



SECOND CHANCE



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John 3:1-21

7th Message

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What do boyfriends, puppies, and football teams have in common?

If you search Twitter for comments about second chances, these are the most common topics. I did a Twitter search for #secondchance and found comments like “If she gives you a second chance, she’s a real keeper. Now be a man and show her why she should keep you.” A news station collected stories saying, “Given a rescued pet a second chance? Let’s see them on News24.” And people are tweeting about football teams and athletes hoping for a second chance.

You also get some pessimists. People who say “Sometimes giving someone a second chance is like giving them an extra bullet for their gun because they missed you the first time.” Then there is the practical advice, “A man deserves a second chance, but keep an eye on him.” And the honest, “Everyone should get a second chance to mess it up again.”

We’ve all made mistakes. There’s always something that we wish hadn’t happened or we might wish we could go back and redo something. Everyone loves the idea of a second chance.

We’re in the middle of our ten month series going through the Gospel of John called *Signs of Life*. We’ve been looking at how this gospel author uses signs to demonstrate that Jesus is the source of life.

As we’ve looked at the beginning of this gospel, we’ve talked a lot about something new coming along. It seems like that has been one of Jesus’ primary themes in this section. Whether it is the baptism of John the Baptist, Jesus reusing Jewish ritual pots, or criticizing the temple, the message has been clear. Something new is on its way.

What better way to communicate the arrival of something new than using the image of birth? We’ve collected nine images that are prominent in this book and grouped the various sections under those headings. Today we see the image of birth come into the foreground. What has been hinted at is now being made explicit. Today we hear Jesus speak about a new birth. Today we find out about a second chance.

John’s gospel has two main ingredients that he mixes together to tell the story of Jesus. John uses signs and sayings. He tells us about signs that Jesus performs and

he records what most people call discourses: that’s just conversations or things that Jesus says. Signs and sayings. We’ve seen the sign of the water turned into wine. We saw the sign of the temple cleansing. Now we get to our first major saying.

We’re looking at John 3:1-21 today. It starts off as a conversation between a man named Nicodemus and Jesus. The first part of this passage records that conversation and the second part is the gospel author John adding his reflection on the conversation. We’ll see that pattern all throughout this gospel.

As we look at this, we’re going to listen to the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus at first and then look at John’s comments. We’ll see Jesus talking about a new birth. We’ll start off by thinking about what that looks like for us? How do we need a new start? Who is responsible for this?

Then we’ll look at what is probably the most famous verse in the entire Bible: John 3:16. And we’ll think about who gets the possibility of a second chance. We’ll ask what our role is in that process.

We’ll wrap up with John answering some tough questions that come up because of these ideas. Who doesn’t get a second chance? What happens if you’re offered one and you turn it down?

As we ask these questions, the overwhelming picture that we will see will be of a God who is reaching out to his creation. A God who is going to every length he can to invite people to know him. So let’s find out along with Nicodemus what this gospel has been hinting at for the last several chapters. Let’s find out about this second chance that is available to us.

Be Born Again

This first part of this passage describes a conversation that begins when a man named Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night. Nicodemus speaks three times and Jesus answers three times.

John 3:1-15:

¹Now there was a man of the Pharisees named

Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. ²This 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.” ³Jesus answered him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.” ⁴Nicodemus 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?” ⁵Jesus answered, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. ⁶That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’ ⁸The 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.”

⁹Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?” ¹⁰Jesus answered him, “Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things? ¹¹Truly, 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. ¹²If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things? ¹³No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. ¹⁴And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

We are told that Nicodemus is a ruler among the Jews. He starts off with a compliment by saying that it is clear that Jesus is a teacher from God. But it sounds like the kind of compliment you would receive from someone who thinks they are better than you. So Jesus doesn’t go for it. He’s not interested in small talk.

Even before Nicodemus has had the chance to ask a question, Jesus answers. He starts off with these words, “Truly, truly I say to you.” That’s kind of a Jesus trademark way of talking. He’s the only one in Scripture that talks that way. It means that what he is about to say is really important.

