

Religion vs Relationship

Sunday Service

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This morning as we prepare to be challenged by the word of God, for those of you that may be guests or visitors, we're just continuing walking through what we know as the Gospel of John. But if we were in a different situation, if we were in an interview context and you were to ask me what are three time periods or three places in history that you wish you could go back to and actually be a part of physically, what we're about to study today is one of those places. I wish that 2,000 years ago I was on the rooftop when a man by the name of Nicodemus and Jesus had the conversation we're going to study today, a conversation that some have said is the most important conversation in the New Testament.

Would you pray with me?

Lord, as we prepare to read a story that is from our perspective 2,000 years old, Lord, I pray that the questions that were asked then will be the questions that we'll ask today. Lord, I pray that the answers that were given will be the answers that we'll listen to today. But more than anything, when I pray that the subject matter that was discussed will be the subject matter that is on our heart and on our mind today and that this might be the day that the questions that we've had, the concerns that we've had, possibly even the doubts that have been in our life would be answered. It is in the name of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.

This morning, I want to encourage you if you have a Bible with you, to open to the Gospel of John 3, and as you turn to John 3, today we're going to deal with the subject matter that is one of the most, I believe, important subject matters obviously to discuss, but has become very personal to me over the years. In fact, for a little over 25 years, a subject matter that I have just studied and thought upon and looked at both from a distance and close by is this concept of religion versus relationship.

Now, religion by definition is something that somebody does or says or attains so as to hopefully win favor of that of which they are doing it for, but a relationship is something that is personal. And there have been a series of events and things in my life that have probably caused me to be a little more sensitive to this. As a young person, I remember there would be times in my life where there would be people that I would see in church on Sunday acting a certain way and in a certain role and position and then during the

week see them in a very unfortunate light. Or maybe it was when I was a college student and there would be young men in my dormitory that would sleep in on Sunday morning but get dressed to look like they went to church so when they went out to eat everybody thought they had gone to church. Or maybe it was when a friend of mine invited me to attend a worship service that we as Baptists traditionally do not celebrate, we know it as Ash Wednesday, and being a friend and wanting to feel a part of things, I remember going down to the front and when I was there the pastor/priest came to me and he looked at me and he said, "You're not one of us, are you?" and moved on to the next. You see, religion is very different than relationship. Religion is something that we do or try to do or stop from doing, but a relationship is real and vibrant and authentic. And today as we turn to John 3, we're going to see a religious man by the name of Nicodemus come into contact with Jesus Christ who desires nothing more for him and for you a real vibrant living relationship.

Seventeen years ago, I had as a forethought of mind, to do my dissertation on the subject matter of religion versus relationship. An individual that we are going to study today was the subject of the context, Nicodemus, and the questions he asked, the answers that were given. Now, those of you who have done any graduate school work, you know that the titles that you give these projects have more words that can be fathomed and so there was something that I wanted to do with John 3 that they did not allow me to do in my dissertation and so today if you do not mind, I want to do something to give us a feel of John 3 that I've never done publicly before but I've always wanted to do and our media team has made it possible. So as we turn to John 3, on the count of three I want to introduce you. Are you ready? 1, 2, 3, to Nick at Night, John 3. I don't know why they wouldn't let me name my dissertation this but it just wasn't professional enough.

John 3:1, it says,

1 There was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews: 2 The same came to Jesus by night, and said unto him, Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God: for no man can do these miracles that you do, except God be with him. 3 Jesus answered and said unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God. 4 Nicodemus said unto him, How can a man be born when he is old? can he enter the second time into his mother's womb, and be born? 5 Jesus answered, Verily, verily, I say to you, Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. 6 That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. 7 Marvel not that I said unto you, You must be born again. 8 The wind blows where it listeth, and you hear the sound thereof, but you cannot tell where it comes, and where it goes: so is every one that is born of the Spirit. 9 Nicodemus answered and said unto him, How can these things be? 10 Jesus answered and said unto him, Are you a master of Israel, and you know not these things?

Those last two verses of the passage we read today, "How can these things be? You, a master of Israel, do you know not these things." Now, before we delve into who the person or the man Nicodemus was and the message that Jesus gave him, I think that it is the setting of this story, the setting of this conversation that needs a little bit of our time, kind of what I call the manner of the conversation. What was the backdrop here? What was happening? So I think it will give us a little color commentary on why Nicodemus asked the questions he did and why did Jesus answer them the way he did.

