begins to develop God's redemptive plan. Notice that He continues to explain even in the face of Nicodemus' apparent unbelief. He uses an illustration from an Old Testament text that Nicodemus should have known very well.

The Foundations Explained (v.16-18)

Why must saving belief focus on Christ and the cross? Why is the gospel Christ centered?

¹⁶ "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. ¹⁸ Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God.

The Character of God (v.16)

God loved the world in such a way that He gave His Son. God's love is characterized by sacrifice. God's saving and sacrificing love has made believing in Him how that salvation is given to you. If you believe in Him, you have eternal life and have been born from God.

The Purpose of God (v.17)

God saved the world in such a way that He sent His Son. God's purpose for Jesus' first coming is for salvation. The Law on which Nicodemus had set his hope condemned him. Jesus came to accomplish God's salvation.

The Condemnation by God (v.18)

God has already placed the world under a condemning verdict. Those who believe have not under this verdict. Those who do not believe, still are. Their unbelief is evidence that they are condemned.

The Fruit Exposed (v.19-21)

How is this so? Why is this so?

¹⁹ And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. ²⁰ For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed. ²¹ But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God."

Here is the way the condemning verdict reads:

The Principle Declared**(v.19)**

Sinful man is not neutral. He loves his sin. He does not love the Savior. He embraces the darkness rather than the light. He is enslaved to the pleasure that his sin gives. You can know whether you have saving belief by what you truly love.

The Product Demonstrated**(v.20-21)**

Here is the proof. Sinners hate God and will not come to God because God exposes them for what they are. Believers live by the truth and come to God so that everyone will see that it is God who is at work in them.

If you will not come to God it is because you are sinful, hate God and do not want to be exposed. But if you practice the Truth, you come to God plainly showing that God has done an inward work.

John is saying here that the difference between a belief that does not save and one that does is God's work of regeneration.

Reflect and Respond

Religion will not save. Many, many people are going to die and perish eternally in hell because they are depending on their religion. It may even be a religion that looks like belief. It may even be a fundamental, evangelical belief. But if it is focused on anything—and I mean *anything*—besides the cross of Jesus, then it is not a saving belief.

The new birth is not a moral obligation addressed to our wills; it is spiritual necessity arising out of sinful depravity and spiritual death.

God may be pleased to bless our evangelism. We are given hope and confidence because:

John 7:50-51 Nicodemus, who had gone to him before, and who was one of them, said to them, "Does our law judge a man without first giving him a hearing and learning what he does?"

John 19:39 Nicodemus also, who earlier had come to Jesus by night, came bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds in weight.

So here you have it. Here is John's argument:

There is **religion** and a belief that will not save.

There is a **regeneration** that is necessary in order to believe.

There is a **redemption** in which we must believe.

By the mercies of God, believe in Jesus as your Savior and bow to Jesus as your Sovereign, today.