

## What does a “born-again” Christian look like?

Was there ever a time in your life when you got it wrong—and not just a little wrong, but completely, totally wrong? I remember a time in my life when I thought that the words “vivid” and “livid” had the same meaning. And so I would write sentences like: “The princess was lividly joyful of her happy home.” Not surprisingly, there was even a time when one of my professors joked about people abusing the spell-checker in Microsoft Word. I and everyone else was laughing along with the professor when he said that some foolish student thought that ‘livid’ and ‘vivid’ were the same word. I was laughing at the stupid student until I realized that *I* was that student.

In the words that we look at this morning we find a Pharisee, named Nicodemus. And Nicodemus has it wrong, really, really wrong. He is caught up in the teaching of the Pharisees. And so when he visits Jesus at night he makes one insulting blunder after another. We read in John 3: “*John 3:2 He came to Jesus at night and said, ‘Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him.’ 3 In reply Jesus declared, ‘I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.’”* “

At first, it doesn’t seem like Nicodemus has done anything wrong at all. He politely addresses Jesus as a good teacher. But, there is so very much that Nicodemus doesn’t understand—so very many ways he is insulting Jesus with his words. First of all he says “we know.” Nicodemus says “we.” He is not talking on his own behalf. He is talking on behalf of his fellow, powerful Jews, the Pharisees, the great teachers of Israel. He came to Jesus not as a humble student. Instead, he came to—at the very most, let Jesus know that he and Jesus were on the same level.

And so he says “we.” But he attaches a verb to that subject. He says “we know.” Now, in the Greek, there are a number of ways to express types of knowledge. The best is the word “*γινώσκω*.” It is knowledge by experience. We *know* that a burner is hot when we touch it. We *know* that a dogwood tree is beautiful because we can see its flowers and smell them. That’s not the word Nicodemus uses here. He uses the word “*οἶδα*.” This is mental acceptance.  $1 + 1 = 2$ . The bird in the air is flying far away. It’s knowledge without experience. So, what is Nicodemus saying? He’s saying that none of the Pharisees really gets who Jesus is. But, they can concede and conclude, that at the very least he is a good teacher.

Nicodemus was getting it more and more wrong with every word he spoke. So, after his introduction, Jesus responds with stinging, striking words. He says in verse three: “*John 3:3 ‘I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.’”* “

Nicodemus was sinning against God, the Father because he refused to see who Jesus really truly was. Jesus wasn’t just at the same level as Nicodemus. He was the teacher’s teacher. He was the teacher’s Messiah. He was the teacher’s God. And Jesus ruthlessly shows this fact by bluntly letting him know that no one gets into heaven without being born again.

Now, notice from that answer that Nicodemus gave, that he didn’t get it. He didn’t understand that there was nothing he could do choose or cause or help God save him. Nicodemus says: “*John 3:4 ‘How can a man be born when he is old?’ Nicodemus asked. ‘Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother’s womb to be born!’”* “

Nicodemus sinned against God, the Father by not thoroughly, humbly accepting who Jesus was. And there is where we can find a great deal of sympathy for Nicodemus. For, we too have fallen into that same trap. I remember serving in a church where there was a man who had not gone to church for years and years. As many times as I would visit him, he would refuse to come to church. I visited with a really good friend of this inactive member. And when I told him that his friend was refusing to go to church and that he was separating himself from God, the friend said: “yeah, but, if he died tonight, you’d still give him a Christian burial, wouldn’t you?” That inactive member despised Jesus. And his friend was just concerned about him being buried in a Christian church—as if that would all of a sudden push him into heaven. All of that boiled down to a despising of who Jesus really truly is. The inactive member pridefully thought that he didn’t need Jesus or his church. His friend pridefully despised all the words Jesus spoke about the fact that those who abandon Jesus will end up in hell. We find ourselves in Nicodemus. We find ourselves in this inactive member and in his friend. For sinful nature in every one of us does not want to know Jesus through his word in an in-depth way. We want him on a shelf where we can take him off

when we need him, but, most of the time leave him there gathering dust.

So, Jesus showed Nicodemus what a 'born-again' Christian looks like. A born-again Christian humbly accepts who Jesus is—all of who Jesus is. But a 'born-again' Christian does so much more than that. Jesus tells Nicodemus: *"John 3:5 Jesus answered, 'I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. 6 Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit.'"*

Nicodemus belonged to a group of men who despised Baptism. They wanted to get to heaven by themselves—or at the very least, with a little help from God. They hated John, the Baptizer because they hated what he offered to them. John told them that they were snakes and vipers and sinners. And even more than that, they hated the fact that through that the words that John spoke and water that he poured on people's heads, their sins were forgiven—and not just one or two, but *all* of them.

And so Jesus speaks some blunt, even violent words to Nicodemus because it was his people, the Pharisees who despised the tool that God was using to put forgiveness in their hearts. What Jesus was teaching Nicodemus was that a 'born-again' believer doesn't just humbly accept Jesus' person. He also accepts Jesus' gifts. He accepts this amazing gift of baptism.

And that is exactly what the Holy Spirit moved Nicodemus to do. Nicodemus humbly accepted and rejoiced in this gift of baptism. For, where the rest of his fellow Pharisees despised this gift, the Holy Spirit moved Nicodemus to rejoice in it. He led him to rejoice that God would take simple water and combine it with the power of his word. He led him to rejoice that since he could not be born again, God was the one who had to give him a new birth. And he rejoiced that it was through this gift of baptism that he received this new birth, not through his own decision, choosing or desiring.

And, as much as Nicodemus rejoiced in baptism in his day, we too rejoice today. For Today is Holy Trinity Sunday. And in baptism we have the name of the Triune God placed on us. We are born again of water and word. All of our sins are washed away in the power of God's word. The salvation that Jesus earned for us on the cross was placed in our hearts through baptism. And it is through baptism that we know who Jesus truly is and can rejoice in his gifts to us.

A 'born-again' Christian humbly accepts Jesus' person and his gifts. But, there is yet another way we show that we are 'born-again' Christians. Jesus tells Nicodemus: *"John 3:5 Jesus answered, 'I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. 6 Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. 7 You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.' 8 The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.'"*

Nicodemus sinned against the Father by assuming he was at the same level as God's Son. He sinned against Jesus by despising the gift of baptism. And here in these words, he sins against the Holy Spirit by not being content *that* the Spirit gives him a new birth in Christ. Instead, Nicodemus wants to know *how*. And what does Jesus tell him? You feel the wind against your face. You don't know where it came from. And you don't know where it's going. This is a fact we don't lose much sleep over. We are content with the *that*. And we don't worry about the *how*. How is it that through water and word Jesus could take a sinner like me, born into death and make me alive in Christ? Just how exactly does he do that? Who cares! I will spend my life rejoicing *that* I have the name of the triune God on me. I don't need the *how*.

And, my brothers and sisters, Our Triune God does the same for you. He gives you a new birth into a new and living hope. He gives you the great gift of faith. And with that, unasked, unearned, unforced, you humbly accept who Jesus is. You humbly accept the gift of baptism he gives to you. And you humbly accept *that* the Holy Spirit has made you a Christian, even though you may not ever know the *how*. That is what a born-again Christian looks like. And, in Christ, that is what you are. Amen.