Now, the first aspect of their conversation is I'm of the belief it was a very punctual conversation. What I mean by that is that as you study the chronology of the life of Jesus, the Gospel of John is very beneficial to us because of the four Passover feasts that Jesus would have celebrated both at the beginning of his ministry and the night before his crucifixion, those four Passover's help mark the chronology of his ministry. Three of them are explicitly mentioned and spoken of in the Gospel of John. In chapter 2 that we studied last week when Jesus comes and overturns the tables and he cast out the money changers, it was at the Passover. The next Passover is going to come into play at the end of chapter 5, the beginning of chapter 6 of John. And the third one that is mentioned is in chapter 12. Obviously, three of the four are mentioned in this Gospel. Now, the reason that is so important is if you study the life and chronology of Jesus' ministry from the first Passover to the second Passover, you will discover there are about 15 to 20 significant events in his life and ministry that take place yet here in the Gospel of John, it's the very next item mentioned. I'm of the belief that when Nicodemus came to Jesus, he did so pretty quickly. I mean, after all, water had been turned into wine and as we're going to see and a moment, this man by the name of Nicodemus, he was a mover and shaker in the community and if he was not at the wedding, he most likely heard what had occurred at the wedding. Here at the Passover which took place in his hometown of Jerusalem, most likely because of his position that he held, he actually would have been in attendance when Jesus overturned the tables or he would have heard about it very shortly thereafter. And I'm of the opinion because of the way the Gospel of John is laid out, that Nicodemus didn't spend a lot of time wasted when it came to this rogue rabbi from Nazareth.

So I believe he came very quickly but I believe he also came with a very specific purpose. Notice what it says: he came at night. Now, many people have seen that phrase "at night" and thought, "Well, maybe Nicodemus was scared." I mean, after all, here's a man as we're going to see in a moment with a lot of power and position and authority and reputation, maybe he was nervous about entertaining this Jesus of Nazareth. Maybe he didn't want people to be aware that he was willing to have a conversation with him. I see it much the opposite because when that phrase "at night" is utilized, it gives me great comfort to know that I would have done really well culturally in Nicodemus' day.

You see, by birth, by nature, I'm a night owl. Now, those of you like me that are night owls, the Lord has a sense of humor and oftentimes has us fall in love with and marry morning people at that time. But being a night owl, I love to stay up late. My wife loves to get up early. But that being said, I just don't know why it is, that's just when I operate best. Well, in Nicodemus' day when it says "at night," that was not a time where people hid things, that was not a time where people did things in secret, in fact, it was much the

opposite, for in his day when it became night, they would make sure that their families were in bed, their businesses were closed down, and the individuals in the community that had reputation, power, authority, the philosophers, the politicians, the theologians of his day, when everything had settled down in the community, they would gather together in that dry yet cool night air of what we know as the Middle East because the way their buildings were structured they would gather on the rooftops and it was at night that they would discuss the important issues of the day. This wasn't a time that Nicodemus was trying to hide from Jesus, this was a time where Nicodemus really wanted to hear from Jesus.

And what is the subject matter? Is he asking him about the tables being turned over? Does he come and say, "How did you really turn that water into wine?" What does he want to talk about? He wants to talk about eternal life. He wants to talk about a subject matter that if you have not thought about it, let me encourage you to do so today, the fact that every one of us is going to breathe our last breath; every one of us at some point in life, and we usually don't know when, we're going to step from this life to the next. And when you're thinking of eternity, there are two questions that naturally come to mind: where am I going and why will I be there? Here is Nicodemus coming to Jesus, this what we called a rogue rabbi at the beginning, and he wants to talk about eternal life and Jesus speaks about being born again and born of the water and the flesh, and many people I think have looked at the character of Nicodemus as being critical. I think you can see him as critical if you think he came kind of underhanded in a sneaky fashion, but he comes curious, wanting to dialogue the thoughts of the day, the philosophies of the day.

