

Come to Jesus: Sharing the Gospel with Conviction and Compassion

A Religious Seeker

John 3:1-16

Mark Vroegop

"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.' Jesus answered 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?' 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 flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' 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.'" Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" Jesus answered him, "Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things? 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. If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. 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 3:1–16, ESV)

Over the last few months, I've had two conversations that are connected to what we are talking about over the next six weeks. Both of them happened in a car. One was an Uber ride. The other was a courtesy vehicle.

First the Uber ride. I was in Baltimore for a pastors' conference, and I hailed an Uber to take me to Washington, D.C. The woman driver was very kind, and we had an hour-long drive. I noticed what I thought was a rosary hanging from her rearview mirror. After we talked about a number of things, I asked her if she was Catholic. It turns out that what I thought was a rosary were actually Islamic prayer beads for reciting the names of Allah.

That opened a long and wide-ranging conversation with my driver about the differences between Islam and Christianity. Frankly, she knew the Bible better than I knew the Koran. She began to explain all the reasons why she believed that Islam was superior to Christianity. She was blunt, bold, and confident. And as I listened to her, I could feel the tension inside of me starting to rise. There was this single nagging question:

How do I share the gospel with her in a way that doesn't offend her?

As I wrestled with this question, it struck me that she was not all that concerned about offending me. And I found myself stuck between compassion and conviction. I wanted to share more with her, and I did. But it was a real struggle.

The second ride was in a courtesy vehicle from a dealership in town. After the other person was dropped off, I told my driver that I needed to go to College Park Church. We talked about what he did for a living, and soon enough he asked about my line of work. Once he knew that I was the teaching pastor, he told me that he and his wife have been long time members at a particular church in Indianapolis. I knew the church, and it did not assure me that he was a follower of Jesus.

We were about three minutes away from the church, and I felt the same way I had in Washington, D.C. I wanted to ask him the next question and to probe a little bit deeper. I wanted to shift the conversation toward his beliefs and the gospel, but the same question emerged: *How do I move this conversation toward the gospel in a way that isn't offensive?*

Before I knew it, we were at the church. I couldn't find a way to "thread the needle" of that conversation. I walked away from the car frustrated. I felt like I had failed.

Not Alone in the Tension with Compassion and Conviction

Now I know that I am not alone in dealing with that tension between compassion and conviction when it comes to talking about the gospel. I am sure that most of you have faced that very issue. Or it may be that you are here today and not yet a Christian. But even you would understand the tension. After all, I'm sure that you wouldn't want someone recklessly talking with you about some of the most important questions in life.

Today we are starting a seven-week series called "Come to Jesus: Sharing the Gospel with Conviction and Compassion." The aim of this series is to look at the ways Jesus engaged a wide variety of people and how He called them to faith and belief.

We are going to look at the following:

- A Religious Seeker
- A Man in a Tree
- A Woman with a Past
- The Rich and Famous
- The Adoring Crowds
- The Popular and Proud
- The Thief on the Cross

Each week we are going to see the unique person(s) that Jesus encounters, what kind of barriers they had to the gospel, and how Jesus dealt with them. Hopefully we'll learn how to better navigate the tension between compassion and conviction.

A Summer of Opportunity

We have positioned this series in the summer on purpose. This time of year presents some unique opportunities for you to connect with people, take some next steps in your relationships, and look for open doors to share the gospel.

The aim of this series is for you to learn something and do something. To that end, we've have created some specific action steps:

- Our Small Group team has written a new discussion guide that you can use in your Small Group, for your personal reflection, or maybe for family devotions.
- Each campus has its own action steps. At North Indy our theme is "neighboring," and we want you to apply this sermon series as you learn the art of gospel neighboring.
- We'll have a variety of resources, ideas, and action steps for you to take at the Local and Urban Outreach Wall.
- If you are part of the Castleton Congregation, you need to build relationships with people now so that when you move into the facility on September 10, they'll be inclined to come. And you can invite people to your pitch-in on Saturday, June 25.
- On Friday, July 28, North Indy will host Summer Fest, a Friday Evening bridge-building night where you can invite neighbors or friends.

