

## **16 - John 3:9-15**

### **“Try Hard Religion vs The Cross”**

#### **REVIEW / INTRODUCTION**

We are in John 3:9-15. Last time we were in this series we spoke about the new life that is available through Jesus Christ. As believers we have the capacity to either get our stuff from the world or to get our stuff from God through His Spirit. Getting our life and direction and guidance from God begins with being born again. When God puts a new heart in you then you have the equipment to hear from God and do what He says and walk in His blessings and power. When we think up everything on our own we will go off track in everything.

Today is a continuation of that theme. Jesus continues to patiently explain to Nicodemus the dynamics of being born again and Spirit led. Listen to the reaction of Nicodemus when Jesus insisted that people must be born again in order to see the kingdom of heaven.

#### **READING THE TEXT**

**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.**

### **PREACHING THE TEXT**

In verses 1-8 Jesus tells Nicodemus that in order to see the kingdom of heaven he must be born again. Nicodemus had the idea that salvation was found through the rules and regulation. He has become an expert at rule making and rule distributing. Don't walk more than 2 miles on Saturday. Make sure to wash your hands ritually before eating. Make sure you eat only animals with split hooves.

Make sure you tie a box on your head that has scriptures inside. Show...that you are serious about God by following His rules! That is how one enters the kingdom.

But Jesus renders his rulebook useless. Jesus said you must be born again. You must be completely remade in your mind and spirit. None of Nicodemus' training and memorization has prepared him to understand the inner workings of this complete make-over of his mind and spirit.

Nicodemus is astonished that all of his decades of learning did nothing to actually get him saved and heaven bound.

**<sup>9</sup> Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?”**

**TRY HARD RELIGION**

Nicodemus is an expert at *“Try Hard” religion*. In *Try Hard religion* people have a rule book. They *try hard* to eat the right stuff, worship on the right day, dress the right way, use religious buzzwords and do other things to appear pious. In *Try Hard religion* keeping up appearances is crucial. Nicodemus is an expert at keeping up appearances. People look up to him because his life

seems to put together. Little do they know that his heart is empty and dead.

This *Try Hard Religion* can still take over any heart or any church. A temptation for God's people is to move from salvation by grace, to a religious routine that is based on trying hard like Nicodemus. Our faith began with brokenness realizing that we desperately need a Savior. We can not save ourselves. So God gives us the faith to cry out for salvation. He changes our heart and desires. This is a miraculous process that you can not fake or come up with on your own without God's help.

#### AUTOPILOT LEADS TO TRY HARD RELIGION

But some Christians throw it on autopilot and stop praying and stop asking God to show up and give them spiritual discernment. We stop asking Him to transform our life. We no longer cry out to Him in brokenness. We move from operating in the power of The Spirit to operating in the flesh and now our spiritual life has been reduced to following our common sense and doing what seems right to us and following the rules of the faith and the traditions

we came up with. Even if we are no longer broken and humble on the inside we want to act like we have been transformed. So we make the outside look as if we have been transformed on the inside. That is when Try Hard Religion kicks in.

In the flesh we follow the rules. Don't drink, don't smoke, follow the dress code. Don't appear to be angry. Show up for meetings and do church politics. None of these rules are bad in and of themselves. But what began as a miraculous work of the Spirit has become a chore of the flesh.

My first reaction in reading about Nicodemus is to judge him as slow and undiscerning. We kind of mock characters like this who just don't get the new birth. But we must take this mode of operating in the flesh very seriously. Operating in the flesh rather than by the Spirit is a threat to any church including ours.

This church began as a work of the Spirit and it will only please God if it continues as an ongoing work of The Spirit.

**Galatians 5:25 (ESV)**

***<sup>25</sup> If we live by the Spirit, let us also keep in step with the Spirit.***

**Ephesians 5:18**

***And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit,***

God is calling us to be filled or intoxicated by His awesome beautiful life changing presence. Be filled and continue to be transformed daily.

**Colossians 1:9**

***And so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding,***

Are you seeking earnestly spiritual wisdom or are you just coming up with your convictions in the flesh? If you are coming up with your convictions and preferences in the flesh you will not build the kingdom and the church. You will build your pride and a *Try Hard Religion*.

### **Proverbs 3:5-6**

***Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths.***

We must seek an ongoing work of the Spirit that continues to power us up and guide us so that we can discern the will of God. **When we put it on auto pilot and begin to figure everything out in the flesh we become Nicodemus.** Nicodemus did not receive the teaching of Jesus.

<sup>10</sup> **Jesus answered him, “Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?**

*D.A. Carson: ... Nicodemus in his role as Israel’s teacher should have understood these things ...*

*The text suggests Nicodemus was a recognized master, a religious authority. It is as if Jesus is saying to Nicodemus; ‘You are the Reverend-Professor-Doctor, and do you not understand these things?’ (After all, the) teaching on the new birth was built on the teaching of the Old Testament. ....End Carson Quote.*

## THE GOOD DOCTOR

It **is** possible to get a Doctorate Degree in religion and be a religious expert like Nicodemus without being saved, born again and heaven-bound!

## THEOLOGICAL BOOK BY UNBELIEVER

For example, one of the best books ever written on Old Testament Biblical Narratives was written by Robert Alter, a non Christian. He helped bible teachers establish guidelines for reading The Old Testament. But he does not have the faith in Jesus Christ to be born again and heaven bound.

