

John 3:16-17      First in “Jesus First” Series  
Lincoln Second Baptist  
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### Jesus First: The Savior

<sup>16</sup> "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.

<sup>17</sup> For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.

When the New Year rolls around each year, we have opportunity to make new beginnings in our lives. In the Journal Star on Saturday, there was a page full of recommendations by faith leaders as to what kind of resolutions people should make. Memorize a song said one Christian musician. Slow down said a Oneness minister from California. Love others replied a Rabbi. Touch a life said a Southern Baptist leader. These are all wonderful and I think we should take them seriously. We should always look for ways to become what God has planned for us.

As I was looking ahead to the New Year, I prayed about what God who have me focus on in my sermons in the New Year. The statement or our motto that says, “Where Jesus is Always First” intrigues me. I know that in my own life, Jesus is not always first because I have a nature that fights against this. My tendency is to do my own thing and then struggle through it until I discover Christ’s way. I think there is a better way. If I’m going to always place Christ first, then I need to really know Jesus. I need to know his nature, his priorities, his M.O. (Modus Operandi) and a whole bunch of other things about him. I mostly need to know the word of God where Jesus is revealed to us. So wouldn’t that be a great New Year’s resolution for all of us? Let’s get to know Jesus better and in a more intimate way. Let’s have a relationship with him that is real and growing.

So in the next several months, I am going to explore Jesus by exploring the word of God and in doing so, talk about his nature and his supremacy. The next few weeks will be about the nature and character of Jesus. As we enter Lent and move toward Easter, those messages will be about what our church would be like if Jesus were seated right here among us on a Sunday morning. Had we read all of John chapter 3, we would have seen a description of a man who was on a quest to know Jesus better.

Nicodemus was a man of distinction and outstanding character. He was intelligent, honest and upright. John in his gospel tells us: “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 have come from God as a teacher; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him" (3:1-2). No doubt, Nicodemus, who was a member the Sanhedrin, had heard about Jesus. Perhaps he came at night so he could have a private meeting with Jesus and ask all the questions he wanted to ask. He was a religious man. We know that he took his religion seriously because he was a member of the Pharisees sect. They were strict, narrow, traditionalists. He was “a ruler of the Jews.”

He was one who was first or preeminent among his associates. He stood in a high position among the ruling class in Jerusalem. This would indicate that he was a member of the Sanhedrin. Nicodemus was a man of discernment is seen in his estimation of Jesus. “We know that You have come from God as a teacher.”

Most importantly, in this episode, we see that Nicodemus was a seeker - a person who was sincere in his quest for the kingdom of God but, nevertheless, a spiritual failure in spite of all his religious knowledge and enthusiasm. Here was a sincere man with a sincere hunger for truth who came to have a private talk with Jesus in the quietness of the night away from those who would distract him. He came to Jesus at night so that he could have a private conversation concerning his own very personal needs.

That tells us about Nicodemus. What about Jesus? Isn't this message about the nature and character of Christ? Jesus had something Nicodemus did not have. Nicodemus, like each of us, was seeking for that something more in life – looking, longing for spiritual bliss and truth to fill the hole that's felt in the heart. Nicodemus was a man whose whole life was a religious exercise yet he realized that Jesus had something he did not have.

One of the messages of John 3 is this: You may have all sorts of Christian activities, you grew up right and went to the right university much like Nicodemus, having all the trappings of faith. You may even have had missionary service, even taught Sunday School. Perhaps you even served in ruling councils such as church boards, like Nicodemus. You may have founded your own ‘holy club’; done excellent work in church organizations; perhaps even figured out a method of spirituality like Nicodemus.

Yet what Jesus has to offer is not something comprised of outer trappings, appearances and status. It comes from within and is about relationship. When Nicodemus asked the question, “What must I do to have eternal life?” Jesus first gave the Pharisee the answer he was looking for. “You must be born again!”

I remember when the term born again became a cultural catchphrase. When Jimmy Carter was running for president, he described himself as a “born again Christian” and the term became popular to describe anyone who experienced an overt, Christian conversion. What did Jesus mean when he said this to Nicodemus? He explains in verse 5, **“No one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the spirit gives birth to spirit.”** In other words, we are born in the flesh as a baby and then by the power of the holy spirit, we are born anew by the spirit of God. Our birth in the flesh is not of our own choice but our parents. However, the birth in the spirit is by the influence and power of the Holy Spirit and we choose to follow Christ in this new birth.

Jesus explains to Nicodemus in the most popular, well-memorized Bible verse of all time: <sup>16</sup> **“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.** It starts with the basic nature of God who sent his only Son into the world for people like Nicodemus, Steve Wisthoff and for each of you. It wasn’t based upon anything you or I accomplished, but it was done by the Father who sent the son as a sacrifice so that we don’t have to face spiritual death and separation from God.

Salvation was accomplished not by our efforts, but by what Jesus did on our behalf. He goes on to explain further in verse 17: <sup>17</sup> **“For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.**

As Jesus spoke to Nicodemus, his intent and motive was LOVE. He didn’t come as one ready to pounce on everyone he saw sinning. Sure, he is described in scripture as JUDGE, but he came with Good News and he desires that all should be saved.

Think of his response to the woman at the well and how he showed compassion to her. Think of the tax collector who lied and cheated everyone he had dealings with. Think of the thief on the cross. Each person was deserving of death, but Jesus showed compassion. He did not come to condemn the world, but to bring salvation.

So here is the nature of Christ as redeemer: First, *he forgives sin*. This infuriated the Pharisees because Jesus made the claim that he could forgive sins, something only God could do. This was considered blasphemy, the very worst of all sins, and it was worthy of the death penalty. So this claim that Jesus made was consistent with the many miracles that only God could do. Secondly, Jesus' redemption is demonstrated by *being our guide* as we live the Christian life. Sin is always lurking because it is in our nature. But Christ, through the power of his spirit guides us toward the kind of life that reflects God's plan for us. Thirdly, Jesus *takes the penalty for us*. We were deserving of spiritual death which means eternal punishment in hell. Yet he took the penalty for us by going to the cross.

Fourth, *Jesus acts as the intercessor* between us and God. He stands in the gap for us. God is so holy and righteous, that without Christ, we wouldn't have a chance of connecting with God. Since Jesus is connected to the father, and since he died for us, he is the perfect intercessor.

As we come to the table, we are reminded of that important act of GRACE that Christ committed on our behalf. These elements reflect his redemptive nature. The cup represents the blood he shed for us. The bread represents his broken body on our behalf. If you have made that decision to accept his free gift of salvation, then receive his symbolic representation of the Lord's Supper. He is the redeemer. He has given us life so that we can live as his sons and daughters.