Allow me to use tone for the questions that Nicodemus asked to help you understand his purpose. Rather than, "Well, how can a man enter into his mother's womb a second time?" how about, "How can a man enter into his mother's womb a second time?" Rather than, "How can these things be?" how about, "How can these things be?" You see, there is a difference in that tone because the purpose, Nicodemus is not here to criticize. Nicodemus is not coming to do a doctoral oral examination. Nicodemus knows he'll breathe his last breath one day and Nicodemus has lived his entire life doing everything his religion told him to do and he has realized, hopefully like you have, that you can never do enough and he's questioning and he's curious and his purpose is to discuss eternal life.

Now, before we discuss him as a specific person, I want to talk about the precedence of this conversation because it is at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, because we're dealing with an individual of such great influence and such curiosity, what you see in the life of Jesus is very soon thereafter the crowds that come to hear Jesus are massive in number. Everywhere he goes, in fact, there are times where he has to go out into the boat and teach because there is not enough room on the shore. There is a time where he multiplies the bread and the fish and if you include the women and children and everybody that was there, 20-25,000 people, everywhere Jesus showed up, the crowds were massive. Now, up to this point, sure, he's turned water into wine. That's pretty significant but as we studied a couple of weeks ago, only the servants and the disciples knew about that. Sure, he overturned the tables and that would have been a significant event that I'm sure lots of

people would have been aware of, but that doesn't give credence to this incredible massive crowd that just began to gather when Jesus teaches.

But Nicodemus was unlike any other person. His prosperity, his position, as we're going to see in a moment, was immense. You see, when they would gather at night, it wasn't just Nicodemus and Jesus, their entourage, their disciples, those who followed them, just like Jesus had his, would have been around Nicodemus. This conversation was not in isolation. There would have been a large gathering on that rooftop and can you imagine if it would have happened in our context today. As the conversation is taking place, people would have texted and posted and Instagramed, "Nicodemus doesn't know the answer. This man who we've all been listening to, this man, he's actually asking Jesus questions." Not the reverse. Nicodemus had so much impact and influence in his culture that the very fact that he would entertain a conversation with Jesus, much less have it in the way it did, would have caused a social stir.

You know, a very similar event happened in our context in 1949. You may not be aware of it but it changed your culture. It changed your life. In fact, it changed churches in America. In 1949, we were coming out of what we know as World War II, we were about to enter what we know as Korea. It was a time of political, economic, fiscal conflict. People were struggling from all angles but there was a man much like Nicodemus though not religious, who had a lot of power and a lot of influence and a lot of authority. His name was William Randolph Hearst. He had a newspaper empire. Those of you who are not quite my age, he was the Mark Zuckerberg of his day. Does that communicate? When it came to communication, he had a corner on the market.

William Randolph Hearst didn't care for the things of God, never to our knowledge was faithful in any type of religious expression at all, but he had a couple of children who were interested and in 1949, some of his children had been going to downtown Los Angeles. There is a large tent that had been put up and a little-known man from North Carolina by the name of Billy Graham was preaching. Just a guy from the backside of North Carolina and as he preached night after night and as things began to kind of roll with momentum, Hearst's children asked him to come one night. He came very skeptical. He came very much questioning why he would go. But that night Billy Graham, as he did not do much but he did occasionally, he preached on the consequences and effects of sin. I mean, his basic message was: we have all sinned, Jesus is the answer. That was his message but that night as an illustration for sin, as an illustration for the ramifications of what sin does in our life, he used the illustration of communism, that which enslaves people, that which allows people to be in bondage in their life. He did not know that Hearst was in attendance. Hearst was an avid vocal anti-Communist.

Well, that perked his ears and the next day William Randolph Hearst sent one of the most famous instant messages in all the world and that was called a telegraph then but nonetheless he sent it with two words: push Graham. Every major newspaper in America, their boss, their CEO told them to push this evangelist from North Carolina and a little-known preacher who a few people knew but not many, became a cultural sensation overnight.

You see the same thing in the life of Jesus. He goes from this individual from Nazareth who, yes, is doing miracles and great teachings, to all of a sudden everybody is talking about him, everybody is curious. How did that happen? Because Nicodemus was confounded. Nicodemus could not answer the questions. In fact, Nicodemus ends his conversation by saying, "How can these things be?" I believe it would have caused any and all that were in attendance that day to begin to talk about who is this Jesus guy and everybody wanted to have the same conversation with Jesus that Nicodemus had had.

