

We Are – Centered on Jesus.

John 3:1-20

(Expanded Sermon Notes)



Over the course of the summer, we took time to look at what we believed as a local church. We examined essential theological doctrines on God, the Bible, Jesus, and the human condition, among other things. The goal of that series was to ground us in the concept of theological charity. That is, we are able to be unified around the most important and essential theological truths while giving room for respectful disagreement on the non-essentials. The reality of unity is not a “nice add” for a local church; it is something that we must walk in. However, as we all know, unity is not easy. Instead, it takes effort and willing cooperation with God’s Spirit to maintain the bond of peace. Theological charity is one really helpful ingredient in the recipe for church unity. The second is having a unifying mission. Last week, we said it this way, mission helps us stay unified. So, what is our mission here at Christ Community church? We primarily exist for the purpose of **connecting people to life-defining relationships in Christ.**

See, a mission is what a group is to be most centrally focused on. Sports teams have them, businesses have them, clubs and social groups have them; really, any organized group has a mission. As Christians, we have been given a mission from Jesus, the Great Commission (Matt. 28:18-20). This applies to all believers in all places and at all times. Each local church is called to the Great Commission, but often expresses it through a unique call that God gives to them specifically. This unique call fits within the Great Commission but also reflects the unique DNA and approach God has equipped that local congregation for. Everything we do at Christ Community is to support, reflect, and engage our mission of connecting people to life-defining relationships in Christ. When we focus on that as a large group, it really helps to keep us unified by aligning us around the most important and central thing so that we can give room and charity in the non-essential things. Over the next month we are going to press-in to understand our mission, vision, and values as a local church. As we begin that journey today, the most important place to start is with the most important thing, our mission. When we look at our mission, one thing should stand out above everything else, Jesus. Yes, we are all about relationships and we’ll come to the power of those next week. But we don’t exist to simply help people find friends. We exist because of Jesus, and we exist for his glory. The relationships that we form through CCC are all about Jesus and for his glory. **That means because of our mission, we are centered on Jesus.**

1. “A teacher from God.”

a. The Bible’s most famous verse and its context.

- i. The third chapter of John’s Gospel contains the most famous verse in all of the Bible, John 3:16. It was probably the first verse that you ever memorized in Sunday school or in church. It goes like this, **“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.”** This is a wonderful verse, and it is no wonder why it is the first that so many of us memorize. It tells us about God’s love for us, his radical action of sending his Son for us, and that if we believe in his Son, we won’t perish but instead experience eternal life. Truly amazing in every sense of the word!
- ii. But this verse doesn’t stand on its own; it has a context, and that context is part of a larger dialogue that Jesus is having with an elite religious leader named Nicodemus. Nicodemus is a Pharisee who was also part of the ruling class in Judea, presumably a member of the Sanhedrin. This implies that he was quite wealthy, and Jesus addresses him as the preeminent teacher of Israel. John points out in his Gospel that “rulers” and “Pharisees” are a distinguished group in Jewish society, suggesting that Nicodemus was a prominent figure within the governing group.
- iii. The broader conversation that Jesus is having with Nicodemus is about the lack of right sight or clouded vision that Nicodemus has. This pattern will continue for three chapters with different individuals.
 1. “The one who ‘knew all men’, who ‘did not need man’s testimony about man’ (2:24–25), now enters into a number of conversations in which he instantly gets to the heart of individuals with highly diverse backgrounds and needs— Nicodemus (3:1–15), the Samaritan woman (4:1–26), the Gentile official (4:43–53), the man at the pool of Bethesda (5:1–15), and more.”¹

b. One of the key words in the text to help us understand what is going on is, “night.”

- i. John tells us that Nicodemus came to Jesus at night or some translations render it, “under the cover of darkness.” → This tells us both the time of day and the spiritual condition of Nicodemus’ heart.
 - ii. John’s use of ‘night’ elsewhere in his Gospel account helps us to understand what is going on here. **In each instance (3:2; 9:4; 11:10; 13:30) the word is either used metaphorically for moral and spiritual darkness, or, if it refers to the night-time hours, it bears the same moral and spiritual symbolism. Doubtless Nicodemus approached Jesus at night, but his own ‘night’ was far darker than he knew.** But John helps us as the reader understand what is going on below the waterline.²
- c. Nicodemus’ spiritual journey in the Gospel of John.
- i. When we meet Nicodemus, we find him drawing near to Jesus because of Christ’s powerful teaching and miraculous acts. Nicodemus is clearly curious, but he doesn’t see Jesus clearly... yet. John records three interactions of Jesus and Nicodemus (3:1-20, 7:45-52, and 19:38-42).
 - ii. These three accounts show us spiritual progression in Nicodemus’ life.
 1. Chapter 3 – Curious but tragically incorrect.

