

Mortal Combat: Jesus vs. Ignorance

John 3:1-17 (NIV)

¹ Now there was a Pharisee, a man named Nicodemus who was a member of the Jewish ruling council. ² He came to Jesus at night and said, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him.” ³ Jesus replied, “Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.” ⁴ “How can someone be born when they are old?” Nicodemus asked. “Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother’s womb to be born!” ⁵ Jesus answered, “Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are 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.” ⁹ “How can this be?” Nicodemus asked. ¹⁰ “You are Israel’s teacher,” said Jesus, “and do you not understand these things?” ¹¹ Very truly I tell you, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony. ¹² I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things? ¹³ No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of Man. ¹⁴ Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, ¹⁵ that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him.” ¹⁶ For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.

Do religious, faith-based conversations make you uncomfortable? Do they feel like they are knockdown, drag out fights, with each speaker giving a punch or a jab or an uppercut, until one of them concedes or can’t keep going? Are they more debates with winners and losers rather than converts? Is that what we have here between Jesus and Nicodemus in our Gospel reading from John chapter 3? Do we have in one corner, weighing in at 165 lbs, the miracle worker from down under in Galilee, the teacher come from God, the honorary Rabbi: Jesus! And in the other corner, weighing in at 175 lbs, from the Jewish supreme court, the strict adherent to manmade religious laws, the teacher of Israel: Nicodemus!? Did Nicodemus come to Jesus for a verbal mortal combat?

Reading through this account, Nicodemus does not seem to be the antagonist. His words to Jesus were not fighting words. He straight-forwardly lays it out there that he thinks Jesus is special, someone worth talking to. Jesus had done miraculous signs, signs no average person could do. To Nicodemus, Jesus looked like a Rabbi, a teacher come from God. And if Jesus is a teacher come from God, then Nicodemus wants to pay attention to what Jesus says. He seems to genuinely want to learn more about Jesus, maybe even coming at night to have a longer, uninterrupted conversation with him.

Neither does Jesus combat Nicodemus’ words but instead gets to the heart of the matter, the reason why Nicodemus is taking time to talk with Jesus. Jesus replied, “Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.” (verse 3)

Nicodemus responds: “How can someone be born when they are old? Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother’s womb to be born!” (verse 4) Depending on the inflection you hear when you read those words, you could make Nicodemus sound combative, incredulous. But is there a different way to hear his words? Could you picture his face with a puzzled look, a little dumbfounded? He seems to be expressing confusion and a desire to have that confusion cleared up by Jesus.

We may not readily be confused by Jesus’ words since the phrase “born again” is one that is familiar to most of us as a time when someone renews or confirms their commitment to faith in God. But try to see it through Nicodemus’ eyes. He was hearing Jesus say that he, a grown adult man, has to be born again in order to see God’s kingdom. This is a physical impossibility, like a camel going through the eye of a needle. This doesn’t make sense. Nicodemus honestly doesn’t get what Jesus is saying.

Now we are seeing the real battle commence. This is not a verbal religious debate between Jesus and Nicodemus. This is a combat of Jesus vs. what Nicodemus doesn’t know, what he doesn’t understand. This is a mortal combat of Jesus vs. ignorance.

You and I have been on that same side of the conversation as Nicodemus was with moments of not getting what God is saying. And while we have a laundry list of items we don’t get about God and his Word, let’s watch and learn what Jesus does with ignorance just with this one phrase of being “born again.”

Jesus answered Nicodemus’ question of ignorance, “Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit.” (verse 5) Yeah, I meant it when I said you can’t belong to God and his kingdom unless you are born again, a birth that comes about by the working of water and the Holy Spirit. Nicodemus, being a Pharisee and a member of the Jewish ruling council, was well aware of John’s work as he baptized people with water and the Holy Spirit for the forgiveness of their sins, a turning around of their life, a new life – if you will. Yet, he and the other Pharisees and the Jewish ruling council did not participate;

they only observed. They didn't think that they needed this baptism of repentance, this water to take away their sins, this new life. They despised God's gift of baptism through John. Do we shake our heads when baptism is talked about this way – that it is a new birth, something that God does for us instead of what we do for God? How does it work that splashing water on someone and saying some words is God saving someone, making them new instead of what we do to show commitment to God?