So, we want you to be intentional this summer as it relates to the gospel conversations. In the midst of all the good things that you'll be doing over the next six to seven weeks, let's pray about the Lord opening some doors to share the gospel.

And when you feel the tension – *How do I talk about the gospel with compassion and conviction?* – hopefully you'll remember this series.

We are going to begin our journey by looking at John 3 and the story of Jesus' engagement with a man named Nicodemus. Let's look at who he was, what barriers stood in his way, and the gospel hope that Jesus offered him.

A Religious Seeker

In the flow of the gospel of John, it is very interesting that the first person that Jesus engages is "a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews" (3:1). This is very intentional. Jesus' encounter with him becomes foundational for the rest of the book.

What's more, this section of scripture contains the most famous passage in the entire Bible: John 3:16. So, understanding what is happening here is really important.

Let's start with what John said before John 3. After telling us about Jesus' miracle of turning the water into wine and the cleansing of the temple (2:1-22), John records the following words in John 2:23-25:

"Now when he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, many believed in his name when they saw the signs that he was doing. But Jesus on his part did not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people and needed no one to bear witness about man, for he himself knew what was in man." (John 2:23–25, ESV)

Immediately after this statement, John introduces Nicodemus. John wants us to see what Jesus saw when He looked at mankind. This story is not just about Nicodemus. He represents something much more common, and I'm sure you will see it as we move forward.

But what do we learn about Nicodemus? There are a number of things.

First, we learn that he is a Pharisee, a ruler of the Jews. That cultural categorization immediately sets Nicodemus apart. He was a part of the educated, elite, ruling class. Nicodemus was one of 70 men who were a part of the Sanhedrin, the religious and political power-center in Jerusalem.

Nicodemus would have been highly educated. He would have come from the right family. He would have been well-known by the people. Nicodemus would have been familiar with the political landscape and how to navigate it. But more than anything else, he would have been revered and trusted. Perhaps you could think of him like a Supreme Court Justice. Even if you disagreed with his view of the law, there would still be a high degree of credibility. That is what Nicodemus is. He's a highly esteemed man.

Second, we learn that he came by night. Some commentators completely dismiss this reference as merely an anecdotal comment. But I think that there is more to it than that. It appears that Nicodemus wants to ask Jesus some questions, but he is not ready to do so publicly. Perhaps he knew from his political experience the ramifications of asking his questions in the open. Or perhaps he wanted a private audience with Jesus. The point, I think, is simply that Nicodemus is searching.

Third, if we were to look at the entire Gospel of John, Nicodemus only appears in two other places. He appears in John 7, where he asks a procedural question when the Pharisees are threatened by Jesus' teaching. And he appears in John 19, as he assists Joseph of Arimathea in the burial of Jesus, bringing 75 pounds of spices, which was only fitting for a king. So, I think it is safe to assume that Nicodemus became a believer. But it didn't happen in John 3.

The point of this text is not to show us the conversion of Nicodemus or to give us a strategy to reach upper-class, highly-educated, and religious people. John uses Nicodemus in order to show us something more. I think he wants us to see what is inside of every man, every person.

I trust that you know that everyone is searching for answers to really big questions – nagging questions – that just will not go away. Even when people don't classify themselves as "religious," they are still trying to answer questions about life, death, sin, forgiveness, identity, and the future. Everyone is seeking. It's just a matter of from what perspective and of which questions they are asking.

His Barriers

Let's turn now to the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus so that we can see the barriers that were in his life. Take careful notice what Jesus does in this conversation.

Barrier #1 – Knowledge. In verse 2 we see Nicodemus start the conversation with a bit of flattery. He calls Jesus "Rabbi," a title of respect even though Jesus was not a part of the educated class. He

calls him a teacher from God. And he acknowledges that God must be with Him to do the signs that He does.

But the most important word in verse 2 is the word “know.” Just hear what he says: “Rabbi, we **know** that you are a teacher come from God.” Nicodemus was an educated man. He knew what he saw. He knew what it meant.