¹ D. A. Carson, *The Gospel according to John*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, MI: Inter-Varsity Press; W.B. Eerdmans, 1991), 185.

² D. A. Carson, *The Gospel according to John*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, MI: Inter-Varsity Press; W.B. Eerdmans, 1991), 186.

2. Chapter 7 – Sides with Jesus.
3. Chapter 19 – When all the other disciples fled, he and Joseph of Arimathea went out of their way to get Jesus' body and help prepare it for a proper burial. → While John never tells us that Nicodemus made a "confession of faith," we see in his actions at the crucifixion that he has identified himself to be part and parcel with Jesus. He would have understood the cultural implications of his actions in that moment. Bringing spices for the burial of a man who was crucified was in every way to stand with and be in alignment with Jesus.

d. Nicodemus' opening statement – Who is Jesus?

- i. Let's focus for a moment on the titles and accolades Nicodemus gives to Jesus. After all, when we read our Bibles in English, they sound pretty good and honestly, quite respectable. To be honest, they are! Yet, they fall tragically short.
 1. **Rabbi** – This was a title of honor, not unlike titles we use today, such as pastor or professor.
 - a. **Note** – Nicodemus doesn't just say "I know..." he says, "we know." The use of the term we indicates that even among the Pharisees and the ruling class of Jews, they understood that something was truly different about Jesus. They just couldn't quite get their heads around what.
 - b. The most natural reading of 3:1–15 is that at this point Nicodemus, though interested, is not particularly open to the truth.³
 2. **Miracle worker from God** – This second accolade acknowledges that Jesus has been doing things that no one else has ever done in Nicodemus' lifetime. Sure, there are the stories of those "sent from God" in the OT who performed mighty acts and miracles because of God's unique action through them. Now, here is Jesus, and no one can deny (at least at this point) that he is sent from God.
 3. **Teacher** - Again, just like Rabbi earlier, Nicodemus not only acknowledges the wonder-working power of Jesus, but the authority with which he teaches. Both his actions and teaching are directly connected to God in Nicodemus' mind.
- ii. **The tragedy of it all – Nicodemus is so close but so far off at the same time.**
 1. D.A. Carson explains Nicodemus' addressing of Jesus this way – **"At one level this assessment of Jesus must be judged disappointing. Nicodemus does not suggest Jesus is a prophet, still less the prophet or the Messiah, but simply a teacher mightily endowed with God's power. Nicodemus was openly curious about Jesus, but still fell a long way short of confession that he was uniquely the promised Coming One."**⁴
 2. Here is how another commentator helpfully unpacks the reality of Nicodemus' lack of sight – "While Nicodemus associated himself with others in his approach, Jesus' initial response was to Nicodemus alone. *In reply Jesus declared, 'I tell you (sing.) the truth, no-one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again'.* The emphatic way in which Jesus' response is introduced, 'I tell you the truth' (*amēn amēn legō soi*), indicates the importance, both for Nicodemus and all later readers of this Gospel, of what Jesus said: 'no-one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again'. To 'see' the kingdom is synonymous with entering the

³ D. A. Carson, *The Gospel according to John*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, MI: Inter-Varsity Press; W.B. Eerdmans, 1991), 186.

⁴ D. A. Carson, *The Gospel according to John*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, MI: Inter-Varsity Press; W.B. Eerdmans, 1991), 187.

kingdom (cf. 3:5). Jesus' Pharisaic contemporaries believed all Jews would enter the kingdom of God through resurrection on the last day, the only exceptions being those who denied the faith and committed acts of apostasy (Mishnah, *Sanhedrin* 10:1–4). To be born a Jew was to be an inheritor of the kingdom of God. Nicodemus would have been astounded by Jesus' statement that he, as a Jew, would not see the kingdom of God unless he were 'born again'.⁵

e. The grace of God to reveal himself.

