

<sup>1</sup> Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. <sup>2</sup> He came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with that person." <sup>3</sup> Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." <sup>4</sup> Nicodemus said to him, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" <sup>5</sup> Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. <sup>6</sup> What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. <sup>7</sup> Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.' <sup>8</sup> The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." <sup>9</sup> Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" <sup>10</sup> Jesus answered him, "Are you the teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things? <sup>11</sup> "Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen, yet you do not receive our testimony. <sup>12</sup> If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? <sup>13</sup> No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. <sup>14</sup> And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, <sup>15</sup> that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. <sup>16</sup> "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. <sup>17</sup> "Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world but in order that the world might be saved through him.

John 3:1-17

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"Rule #3a – Don't Believe What You're Told; Double Check"

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Don't believe what you're told; double check. Let me make a confession – this is not one of my favorites among Gibbs' Rules. To be sure, Gibbs' rules are made for investigative work, and when it comes to that kind of work, it's a good rule. It also seem to be a good rule of thumb in today's world. Just as no investigator takes a witness' statement without corroborating it, so no scientist publishes ground-breaking research until other researchers have verified results. Even a doctor worth their salt in today's world will tell you to get a second opinion. Scholars and Journalists double check their sources and back up their claims with evident. And students in today's classrooms are learning how to do the same – including crediting their sources and verifying facts. When it comes to the facts, verification is a good thing. I'm over-simplifying – there are nuances I'm skimming over – but generally speaking, facts are objective, and verification is an integral part of the scientific method that leads (more often than not) to reliable advances.

But not everything can be double checked, primarily because not everything has right answer or a wrong one. How many kids go through a phase where they want to double check to see if other kids think something is cool before they like it? How many movies, songs, culinary delights, or artistic ventures never see the light of day because someone decided for the rest of us that it wasn't up to par? Some things are subjective, and some things are only known through experience.

I'm not telling you anything you don't already know. But when it comes to faith, we sometimes wrestle with whether things are objective or subjective. I believe what I'm told, and many times

without verification, because I'm told things come straight from the heart of another – how they're feeling, why they're hurting, what they're needing. And I take it as it comes because that's how it goes.

But I get the impression that Nicodemus is an objective faith kind of person. He's been raised to believe that there's a right way and a wrong way. He law-abiding guy, and I mean that in the traditional Jewish sense. Scripture tells us that Nicodemus was one of the 6000 or so Jewish men in the world at that time who had entered the ranks of the Pharisees, which means that he had taken a vow before at least three other men that he would meticulously observe and protect the Law of Moses.

More than that, we know from John chapter 7 that Nicodemus was a member of the Sanhedrin—a council of 70 high-ranking Jewish elders who spoke for and guided the Jewish faith everywhere in the Greco-Roman world. [From "There are Other Worlds to Sing In" by James Moore, [www.Sermons.com](http://www.Sermons.com).] This puts us in a position to make a few educated guesses about him. First, Nicodemus had power. Second, he was exceedingly well educated. Third, he was very wealthy. And fourth, he had the right connections—probably through his ancestral and familial rank.

There is one final piece of information that we can also be fairly sure of; and that is that something is going on inside Nicodemus. He comes to Jesus at night. This is true on several different planes of reality. He comes under the cover of darkness, perhaps to protect his reputation, or perhaps because that's when he finally finished up his work. The scriptures don't really tell us. But he also comes with inward darkness, and by that, I don't mean evil. I mean spiritual darkness. There's a need, a hunger inside Nicodemus for something more. All his life, Nicodemus has been told how to get to God. And he's done it faithfully – followed every rule, offered every sacrifice, devoted every bit of energy to doing what's right. But he doesn't feel right. He comes to Jesus to double check. And Jesus turns everything just a little bit – just enough to see it differently.

Now let me put out a word of caution here. We Christians like to write off the Pharisees as rule-followers; people who were only interested in jumping through hoops in order to hold on to power and prestige. And undoubtedly, there were some of those. But the scriptures that the Pharisees studied speak of how God transforms stone hearts into flesh, how God lights up the mind and the soul, how God cares for the widow, the orphan, the foreigner, the poor, and the sick. Jesus did not invent compassion or spirituality. Those things have always been marks of the faithful. There have been many throughout time that not only sought to be good, but to do good. Moses, David, Elijah, Jonah, Isaiah, Jeremiah – all of these great Hebrews had experiences of God that changed them, transformed their hearts, renewed their hope, re-energized their life and gave them courage to live their faith. Nicodemus' problem is not his faith tradition. It's not a Jewish thing. This is a Nicodemus thing.