But look what Jesus does. In verse 3 he tells Nicodemus that he cannot see the kingdom of God unless he is “born again.” Jesus challenged Nicodemus’ underlying assumption. He told him that there was something beyond his “knowledge.” Jesus draws out Nicodemus by making a statement that will surely generate more questions. But Nicodemus needs to see that he doesn’t know what he thinks he knows. His knowledge is a real barrier.

Barrier #2 – Self-Sufficiency. In verse 4 Nicodemus immediately responds with a question about what it means to be “born again.” He wants to know how that can happen. He wants to know how to “do it.” His question is personal: “How can a man be born when he is old?” It seems impossible.

And that is entirely Jesus’ point! Without being born again, one cannot enter the kingdom of God. Before he would not *see* the kingdom. Now he cannot *enter*. Jesus is attempting to dismantle Nicodemus’ trust in himself.

Nicodemus’ religious training, his education, his knowledge, and his self-trust are significant barriers to him trusting in Jesus. He “had it all,” and that was central to his problem!

Jesus points him to something outside of himself in verses 6 and 8. He tells Nicodemus that he needs something that is not connected to “flesh,,” and that there is a power moving beyond his own ability in verse 8. Jesus is showing Nicodemus his personal insufficiency.

Is self-sufficiency and knowledge a barrier in Indianapolis? I remember the first time I visited this area almost nine years ago. Now I’m rather used to it, so it doesn’t strike me as much. But I remember seeing developments with mansions in them. I was struck by the number of foreign and high-end cars. Conversations at restaurants were loaded with a level of vocabulary that was unusual to me.

I don’t think I need to convince you that knowledge and self-sufficiency are a part of the cultural air, especially in the Northern suburbs. But is there not still an enormous amount of spiritual need? Behind the education, the spirituality, and the material success are lonely, hurting, and lost people.

Maybe that’s you this morning! No one would know that you are dying inside. Somewhere in your heart I think you know this isn’t working. It’s not going to last. Why not consider Jesus? Listen carefully to the rest of this text.

And if you are a follower of Jesus, you need to know that in order to share the gospel effectively, you have to start by dismantling the things that people trust in. You could wait until the bottom falls out and be the person that they’ll call – that’s a good strategy. But it is also important to find ways to help people come to terms with the fact that their knowledge and self-sufficiency aren’t enough.

Perhaps you could take some time this week to write out a few sentences that help you make that turn. Take some time with a group of friends and ask them what they would say to various kinds of people who seem to have it all together. Try to answer this question: How do you point people away from their knowledge and self-sufficiency?

One person who does this better than anyone I know is Tim Keller. If you want to know how to do this, read his books. In his book *Counterfeit Gods: The Empty Promises of Money, Sex, and Power, and the Only Hope That Matters*, he quotes C.S. Lewis:

Most people, if they have really learned to look into their own hearts, would know that they do want, and want acutely, something that cannot be had in this world. There are all sorts of things in this world that offer to give it to you, but they never quite keep their promise. The longings which arise in us when we first fall in love, or first think of some foreign country, or first take up some subject that excites us are longings which no marriage, no travel, no learning can really satisfy. I am not now speaking of what would be ordinarily called unsuccessful marriages, or holidays, or learned careers. I am speaking of the best possible ones. There was something we have grasped at, in that first moment of longing, which just fades in the reality. I think everyone knows what I mean. The wife may be a good wife, and the hotels and scenery may have been excellent, and chemistry may be a very interesting job: but something has evaded us.¹

This is just one example of many where Keller or Lewis help us to effectively diagnose the condition of humanity. Knowledge and self-sufficiency are very common human barriers.

Barrier #3 – Unbelief. After identifying the first two barriers, we now come to the third issue of unbelief. Nicodemus, in a rather exasperated tone, says, “How can these things be?” (v. 9). And Jesus replies with a direct statement questioning how Nicodemus could be a teacher of Israel and not understand these things.

Jesus is blowing Nicodemus’ mind. Categories are falling down all around him. But notice that Jesus doesn’t bail him out too quickly! In verse 11 Jesus identifies that Nicodemus really does not receive his testimony. And in verse 12 He tells him that his lack of belief is a problem, while seemingly telling him that it’s unlikely that he’d believe heavenly things if he doesn’t believe earthly things.