- i. The immediate first question that jumps from the text for us is, "Who do I think that Jesus is?"
 1. So often in our modern moment we treat God like a cosmic candy machine. That is, if we do "x" then he will respond with "y." Or, we treat Jesus as nothing more than cultural window dressing. We like the T-shirts, the concerts, the political talking points, and the cultural connections that Jesus "gives" us more than we actually want to truly submit to Jesus.
- ii. Jesus doesn't just look at Nicodemus and say, "Better luck next time, bud." He leans into this moment and helps correct incorrect sight about who he is. To do this, Jesus speaks to Nicodemus in a way that is both familiar and challenging.

2. A Bronze Serpent and Belief

a. Understanding the text. – Titles and references that are not readily clear to us.

- i. Jesus launches into a curious conversation both for Nicodemus and for us with statements about being "born again" and "being born of water and spirit." These curious statements should cause us to slow down and inquire about what Jesus is actually saying.
- ii. One very important part of the context of the text is that Jesus gives Nicodemus very clear reference points so that he can understand the more curious and confusing statements that he makes.
 1. **Another way of saying this is that Jesus was being candid and clear with Nicodemus.**
- iii. **"Son of Man" – Dan. 7:13-14**
 1. **"And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed."**⁶
 2. "Son of Man" is Jesus' favorite self-designation. It is used eighty-six times in the NT (Synoptics 69x, John 13x, elsewhere 4x).⁷
 3. There is a direct appeal to scriptural language from Daniel 7, which by Jesus' time had developed into an image of transcendent authority (Mt 24:30 // Mk 13:26 // Lk 21:27; Mt 26:64 // Mk 14:62 // Lk 22:69).⁸

⁵ Colin G. Kruse, *John: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 4, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 107.

⁶ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2025), Da 7:14.

⁷ D. L. Bock, "Son of Man," in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels, Second Edition*, ed. Joel B. Green, Jeannine K. Brown, and Nicholas Perrin (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2013), 894.

⁸ D. L. Bock, "Son of Man," in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels, Second Edition*, ed. Joel B. Green, Jeannine K. Brown, and Nicholas Perrin (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2013), 895.

4. The “son of man” as Messiah is suggested by the statement in Daniel 7:27 that all will serve and obey him. The term translated as “serve” (*plh*) here carries the meaning of “worship” (Dan 3:12, 14, 18, 28; 6:17, 21; 7:14, 27 [parallel to *sgd* in Dan 3:18]), something not done of a nation. The Son of Man is pictured as a singular human figure with transcendent qualities, as his riding of the clouds indicates. In the OT it is deity that rides the clouds (Ex 14:20; 34:5; Num 10:34; Ps 104:3; Is 19:1). So this image is of a human being who also has heavenly qualities.⁹

iv. **“A bronze serpent” – Num. 21:4-9**

1. **“Pray to the LORD, that he take away the serpents from us.” So Moses prayed for the people. ⁸ 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.” ⁹ 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.” ¹⁰**
2. First, Jesus moves from an explanation of the new birth in terms of the categories ‘water’ and ‘spirit’ used by Ezekiel (*cf.* notes on 3:5) to a narrative passage, the well-known account of the bronze snake in the desert (Nu. 21:4–9). 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’ (v. 15)? ¹¹
3. What is key in the reference to Numbers is that the people needed to look to the Lord for their salvation. He was the one delivering them from their captivity in Egypt. They were the ones who sinned against him, and their sin brought on the wrath of God. However, and this is an important however, unlike other ancient gods, Yahweh responds with a provision of salvation.
- v. 1+1=2: Nicodemus should have done some basic math and understood.
 1. The reality of these two references should have opened his eyes and helped him to see Jesus clearly. His confession in that moment should have been something like, “Yes, you are the one who has authority and power unlike any other human; you are the ‘Son of Man’ and the Messiah. I look now upon you for salvation just as our forerunners looked upon the bronze serpent for salvation!”
 2. But that isn’t what happened. – Let’s not pull out the rug too hard, though. By chapter seven, Nicodemus will defend Jesus in front of other Pharisees. Something is changing for Nicodemus in this interaction.

b. **The distinction of belief in the biblical context.**

- i. Jesus of the Gospels consistently demands faith in his own person. His proclamation of the imminent coming of the *kingdom of God calls for faith not only in the truth of the message but also in himself as the one who brings the kingdom (Mk 1:14–15). He is not only God’s *prophet who can perform *healings (Mk 9:23), but also the **“Son of Man,”*

⁹ D. L. Bock, “Son of Man,” in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels, Second Edition*, ed. Joel B. Green, Jeannine K. Brown, and Nicholas Perrin (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2013), 895.