So what's not clicking for him? We can't be sure. But based on the conversation he has with Jesus, I think there's some valuable insights worth considering.

But first, let me briefly refresh your memory about this particular passage. How I wish we all spoke Greek, because there's a whole bunch of linguistic stuff happening in Greek that we just can't possibly capture in English. The fact is, our translators have done all the work for us. We don't have to figure out what Jesus is saying. Nicodemus did not have that luxury. In particular there are three Greek words worth noting. First, there's **Anōthen**, which means both "again" and "from above". Then there's **Pneuma**, which means both "wind" and "Spirit". And lastly, there's **Hypsoō**, (hipsuh-oh) meaning both 'to lift up' and 'to exalt'. [I am indebted to Gail R. O'Day, Commentary on John 3:1-17 in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. IX (Nashville: Abingdon Press) pages 548-553 for her definitions of Anōthen, Pneuma, and Hypsoō.] Nicodemus hears these terms in their most literal sense. Biological rebirth, blowing wind, and lifted

symbols reminiscent of the Moses' healing those in the desert bitten by snakes. But Jesus is using those terms on multiple levels all at once. And he prods Nicodemus to dig deeper, to grow in his awareness of the layers and strata of faith. Jesus is not speaking merely of a private moment of conversion, one we typically label as being "born again". Not that Jesus has anything against this, but we dare not limit it to this. Rather, Jesus is inviting Nicodemus into the work of Kingdom building – one of reshaping the world itself. For God did not merely love Nicodemus. No. God so loved the world.

There's a wonderful story about a student nurse who came to collect a patient being discharged from the hospital. She arrived in the room and found an elderly gentleman, already dressed and sitting on the bed with a suitcase at his feet. The regulations of the hospital required that all patients being discharged be taken down to the front entrance in a wheelchair, but the gentleman insisted, over and over again, that he didn't need her help in leaving the hospital. After a chat about rules being rules, he reluctantly got into the wheelchair and let the nurse wheel him to the elevator. On the way down she asked him if his wife was meeting him, to which he responded rather peevisly "I don't know. She's still upstairs in the bathroom changing out of her hospital gown." [adapted from *PreachingNow*, Vol. 5, No. 11, March 21, 2006, as used in "Cross-Eyed: Promise" by Billy D. Strayhorn, [www.Sermons.com](http://www.Sermons.com).]

We chuckle at a silly story, but friends: we can't double check pre-conceived notions and assumptions. We can't always see our own blind spots. Nicodemus came to Jesus in the dark, and Jesus helped him see what he was missing. Jesus helped him believe what he'd been told about the love of God. And something does (at least begin to) click for Nicodemus – the faint glimmer of an idea, and it goes like this. For years, decades, Nicodemus has carried the weight, the pressure of his responsibility. Pharisee, councilman, leader, example. That's a lot to carry. A lot to live up to. And so he constantly claws at the side of the mountain to climb up to God. But what Jesus seems to be saying is that you'll never be able to do that, so God comes down to you. Instead of you being the power, Nicodemus, trying being the channel for God's power. Let the Spirit move. Go with it. Trust it. Consider that all your life, you've been told that God responds to what you do. If I do this, God does that. If I sin, God condemns. If I do good, God rewards. But maybe God wants to take the lead in your life; wants you to do the responding. Instead of doing good in the hopes that it leads to the love of God, consider that the Love of God may precede the good you do, may be the power behind the good you do. All your life, you've followed every rule, offered every sacrifice, devoted every bit of energy to doing what's right. It's backwards. Follow me. Offer yourself. Devote your energy to being mine. This isn't about how you and I fill God's needs, but about how God meets ours, fills ours, and moves through ours to fill the needs others, to reshape the world as we know it. Consider that maybe you don't have to carry the weight of the world. God's got it. God loves it. And God is working to save it. Instead, carry the light to those in the dark. Carry hope to those crushed with despair. And carry the truth to those who just can't believe what they're told: For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may live. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world but to save it. Thanks be to God. Amen.