The way that Jesus handles him here should make you a bit uncomfortable. He is patiently but directly challenging Nicodemus’ wrong understanding of who Jesus is and what God is doing. Jesus is taking the things that Nicodemus trusts in, and He is turning them on their head.

He is skillfully and lovingly helping Nicodemus to see the false foundation of his life. Before He even got to the “Good News,” He is trying to help Nicodemus see his need.

But in order to do that, Jesus had to talk with Nicodemus with compassion and conviction.

¹ Keller, Timothy. *Counterfeit Gods: The Empty Promises of Money, Sex and Power, and the Only Hope that Matters*, (New York: Dutton Press, 2009), 38.

Gospel Hope

So, how does this end? After He dismantled Nicodemus' viewpoint, He pointed Nicodemus to the good news found in Jesus Himself. Notice what He did in verses 13-16.

- He identified the authority and the divinity of the "Son of Man." Jesus is God. (v. 13)
- He connected the message to something Nicodemus would have been familiar with – the story of Moses lifting up the serpent in the wilderness. (v. 14)
- He stated that the Son of Man must be lifted up. (v. 14)
- He opened the door of salvation wide! "Whoever believes in him may have eternal life." (v. 15)
- Jesus, in John 3:16, connects this moment with Nicodemus to the grand plan of God to save the world.

Notice how clear, how hopeful, how wide open the invitation to come to Jesus is! God loves the world, Nicodemus. God gave His only Son, Nicodemus! Whoever believes in Him will not perish. These are stunning and sweeping statements inviting Nicodemus to believe.

Maybe God is inviting you to believe today! Maybe you can see the dismantling of the things you trust in. Maybe you need to heed the call of God today and become a follower of Jesus.

But the final question is: Did Nicodemus believe? The passage ends with no clear decision on Nicodemus' part. Don't miss this. Jesus shared the gospel with compassion and conviction, but it didn't necessarily result in an immediate response. Does that encourage you? It should!

Listen, we are called to share the gospel with compassion and conviction. But the results are up to God. We are not being asked to convert people. We are only asked to be witnesses.

But in order to be an effective witness, you have to a) talk to the person, b) understand their story, and c) know what they are trusting in. Know their name, their story, and what they trust. This is the art of gospel neighboring – to connect and love and build into people's lives so that we will have the opportunity to share the gospel with compassion and conviction.

So, here is your assignment this week. First, stop by the Local Outreach Wall to learn more about some creative next steps. Second, pray that God would give you an opportunity this summer to thread the needle in helping people come to Jesus. Third, build relationships with people such that you can really know what they are trusting in.

And if the conversations don't go all the well, if you feel tension inside because you are trying to figure out what the next step is, or even if you walk away feeling a bit disappointed – don't quit! Keep inviting people to come to Jesus with compassion and conviction. Who knows what God might do!

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PRACTICAL NEIGHBORING IDEAS

- Invite your neighbors over for dinner.
- Host a game-watching party for a sporting event on TV.
- Start a walking/running group in the neighborhood.
- Organize a weekly playdate for other stay-at-home parents.
- Organize and host a craft night for the women in your neighborhood.
- Host a movie night and include discussion afterwards.
- Deliver cookies to your neighbor and invite them to drop by your house.
- Throw a block party this summer.
- Start a neighborhood Facebook group.
- Set up a “Meet Your Neighbors Night” with food and drinks in your driveway/front yard.
- Host a coffee and dessert night.
- Become a regular at your local neighborhood pool/park.
- Host a game night (yard games outside or board games inside).
- Coordinate a summer BBQ every Friday night and invite others on your street to take turns hosting.
- Organize a tasting on your street (everyone sets up a table with food on their front porch).
- Volunteer to coach a local kids’ sports team.
- Join a local adult sports league.
- Host a front yard ice cream party.
- Bring baked goods to new neighbors when they move in. Include a card with a list of local grocery stores, movie theaters, dry cleaners, parks, churches, and information about garbage pickup.
- Get outside – look for ways to spend time in your front yard!

Do you have a Neighboring story? This summer, share your Neighboring stories with us by emailing Joe Wittmer at jwittmer@yourchurch.com.