¹⁰ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2025), Nu 21:7–9.

¹¹ D. A. Carson, *The Gospel according to John*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, MI: Inter-Varsity Press; W.B. Eerdmans, 1991), 201.

who has authority to judge and to forgive sins on behalf of God (Mk 2:5; cf. Dan. 7:13–14). Above all, he demands faith in himself as the Messiah (Mk 8:29; Mk 10:47 [*“Son of David” = Messiah]).¹²

ii. Biblical belief is not - Only agreeing to a set of facts.

1. Often when we think of belief in the modern context, we mean the intellectual action of processing facts and ideas to form a logical conclusion.
 - a. “An acceptance that a statement is true or that something exists an acceptance that a statement is true or that something exists.” – New Oxford Dictionary
2. What is important for us to be reminded of in this moment is that just because we believe someone, it doesn’t mean that we agree with or support them in their idea or conclusion. Another way of saying this, belief doesn’t have to result in a resiliently held conviction in the modern world.
 - a. We experience this when people share their feelings with us; we can believe that they have really experienced the stated feeling, while at the same time disagreeing with its validity as a response to the situation.
 - b. We believe that someone’s account of an event is the way that they experienced it, while leaving room for alternative accounts that would present a similar but different picture.
 - c. We believe in someone’s intentions and even their plans to accomplish something significant, while disagreeing on the reality of the actual outcome.
 - i. i.e., “I believe you.”
 - ii. All of these examples of belief are true and genuine. But they fall radically short of the biblical call and definition of belief.

iii. Biblical belief is - Trusting, relying on, and having confidence in.

1. The Greek word that John repeatedly uses in this passage for believe is: πιστεύω (*pisteuō*). It means: *trust, put faith in, rely on* a person, thing, or statement.¹³
2. It shares the same root word that is translated as “faith.” Faith and belief go together in the Bible. - Faith is one of the most important concepts in the Gospels. It is not surprising that *pistis* (“faith, faithfulness”) and *pisteuō* (“believe, trust”) have subsequently become the central theological terms for the Christian religion. **These terms occur 243 times in the NT, more frequently than “kingdom” (162×), “grace” (156×), “church” (114×), “save” (107×) and “righteousness” (92×).** The concept also is found in passages that deal with trust in God. In the Gospels “faith” refers to belief in God’s words, trust in his Son Jesus Christ (see Son of God), and faithfulness in living out his demands.¹⁴
3. When the Bible speaks of belief or believing, it is talking about having a complete and total reliance on God and God alone. Everything about Jesus’ conversation with Nicodemus points to this longstanding reality. It is God who has the power to save, and he has made a promise to do so. Jesus not only reminds Nicodemus of that promise but also of the examples in which God demonstrated his power

¹² M. W. Yeung, “Faith,” in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels, Second Edition*, ed. Joel B. Green, Jeannine K. Brown, and Nicholas Perrin (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2013), 259.

¹³ Henry George Liddell, Robert Scott, Henry Stuart Jones, et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 1407.

¹⁴ M. W. Yeung, “Faith,” in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels, Second Edition*, ed. Joel B. Green, Jeannine K. Brown, and Nicholas Perrin (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2013), 259.

and authority to carry out the plan of redemption. – Nicodemus was Israel’s teacher; how did he not understand this (Jn. 3:10)?

4. This kind of belief is not foreign to us in our modern moment; we just express it less than we express the idea of intellectual belief. We do rely on others and declare our trust and dependence on them. Just think about wedding vows. It is the declaration of belief in another person for a very significant promise.
 - a. **i.e., I believe in you.** → When we say this, we are expressing our real and sincere reliance on another person for something that we need but ultimately can’t provide on our own.