That was the problem of Nicodemus. It is the problem of many who strive to get saved by learning religious rules and consuming biblical information. Don't be fooled by a degree or a title or Try Hard Christianity which is no Christianity at all. The goal of TRUE Religion is a transformed heart. Jesus continues...

**<sup>11</sup> 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.**

Unregenerate people like Nicodemus cannot understand God's word, not because it is unclear, but because it is unacceptable to them. The need for grace and the new birth in Christ steals the pride of those who want to go to heaven on their own terms by being a basically good person rather than trusting Jesus. Religion done in the power of the flesh will get you the praise of men and also a ticket to hell.

Jesus can tell that Nicodemus is not receiving His teaching. It is too simple. What of this massive rule book that the peers of Nicodemus have written? All of our thousands of hours of study and striving for nothing. It can't be this simplistic, can it? Jesus continues...

**<sup>12</sup> If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things?**

## EARTHLY THINGS AND LIVING ANALOGIES

In Verse 8 Jesus spoke to Nicodemus about the wind as an analogy of how The Spirit of God moves mysteriously. He spoke to him about how the water of

conversion in the Old Testament is The Holy Spirit in the New Testament. He spoke of the human experience of being born into a new world as an analogy of how God gives birth to new citizens of glory.

Many things in this world were created with the purpose of pointing to a deeper spiritual reality. For example marriage was invented by God in order to demonstrate the joy and pleasure of appearing in the marriage supper of the Lamb when Jesus Christ returns for His church which He calls His bride.

If Nicodemus can not see how these simple analogies build into our world point to God and the new birth in Jesus Christ then how can he understand more complicated teaching.

**<sup>13</sup> No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. <sup>14</sup> And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up,**  
**THE SON DESCENDED**

Nicodemus fails to receive Jesus on the terms of **grace** and **faith**. Nicodemus like so many prideful people demands to work hard for that which is available for free by the grace.

Jesus knows that Nicodemus will witness the crucifixion. Perhaps at that time God will open the eyes of Nicodemus' heart so that he can understand salvation by faith in Jesus Christ. Jesus is going to use an Old Testament passage to explain salvation through faith in the work of Jesus on the cross. Jesus illustrates the cross for Nicodemus using...

**Numbers 21:4-9 (ESV)**

***<sup>4</sup> From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom. And the people became impatient on the way. <sup>5</sup> And the people spoke against God and against Moses, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we loathe this worthless food."<sup>6</sup> Then the LORD sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that***

*many people of Israel died. <sup>7</sup> And the people came to Moses and said, “We have sinned, for we have spoken against the LORD and against you. Pray to the LORD, that he take away the serpents from us.” So Moses prayed for the people. <sup>8</sup> And the LORD said to Moses, “Make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live.” <sup>9</sup> So Moses made a bronze serpent and set it on a pole. And if a serpent bit anyone, he would look at the bronze serpent and live.*

*D.A. Carson Quote: That bronze snake on a pole was the means God used to give new (physical) life to the children of Israel if they were bitten in the plague of snakes that had been sent in as a punishment for the persistent murmuring. By God’s provision, new life was graciously granted. Why then should it be thought so strange that by the gracious provision of this same God there should be new (spiritual) life, indeed ‘eternal life’? Second, the deepest point of connection between the bronze snake and Jesus was in the act of being ‘lifted up’.*

*Moses lifted up the snake on a pole so that all who were afflicted in the camp might look and live. In the same way, the Son of Man must be lifted up.*

Some had the faith to believe God's plan of grace to deal with the deadly poison of the snake bite. So in faith they did what God said and looked at the serpent on the pole. Those who did not look to that which was raised up died.

So it is with all of us. God's cure for our sin is to look with faith at the cross. Look to Jesus on the cross to take away the poison of our sin. By grace God has a cure.

Those who insist on curing themselves will die. Those who want to try hard and work hard and keep up appearances will die. Those who look to the cross and receive the grace of Jesus Christ will live. In this The Son of God will be glorified.

THE SON'S PURPOSE, TO BE LIFTED UP

The lifting up of the Son leave us in a position in which we must assess whether we have the faith to

believe Him and look to Him for eternal life through grace by faith in Jesus Christ.

**<sup>15</sup> that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.**

## TRY HARD VS TRUSTING

The challenge for all of us today is the same challenge given to Nicodemus. Will you try hard or will you trust and follow Jesus?

### ***Timothy Keller Quote:***

*Accepting the gift of Jesus Christ requires humility because you're admitting that you can't save yourself by your own means.*

## **SUMMARY**

We need the humility to admit that we can not save ourselves. We are saved by looking to the cross in faith. And we also need the humility to admit that we can not go the right direction in the flesh without prayer and God's guidance. We need Him to be saved. We need Him to be kept. We need Him to guide us in every area of the Christian life. If He is not calling the shots there will be nothing but murmuring and a complete lack of spiritual

power. Through Jesus and His ongoing Lordship Jesus will think it up and He will power it up. And our role is to receive and walk out the things that He come up with.

## **TAKING IT HOME**

1. Have you slipped into “Try Hard Religion?” Are you following the rules and keeping up appearances but failing to renew your love for Jesus.
2. Are you looking to the cross to be saved? Or are you counting on your hard work or religious rituals?
3. What is preventing you from relying on Jesus and His Spirit for salvation and guidance in all things?
4. What is God calling you to place under His control and guidance today?