What he says is not what Nicodemus expects. Jesus says, “Unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.”

Put yourself in the place of Nicodemus. He is intrigued by Jesus. He wants to know more. So he comes to Jesus to find out what’s going on. Jesus tells you that you have to be born again. What do you do with that? I didn’t have a whole lot to do with my being born the first time. I didn’t

do anything to make it happen. I didn’t decide that being born would be a good idea. I didn’t mastermind all the various factors to make sure everything came out right. In fact, being born had almost nothing to do with me.

I think it was during a math class in college, though it may have been high school. I remember our instructor giving us an extra credit assignment to solve some famous mathematical problem that had been confounding mathematicians for centuries. It was an impossible assignment. Some of my classmates actually gave it a shot. Who knows? Maybe they would stumble across some new and brilliant strategy. I’m pretty sure I decided that I had better things to do with my time.

That assignment was nearly impossible for us, but not entirely. There was a miniscule chance that one of us was some kind of a prodigy who could figure it out. But this instruction that Jesus gives to Nicodemus is completely impossible. Jesus tells Nicodemus to do something again that he had nothing to do with in the first place and certainly can’t contribute to making it happen again. Be born again. How do you go about doing that?

That’s why Nicodemus answers the way he does. Nicodemus was a Jewish teacher. He was familiar with metaphor. He’s not five years old. He doesn’t really think Jesus is talking about getting back into his mother’s womb. I think he’s annoyed because Jesus has given him something impossible.

Remember that Nicodemus pegged Jesus as a teacher. He wanted to learn about Jesus. To learn about what Jesus was saying. He wanted to be educated.

Our culture is addicted to education. We have this very naïve belief that education is what we’re missing. If we educate people about sexual disease, they will make good sexual decision. If we educate people about the world, then they will act compassionately. If we educate people, they will be happy.

But Jesus refuses to educate Nicodemus. He basically says, “You don’t need to be educated. You need to be changed.” He tells him that he needs to be born again. To start over. He needs a second chance. Be born again. What do we do with that instruction? Be born again.

Nicodemus didn’t know what to do with it. I’m not sure we do either. Of course, we live in a Christian culture that has taken this phrase as a simple way to describe having a conversion experience. Coming to Jesus for the first time. But it’s more than that.

We don’t have time to look into all the rich images that Jesus uses in his conversation with Nicodemus. He talks about how the flesh can only do so much. He talks about how the Spirit does stuff that we don’t understand. He

compares it to the wind. He talks about baptism: being born of water and the Spirit. That's the baptism that God does when we believe. And he reminds them of a story from Numbers 21 when God saved his people from poisonous snakes.

All of this is meant to point Nicodemus away from what he can do on his own. It's meant to point him toward what God can do. It's a second chance, but it's not another opportunity for you to do it better now that you're smarter. It's what God does.

We find out in the next section that our role is simply to have faith in Jesus. Our faith in Jesus means that God changes us. We believe and God does the work.

It's the same idea that Jesus says in a different way in Luke 18:27 when he says, "What is impossible with men is possible with God." This new birth is the work of God, not of men.

If you are here because you are investigating Christianity, but you don't know what you believe, this invitation is for you. You can be born again. You can be changed. You can have a second chance because it is God at work. That's the message of the Gospel of Jesus. God is real and he changes things. He gives us a new relationship with him and a new chance at life.

If you already consider yourself a Christian, this is a reminder that you didn't have anything to do with it. This whole thing is something that God did for us and in us. It isn't something that we can control. We couldn't make ourselves be born and we certainly can't live life on our own. God is the one at work here. God is the one doing the doing.

Love the World

But this does raise some questions. If God is the one who gives us new life, what do we do? How does all of this work? In verse 16, John, the author of the book, steps in and gives us some more explanation.

So here's the most famous verse in the Bible.