3. Life-defining Faith (Belief)

- a. Life from “above.” → The core message of Jesus’ conversation with Nicodemus.
 - i. Here is how D.A. Carson synthesizes the reality of Jesus’ message. - This regeneration is *anōthen*, a word that can mean ‘from above’ or ‘again’. Because Nicodemus understood it to mean ‘again’ (*cf.* ‘a second time’, v. 4), and Jesus did not correct him, some have argued that ‘again’ must stand. But Jesus also insists that this new birth, this new begetting, this new regeneration, must be the work of the Spirit, who comes from the realm of the ‘above’. ¹⁵
 - ii. **By contrast, the focus here is not on the potential convert’s humility, brokenness or faith, but on the need for transformation, for new life from another realm, for the intervention of the Spirit of God.** ¹⁶
 - iii. What must be seized from Jesus’ insistence on the new birth as the prerequisite for entrance into the kingdom is the fact that this truth is applied to a man of the calibre of Nicodemus. If Nicodemus, with his knowledge, gifts, understanding, position and integrity cannot enter the promised kingdom by virtue of his standing and works, what hope is there for anyone who seeks salvation along such lines? Even for a Nicodemus, there must be a radical transformation, the generation of new life, comparable with physical birth. **Barrett (p. 206) finely cites Calvin: ‘by the term *born again* He means not the amendment of a part but the renewal of the whole nature. Hence it follows that there is nothing in us that is not defective’** (Calvin, 1. 63). ¹⁷
 - iv. **Even the concluding verses of the section (vv. 19-21) reinforce both the need for regeneration and God’s provision of eternal life.** Here Carson notes, “The purpose of these three verses, then, is not to encourage readers to think they fall into a deterministic category bound up with their intrinsic nature, but to make them see the imminence of their danger (the verdict is being declared), and the fundamentally moral reasons why people hate the light. John stresses these points in the hope that his readers will beseech God that all they do may be done through him—in short, **that they will turn to the ‘lifted up’ Son of Man with the same simple, desperate, unqualified faith as the Israelites displayed who turned to the bronze snake in the desert (vv. 13–**

¹⁵ D. A. Carson, *The Gospel according to John*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, MI: Inter-Varsity Press; W.B. Eerdmans, 1991), 189.

¹⁶ D. A. Carson, *The Gospel according to John*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, MI: Inter-Varsity Press; W.B. Eerdmans, 1991), 190.

¹⁷ D. A. Carson, *The Gospel according to John*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, MI: Inter-Varsity Press; W.B. Eerdmans, 1991), 190.

15). By such faith and such faith alone can anyone experience the new birth (vv. 3, 5) and thereby gain eternal life (vv. 15–16).¹⁸

b. “Transformation in the way of Jesus is what we’re after.”

- i. When you think about and understand our mission here at Christ Community Church, it should stand out that we are all about and centered on Jesus. Because he is the only one who offers regeneration and eternal life. There are lots of things our church does and could do. Chief among anything we do and could do is that we are after transformation in the way of Jesus. It is why our mission uses the phrase life-defining.

ii. Let’s ask – What truly defines me?

1. This is not a manipulative question. Instead, it is the very one that Jesus raises for Nicodemus. What do we ultimately and completely rely on? What are we looking to for lasting satisfaction? What is the thing that defines my greatest purpose in life? What will I be known for?

c. What is my next intentional step of growth so that I might be formed in a life-defining way in the way of Jesus?

- i. Often when we hear this question, we hear, “What else are you going to add to your life to be a “better Christian” or to “make God happy?” That is not at all what we mean by this question!
- ii. Instead, what we’re asking is, what good thing do you need to say “no” to right now in order to say “yes” to God’s better thing for you in this season of your life?
- iii. **Example** – Danielle and I have an apple tree in our backyard. Each year in the fall, we look at the tree to plan out what we’re going to prune come winter, when the tree is dormant. The dead branches are easy to spot and mark. However, each year, we have to prune living branches from the tree. We are actively cutting away branches that will bear fruit in the next season. Why do we do this? So that the tree will be healthier and bear better fruit instead of just “more” fruit. Our lives are to follow the same principle. In each season, we need to evaluate with the Spirit of God what we’re going to “prune” (say “no” to) in order to say “yes” to the better things God has for us.
 1. This is going to look different for all of us. Some are going to need to stop serving and leading so that others can step in and step up. Some are going to need to take a step into a group or a Bible study for the first time. Some are going to need to change the way you’re going about things in your group so that you increase in growth this season and not just do the same things as you’ve always done them.
- iv. Whatever your next step is, here is what I know, it should be centered on Jesus. Because it is only through him that we experience truly abundant life.

¹⁸ D. A. Carson, *The Gospel according to John*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, MI: Inter-Varsity Press; W.B. Eerdmans, 1991), 208.