

Gospel of Glory: Nicodemus

SPEAKER	Matt Ryniker
DATE	Sunday, November 3, 2024
PASSAGES	John 3; John 7; John 19; Numbers 21; Matthew 15
MESSAGE	Begins at 1:23:08 in the service

THE BIG IDEA

Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night with his credentials in order, and Jesus takes them apart: no one so much as *sees* the kingdom unless God fathers him by the Spirit. Three scenes later that same man is carrying Jesus' body in daylight where his colleagues could watch him do it. Whatever group you belong to, the invitation is issued to you as an individual — and it leads out of the dark.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- ◆ Nicodemus opens with “we know.” Jesus answers with “unless.” Confidence about Jesus is not the same thing as being born of him.
- ◆ Flesh begets flesh. You cannot play dress-up into God’s family; he has to father you by his Spirit, and that is the entry requirement, not the graduate course.
- ◆ The bronze serpent was not a snake by nature but took that form and was lifted up so the dying could look and live. That is the frame [John 3:16](#) sits inside.
- ◆ Nicodemus stood in front of the light of the world having arrived in the dark. John does not waste that detail.
- ◆ The Pharisees ask “have any of the authorities believed in him?” assuming the answer is no — while one of them is standing there.
- ◆ Joseph of Arimathea was a disciple “secretly for fear of the Jews” and still did the family’s work. You can be genuinely his and still be afraid.
- ◆ Whether Nicodemus ever made a formal confession is not the point of the story. His life is over; ours is not.

► 1:23:08

Two days before a national election, Matt spent his opening minutes on the ballot and the rest of the message on a Pharisee who came to Jesus at night. The halves turned out to belong together: both are about whether you are willing to be seen.

Voting will not defile you

► 1:24:36

Matt has been open with the church about cutting back his media intake after becoming convicted of an addiction to it, so he arrived at this by way of an article a member had posted on Realm — something like forty million Christians planning to sit the election out. He was careful not to tell anyone how to vote, and equally careful about two attitudes he thought might be underneath that number.

The first is *let it all burn down*. That, he said, is [Jonah’s attitude toward Nineveh](#), and it was not God’s. Its cousin is a smoldering disdain for one’s own countrymen — all fat and rich and selfish — which is not Christlike either.

The second is a fear of contamination: that the hostility in politics is a kind of goo you could get on you. Matt went to Jesus on unwashed hands — food goes in the mouth, through the stomach and out; what defiles comes *out* of the mouth, from the heart:

evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander. “You’re not going to get gunked by touching that screen in a booth,” he said. If defilement is your worry, worry about partnering with the thing you claim to fear — lying to get your person ahead, hatred, contempt. Holding an opinion your neighbor dislikes is not on the list: “if bothering people with your opinions is sinful, then I have bad news for you about Jesus and the apostles.”

1. “We know” meets “unless”

► 1:29:14

“Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. 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.’”

JOHN 3:1–2 ↗

Matt slowed down on two words. *We* know — Nicodemus is speaking for a group, and he arrives sounding certain. And *unless* — which is the word Jesus hands straight back to him.

“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.” 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?”

JOHN 3:3–4 ↗

It sounds like a non-answer and it is not. Nicodemus said God is *with* you; Jesus said that without God as your *father* you cannot even see the kingdom. “The very least of my entourage is going to have to have God closer than *with*,” Matt put it. The knowing confidence starts fading into confusion inside two verses.

2. Born of water and the Spirit

► 1:32:00

“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 flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit... 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.”

JOHN 3:5-8 ↗

People often read “water” as the flesh half and “Spirit” as the spirit half. Matt reads both as the Spirit, and he lets John settle it — at the festival Jesus promises rivers of living water out of the believer’s belly, and John says plainly that he meant the Spirit, not yet given because Jesus was not yet glorified.

Then the logic, which Matt enjoyed: cows have cows, ducks have duck children, people have people children. “Flawless.” So when God begets you, you are truly his — that is not something you can approximate by dressing the part. Our default is not that we are his children. Which is why Nicodemus, who asks “how can these things be,” gets asked in return whether the teacher of Israel really does not understand ([John 3:9-12](#)). Notice who is saying “we know” now, and notice that Jesus’ “you do not receive our testimony” is plural. He is answering the same *we* Nicodemus walked in with. “What group is Nicodemus a part of? Which *them* is this *they* that makes their *we*?” Matt asked, and then, to the room: “That’s good preaching. Okay, whatever.”

3. The serpent lifted up

► 1:36:44

“And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.”

JOHN 3:14-16 ↗

We usually meet that verse alone on a placard at a ballgame. Its context is [Numbers 21:6-9](#): people in the wilderness dying of venomous snakebite, and a bronze snake raised on a pole — something that by nature is not a snake, made in that form and lifted up, so that those who looked would live. Jesus, by nature not sinful, took our flesh and was raised the same way. The “so” in “God so loved” is not intensity. It is method: *this is how* he loved the world. And the sentence that follows says the Son came not to condemn but to save, while the one who refuses to believe stands condemned already — which is where the man who came at night is standing.