John 3:16:

¹⁶"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life."

There are things in this world that don't deserve the fame that they have. I found a list of people with undeserved fame online and the Kardashians took 4 of the top 5 spots.

But the fame of this verse is well deserved. It is a

powerful summary of the Christian message. It's the clearest explanation of the role of Jesus in any of the gospels. In fact, it's rare in the gospels to get much of an explanation of the theology behind Jesus' actions. Most of the gospels simply focus on telling the story of Jesus. But John's gospel has this great mix of telling the story and helping us to understand what it means. So we're going to spend some time walking through this verse.

It starts off, "For God so loved the world." We're familiar with that phrase. But it was new to the original hearers. They would immediately have said, "For God so loved who?"

It might surprise you to find out that this is the first place in Scripture where we are told that God loves the world. This was not a phrase you would find in the Old Testament. We are told that God created the world. We are told that God chose the Jews as his people. We are told that God wanted the Jews to be a beacon of hope so that the world may know him. But it is not said that God loves the world.

That doesn't mean that things have changed though. It's not as if God didn't love the world in the Old Testament. It's just not talked about in those terms because it isn't what was most important to understand at that time. God began by establishing his relationship with his people primarily. That relationship was meant to be extended to the world, but it was an Israel-centered relationship. But when Jesus comes, the picture expands.

God isn't changing. We are just getting a new glimpse of his character.

Think about growing up in a family. As a kid in a healthy family, the most important relationship you have is with your parents. You need to know that your parents love you. That's the most important thing. Research has shown it. Experience confirms it. As a kid, you need to know that your parents love you.

But your parents do a lot more than love you. They might work at jobs. They might have friends. They might enjoy certain activities. They might be passionate about the poor or the environment or justice. All that is a bit secondary to you. You might be dimly aware of it, but what you really need to know is that you are loved.

As you get older, you become settled in the fact that your parents love you and you can start thinking outside of yourself. You can see more about your parents. In particular, you can see stuff about them that doesn't have to do with you. And you start to realize that your parents don't just care about you, but they care about other things too.

That's what is going on here. For the first time in the Scriptures, we are told that God loves the world. It's a

new piece of information, but it isn't surprising. In fact, it makes sense. It fits right in. It has always been true and now that we hear it expressed, all sorts of things start to fall into place and make sense.

It helps to explain things like Isaiah 49:6, where God says to his servant, "It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to bring back the preserved of Israel; I will make you as a light for the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth." This is why God spoke of the nations the way he did. He loved them too.

In the context of John's gospel, it helps us to understand what has been going on up until now. The Logos—the eternally existent creator—coming into the world. Why Jesus would kick off his ministry at a wedding. The concern of Jesus for how the temple was perceived by non-Jews. It's all starting to make sense.

Of course! God loves the world.

But this love is not primarily an emotional experience. It is a motivation to act. True love inspires you to give.

The verse continues, ". . . that he gave his only Son." God's love is the groundwork, the reason, the motivation for his actions on our behalf. God's love means that he acts for our sakes at great personal cost.

This is the biblical definition of love. Your willingness to sacrifice yourself for the sake of another. Your willingness to give something up or experience something negative in order for someone else to experience something positive. This is what God does here. He gives something up for us. He gave his only Son. What could be more precious and costly?

So God's love motivates him to send his Son to the world. But for what purpose? That's where the verse concludes. The goal of his love is simple. The goal of God's love is salvation. He sent his Son so that whoever believes in him may be saved. That salvation is described in two ways: a negative way and a positive way. Salvation is "not perishing." And salvation is experiencing "eternal life."

It's the first place in the Gospel of John that we hear about this. The first place that the phrase "eternal life" is mentioned. John will use it a lot from here on out. In fact, he uses it more than any other author. But it's as if he's been waiting to pull out that phrase until now. He has kept that card in his back pocket and now that he is going into the whole deal, he's ready to tell us how everything works.