Jesus continued fighting our ignorance: "Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.' 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." (verses 6-8) Jesus is teaching Nicodemus and us that we can't make ourselves spiritually new. This is why Jesus said "born again" and not recommit. The work of the Holy Spirit with water kind of works like the wind. We know it's there because we can see the effects, but we can't control it. It comes and goes without us. In the same way, we can't see the Holy Spirit working through this water combined with God's Word, but it's doing things. We see the effects, how it's changing the people who were baptized. They are living differently because of the working of the Holy Spirit. This is a way that God is bringing people into his kingdom to belong to him, living in them, ruling over their hearts.

But Nicodemus is still processing this, still trying to take it in. He doesn't scoff and wave his hand dismissively. He doesn't challenge Jesus. He states his ignorance again. "How can this be?" (verse 9) I still don't get it, even with the use of an analogy.

So Jesus continues the combat against ignorance. He doesn't shake his head and say, "I can't make this any clearer." Instead, Jesus basically says that I've explained how God works here on earth. You should understand these things because you are in the position of Israel's religious teacher. As someone speaking from the authority of having come from heaven, let me point you to what you really need to know, the whole reason why you came and sought me out. Let me connect this born again thing to an Old Testament story that shows you who I am and what I am here to do for you: "Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him. For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him." (verses 14-17) I'm here, Nicodemus, to give you and all people a new life, an eternal, forever life, with God. This is done by the working of the Holy Spirit through the Word, pointing you to me.

We don't know how much longer this conversation went on and when it exactly ended, but we do get a sense of how the fight against Nicodemus' ignorance went. Nicodemus later stepped out from among the Pharisees and the Jewish ruling council and spoke up for Jesus, helped honor him in his burial. Looks like Jesus won the mortal combat against Nicodemus' ignorance.

Do you know what else proves Jesus' victory over ignorance? All of you! You are here because you have been born again – many of you, if not all of you - by water and the Spirit. You see this cross here in this sanctuary and you know that the Son of Man, Jesus was lifted up to take away your sins, that that you will not perish to your ignorance, but that you have eternal life with the Son of God.

How did that happen? How did Jesus combat our ignorance? The same way he combated Nicodemus'. It was people with words, God's Word. God put people in our lives who pointed us to Jesus – parents, grandparents, pastors, Sunday School teachers, friends, neighbors, coworkers, boyfriends, girlfriends, husbands, wives, maybe even your own children. They patiently worked with us round after round, especially when we said that we don't get it. We wrestled with what God teaches, and they wrestled with us without giving up. We wrestle with how different and contrary it is to our thinking. We think that we have to put in some kind of effort, that God rewards those who work hard for him with forgiveness, eternal life, a stronger faith, that we have to make ourselves "born again" by our commitment and acceptance. Yet, the only way we're born again, the only way our faith gets stronger, that we receive forgiveness and eternal life with God, is through the work of God the Holy Spirit using simple means on this earth – his Word, water, bread and wine.

Who around you needs someone to go round after round against their ignorance, that they don't know God and what he does for them and how he works? With whom can you share that wrestle, that struggle with, as they ask questions trying to understand God and how he works? With whom can you point to Jesus being lifted up to save us all, to show them time and time again that God so loves the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life?

As you fight this mortal combat against ignorance, remember that Jesus fought that fight too. He fought it with Nicodemus. He has fought it with you and me. He was and is patient with you and me, continually using people in our lives to hold him up to us in all situations so that we belong in his kingdom. Now bring that same fight for other people, that you will hold Jesus before their eyes, just like Jesus did for Nicodemus, to fight and win against ignorance. Jesus wins! Amen!