Now, let's talk about Nicodemus the man. Who was this guy who comes to Jesus? Well, the first thing we need to understand is he was a very prosperous individual. This guy was loaded. He had money. In fact, later on in John 19 when Jesus is actually buried, we see Nicodemus along with Joseph of Arimathea actually place the body of Jesus in the empty tomb. Now, Joseph of Arimathea provided the tomb of which no one had ever utilized but Nicodemus is the one who brought the ointment for the preparation of the body. The reason that is so significant is that that ointment would have been about the annual salary of an average individual in this culture. So imagine today that just on a whim or at a second thought, you can go and take the average income of someone in our context and you can spend it without any return coming.

He was a man of great wealth. In fact, if you'll allow me for a moment, let me get into the academic world for just a few moments. What I'm about to share with you is not written in stone. We cannot prove it beyond a shadow of a doubt but we're pretty conclusive here. We think we actually know what Nicodemus' full name was. All right, his name was Nicodemus ben Gurion. Now, I know what some of you are thinking. "Why does that matter?" If you've ever flown to Israel, you know why it matters. You land at the ben Gurion Airport. Now, you know that your family has got money if 2,000 years later they are naming airports after him. I mean, this guy was so wealthy that through 1,900 years of a dispersion and the Holocaust, his family name is still of great national prominence. A man who had all the money in the world.

Secondly, he is a man of position. Notice that when Jesus communicates with him, they are using formal titles here and they're going back and forth. Nicodemus was a Pharisee. Now, I know we give Pharisees a hard time for their legalism and religiosity as we're discussing today but Pharisees at least believed in the afterlife, they at least understood that when we breathe our last breath there is something there. But he wasn't just a Pharisee, in fact, he was a member of the Sanhedrin. In John 7, he shows up and he's a part of a meeting of these individuals, 70 men, 35 Sadducees, 35 Pharisees, the high priest would officiate them. Why is this important to us? Because this wasn't just a wealthy man, this was a man who had money and he had position. Wherever he went, people would listen. He was the E. F. Hutton of his day. When he spoke, people would listen. He was a man of position. He could make you or he could break you.

So an individual like this and with the authority that he possessed, he was the one that everybody wanted their children to get to know because he could give them a job and he could make sure their life would be secure. He had great position but he was also a man

of great proficiency. I want you to look at the end of the passage that we read today. When Nicodemus asked this question in verse 9, "How can these things be?" Jesus responds with an interesting statement, he says, "How can you, the master of Israel, not know these things?" Now, the reason that that is important is because the term "master of Israel" is found nowhere else in your Bible. It is found nowhere else in history. In fact, I will say I don't think you can find a shred of evidence that anybody anywhere ever used this title for anybody. So why would Jesus call Nicodemus something that no other person had ever had? Now, understand Jesus is God. He knows our hearts. He knows more about us than anybody. Let me tell you what I believe Jesus is doing. When Nicodemus says, "How can these things be?" and Jesus says, "You're the master of Israel, how do you not get these things?" here's what I think Jesus is saying. I think he's saying, "Nicodemus, you are the leading theologian of the day and you don't get it?" Proficiency. You know, one of the struggles Nicodemus had was the fact that he knew so much about religion but he knew so little about relationship. And we see a man who had all the knowledge, all the education, all the power, all the authority, and all the money in the world, and he didn't know where he would spend eternity. He didn't know that when he breathed his last breath, where he would be and why.

So what is the message that Jesus gives him? What is the message for us when we contemplate eternity? What is the message for us when we think about this difference between religion and relationship? Well, the first thing that we see in Jesus' message: it's very very very personal. Notice, Jesus doesn't say humanity must be born again. In fact, later we'll study this next week in verse 16, he says, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son that whosoever believeth in him should not perish but have everlasting life," but to Nicodemus he says, "You must be born again." The first difference between religion and relationship: relationship is personal, religion is societal. He says, "You must be born again. You, Nicodemus, will face God one day. You, Nicodemus, will step out of this life into the next and you must be born again."