So what is eternal life? Is it simply life that goes on forever? No. Not at all. The reason this is important to understand is because of all-you-can-eat sushi buffets.

If you've ever eaten at an all-you-can-eat sushi buffet, you have learned one very important piece of truth. It doesn't just matter how much you get. It matters how good it is. Quantity isn't all that's important. It's the quality that matters.

You might be familiar with the quote from Thomas Hobbes, "The life of man [is] solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short." If eternal life is just life that goes on forever, does that mean that we get a life that is "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish," and never ends? I'm not sure I want that.

But that isn't what this phrase means. Eternal life isn't about the quantity of life. It's about the quality of life.

This is what Jesus has been trying to make clear through all of his actions. This is why the theme of life has come up so frequently in these first few chapters. You have had a certain kind of life. Now you can be born again into a new kind of life. An eternal life. This eternal life is like the life you have, but it's more of the life you want. It's better than the best party and deeper than the best religious experience. All you've known up until now is mortal life. This is eternal life. This is what is available to you.

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

What do we do with this verse? What does it mean for us?

Like I said earlier, if you have not come to faith in Jesus Christ, then this verse is an invitation to you to believe. To accept God's love for you and enter into a new kind of life. You have the opportunity to believe for the first time.

But many of you have already taken this step. For you, I'd like to invite you to think about the love of God for the world. For God so loved the world. John says that God took significant action at great cost to himself because he loved the world. That's the thing that I've been struck by the most as I've been studying this gospel. And I think that's what we need to hear. We need to see God loving the world so that we are moved in the same direction. We need to love the world.

When Jews would have read that God loved the world, it wouldn't be what they wanted to hear. The world was the Romans who were oppressing them. The world was the nations that had ruled them for the past six centuries. The world was the people who mocked them and hated them and took advantage of them. Love would not be the first thing that a Jew would think about when he or she thought about the world.

So what about us? How does this sound to us? I know that we've heard it before: a hundred times before. God loves the world. But how does it sound? Do we really think

the people of the world deserve a second chance?

Remember that this gospel talks about the world differently than the apostle Paul does. Paul uses the concept of the world to refer to the sinful and rebellious systems and inclinations of people. We tend to be pretty familiar with the letters of Paul around here. And sometimes I worry that that's the dominant picture of the world that we hold to.

John speaks of the world as the object of God's infinite love. The object of such great love that God goes to radical lengths to sacrifice for its sake. Of course, both perspectives on the world are true. They go hand in hand. But if there's one that we tend to forget around here, it's probably that God loves the world.

We have a lot of attitudes toward the world. Some of us protect ourselves from the world. Some of us judge the world. Some of us try to fix the world. Some of us like the world—we enjoy people. But what does it look like to love the world?

God goes to great lengths to reach out in love toward the world. He takes the initiative. He opens the door. He makes the first move. Jesus becomes man. God sends the Son. He suffers for our sake. All because of the world. All because of us: that's all of us.

How do we love the world? What lengths do we go to for its sake? What are we willing to sacrifice so that people may have eternal life? Our reputations? Our money? Our time and energy?

How would you complete this sentence, "For you so loved the world that you ..."

What does your love for the world inspire you to give?

Come to the Light

We've seen this conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus where Jesus insists that this new thing that is happening is only the work of God. Then we've seen John explain the purpose of Jesus and the great love of God for the world.

But all of this raises a tricky question. If Jesus came so that we didn't have to perish, then what about those who don't believe? If it's possible to be saved, then it's possible to not be saved. We are saved when we believe, but what makes us perish? After describing what Jesus came to do, that's what John addresses in the next verses.

John 3:17-21:

17"For God did not send his Son into the world

to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. 18Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. 19And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. 20For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed. 21But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God."

I'm grateful that our author deals with this topic. I think it's relevant to our culture. In fact, I think it's one of the first questions that people ask. If God so loved the world, why do any have to perish?