“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... 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.”

JOHN 3:19–21 ↗

4. Act two: which “them” is he?

► 1:41:46

Nicodemus surfaces again at that same festival, after the temple guards come back empty-handed because “no one ever spoke like this man.” The crowd is split over whether he is the Prophet, the Christ, or disqualified by his address (John 7:40–44). The Pharisees press the guards with what they take to be a closed question — have any of the authorities believed in him?

► 1:42:53

John writes people who ask questions more profound than they realize. The answer to that one is standing in the room. Nicodemus — “who had gone to him before, and who was one of them” — says only that the law does not judge a man without a hearing, and gets “are you from Galilee too?” for his trouble (John 7:45–52). It is not a confession. It is a man spending a little of his standing to buy Jesus a hearing, and the confident tone he arrived with in chapter 3 is now on the other side of the table. Act two ends on the question: which *them* is he with?

5. Act three: seventy-five pounds, in daylight

► 1:44:40

He returns after the crucifixion. The legs of the other two are broken so the bodies can be down before the Sabbath; Jesus is already dead, so instead a soldier’s spear opens his side and out comes blood and water — and John stops the narrative to swear to it, because he saw it (John 19:31–37). Flesh begets flesh; the Spirit begets children of God. Here is the blood, and here is the water.

► 1:46:51

“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 they took the body of Jesus and bound it in linen cloths with the spices, as is the burial custom of the Jews.”

JOHN 19:38–42 ↗

Burying the dead is family business, and Matt read the whole scene as family business: Joseph of Arimathea, a disciple “secretly for fear of the Jews,” doing it anyway; Jesus from the cross handing Mary to John and John to Mary, founding a blended household by the Spirit. That Joseph acted while still afraid is, Matt said, a comfort — you can be genuinely in the family and genuinely frightened.

► 1:49:19

And then the detail the whole arc has been waiting for. Verse 40 says *they* took the body — the disciple and Nicodemus, together. The sun has not set, or the burial could not be happening. The man who came at night is bearing Jesus’ body where anyone he answers to could see him. He is doing exactly what Jesus told him in chapter 3: whoever does what is true comes to the light.

6. Your story isn’t over

► 1:50:46

People argue about whether that counts as a confession. Matt declined the argument twice: “his story on earth is over, but ours isn’t.” The question the text puts to a congregation is whether *we* have made one.

He drew out two things worth carrying. First, no matter which *they* you have belonged to, the invitation is addressed to you singular — whoever believes may leave the group he came from and live. That is worth saying in a season when the church is working hard to recover a communal identity against too much individualism. Second, Nicodemus got there slowly, chewing on it, wrong-footed and then wrong-footed again. Matt said he identifies with that: showing up sure you know what Jesus is about, and having him wreck your templates almost mercilessly.

► 1:52:37

He ended with the challenge he said he is working on himself. “How could I obey him openly, not in the dark or secretly, but openly?” — and an offer: “If you want, I’ll tell you what I think God is challenging me to do, if you tell me what God is challenging you to do.” Then the prayer, which reached back to the prayers for the persecuted church earlier in the service: stir up boldness in our confession, and let us bear witness faithfully.

FOR FURTHER STUDY**SCRIPTURE IN THIS MESSAGE**

- [Jonah 4:1–3](#)
- [Matthew 15:18–19](#)
- [John 3:1–2](#)
- [John 3:3–4](#)
- [John 3:5–8](#)
- [John 7:37–39](#)
- [John 3:9–12](#)
- [John 3:14–16](#)
- [Numbers 21:6–9](#)
- [John 3:17–18](#)
- [John 3:19–21](#)
- [John 7:40–44](#)
- [John 7:45–52](#)
- [John 19:31–37](#)
- [John 19:38–42](#)

FOR YOUR HOPE GROUP

1. Matt distinguished being defiled by the world from partnering with it. Where have you confused the two — pulling back from something that could not defile you, while tolerating something that could?
2. Nicodemus opened with “we know.” What do you think you already know about Jesus that he may be waiting to wreck?
3. If God has to father you by his Spirit before you can even see the kingdom, what does that do to the parts of your faith you have been trying to manufacture?
4. Joseph acted while still afraid. What are you not doing because you are waiting to stop being afraid first?
5. Where are you still coming at night — and what would it look like this week to bear up his body in daylight, where the people you answer to can see it?

ABOUT THE SPEAKER

Matt Ryniker is Hope Chapel's senior pastor — his own description of the job — and reports to the church's governing board, who he cheerfully calls his boss. He and his wife Mandy have been held up from Hope's own pulpit as an example to the congregation. He spent a stretch of his working life as a public school teacher, and he still teaches the parent dedication classes where families commit to raising their children to follow Jesus — a theme that runs straight into this message.

Watch the full message:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fcqpUZoJcBI&t=4988s>

These notes summarise a message preached at Hope Chapel in Austin, Texas. They are a reader's aid, not a transcript — scripture references link to the full passage so you can read it in context.