So John deals with the issue of condemnation. He says a lot, but he's basically making two points. First, Jesus came to save, not to condemn. Second, people get what they want.

He starts out by saying that Jesus did not come into the world to condemn. He didn't come to judge. The goal of the incarnation is that people would believe in Jesus, not disbelieve. Whenever you offer someone anything, there is the possibility that they turn it down.

One scholar put it really well. He said that Christ came to judge the world,

as little as the sun comes to throw a shadow. [But] judgment like the shadow is the natural consequence of the world's constitution and circumstances.¹

Think about a world covered in darkness. That's how John describes the state of creation because of sin. Darkness covers the earth. But then Jesus comes as the light of the world. The sun rises on a new day. And light fills the world. But not everywhere. In some places, there is still shadow. The rising sun brings light, but where there is light, there are also shadows.

Jesus came to bring light to those living in darkness. That's the first point: he came, not to condemn, but to save. But that gives rise to the second question. If he came to save, why do some people miss out? Put simply, he says that people get what they want.

The light has come into a darkened world. But there are still shadows. And some people prefer the darkness. They don't want to live in the light. John says that they will get what they want.

The world is already in darkness. That's why John says

that he who doesn't believe is condemned already. All of us were living in darkness. When the light comes, if we don't accept it, we will continue living in darkness. The light didn't make us live in darkness. It's because of a choice. John talks seriously about what people preferred.

It's one of the most amazing things to me about God. He won't violate my free will. If I live my whole life without any interest in knowing him, he won't force me to know him for eternity. God will not force you to come to the light.

That's how much God respects the free will of the people that he created. He will not force us into a choice even when that choice is a matter of life and death. That's incredible. Tim Keller puts it this way, "Hell is simply one's freely chosen path going on forever."

God will not force us to come to the light. We must choose it. So this last point about those who preferred the darkness is a caution and a reminder. Light and dark are presented as choices in John's gospel. We must choose to come to the light. Come to the light.

This doesn't just mean believing in Jesus for the first time. This is the constant attitude of the follower of Jesus. The follower of Jesus lives in the light. Nothing is hidden. Nothing is kept in the dark. Christians live in the light.

It's a hard way to live. We all want to hide things about ourselves. I don't really want you to know how I sometimes talk to my kids when I'm tired and frustrated. I'd rather keep that in the dark. I don't really want you to know that there are times when I can feel the choice to give in to anger or hold it back and I let the fire of anger burn brighter. I don't really want you to know the thoughts that go through my head. Living in the dark is easier.

But when I choose to live in the light, I make a statement. By the way I live my life, I proclaim that light is better than darkness. Truth is better than secrets. That makes an impression on the world. In fact, one of the common objections I hear to Christianity is that plenty of Christians seem to prefer the dark. They prefer to live secret lives where what is really going on is hidden.

If the ones who know the light chose the dark, why would the ones who have never experienced it be drawn to it? Living in the light actually helps us love the world.

Conclusion

Our passage began with a timid Jewish ruler coming

to chat with Jesus. Jesus gave him more than he asked for. He told him to be born again. Definitely not what Nicodemus was expecting. He wanted instruction. He got something impossible.

But we heard about the possibility of a second chance. A second chance that God does for us: not something that we manufacture. A second chance that is based on God's great love for all of his creation. And a second chance that can be rejected, but can also be chosen.

All of us need a second chance. We need God to change us and love us and invite us into the light.

But we live in a world that needs one even more. I want to end thinking of us not as recipients of a second chance, but as agents of offering that second chance to others. God loves us. Deeply. But it's time we grow up and remember that God loves others as well. He loves the world. His love motivated him to action. How does that love motivate us?

God offers everyone the chance to be born again. The chance to live in the light. This is a real second chance. Take it for yourself. Give it to others.

NOTES

¹Leon Morris, *Gospel According to John*, (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, Grand Rapids, MI, 1995) p. 205.