It is very reminiscent of later on in the life of Jesus, Matthew 16. Jesus is there at Caesarea Philippi, it's all the religions of the world, this is the eclectic, I mean, this would've been, Caesarea Philippi in Jesus' day was the coexist hang out, is what it was. It was every known religion and Jesus asked this question, "Who do men say that I am?" You know the answer. The apostles say, "Well, some think you're Jeremiah, some think you're Elijah, some think you're a good prophet, some even think you're even John the Baptist." Remember what Jesus asked? "Who do you say that I am?" And a man whom we know as Simon Peter stood up and said, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." To which Jesus replied, "Flesh and blood has not revealed this to you but my Father has revealed it to you."

You see, relationship is personal and Jesus said, "You must be born again." But Jesus also gave us insight into the process. "You must be born again." He didn't say it would be a good idea or if you have time or if there is nothing else better to do. What he was declaring to Nicodemus is that a man who had all the knowledge and education, money and authority in the world, that he needed forgiveness and salvation. And I've got news

for you: if Nicodemus needs to be saved, so do you. If Nicodemus needs Jesus, so do you.

He said, "You must," what does he say? "Be born again." Now, Nicodemus is brighter than your average lightbulb, so to speak, because he asks, "How can I get into my mother's womb?" At least Nicodemus understood what Jesus was conveying, that it wasn't a series of checking off boxes, it wasn't about crossing t's and dotting i's and saying, "Well, I did this and I gave this and I went here and I sacrificed there." No, it's about a new beginning. It's about starting over. It's about becoming a new person and a new creation. "You must be born again."

And Jesus illustrates, he says, "That which is flesh is flesh and that which is of Spirit is spirit. You must be born both of water and of spirit." You know, it's been collectively said, kind of a commentary on this passage, that if you are born once, you'll die twice, but if you are born twice, you only die once. And what Jesus was commuting very clearly to Nicodemus, his problem wasn't that he needed to do more stuff, his problem wasn't that he needed to stop some stuff, his issue was he needed a new beginning. He needed a new birth. All of the endeavors, all of the good stuff, all of the things that he had done his entire life would never measure up to attain the favor of God and the process was, "You must be born again."

Here's the problem: you are Nicodemus. You are Nicodemus. I am Nicodemus. The whole world is Nicodemus because we fall into the same traps. Believe it or not, you have the same struggles when it comes to relationship versus religion that Nicodemus did. Your first struggle, humanity's first struggle is prosperity. I know what some of you are thinking, "Well, I'm not a very prosperous person. I'm just trying to get by." Well, in the world economics and those that are smarter than I am have figured this out, that if you make about \$12-15,000 a year in total income, you're in the top 1% of the world's economic system. You see, what happens in our culture is we get so used to what's happening around us and it feels so good to us, we just want more of what we already have.

You know, this week I had one of those conversations with one of my children. I didn't spur it on. I didn't try to bring it up. It just, sometimes these conversations just come up with your kids and I don't know if it's because throughout the years being a pastor or all the "Ask Jeff" that I've done, but just one day one of my children this week said, "Dad, can I ask you a question?" I said, "Sure, why not?" He said, "Why is it that people always ask you questions about heaven?" He said, "They are always asking about how big is a mansion going to be? How big is the new Jerusalem going to be? Am I going to be married or am I not going to be married? Am I going to be tall? Am I going to be short? Is there going to be this? Is there going to be that?" He said, "Everybody asks all these questions about heaven." I said, "Well, yeah, because they are concerned." To which he responded, brilliant theology, he said, "Dad, it just seems to me that most people want heaven to be earth on steroids." Let that resonate. Why? Because most of us have created our own little heaven on earth and we are so distracted by what we've got or what we desire to attain that we don't give serious consideration to what happens next.

Nicodemus had everything he ever wanted to purchase or buy and once he had attained it, he realized, "I need to be thinking about what is next." But the second issue that Nicodemus struggled with is the same one you do, it's called position. You say, "What do you mean, I struggle with position?" Don't think in terms of titles or degrees behind your name, think of it in terms of this: your reputation. How we think that people perceive us or what they think about us. I've had more conversations with more people through the years who were fearful of making a decision for Jesus not because they didn't know they needed to but they were nervous or scared or fearful what somebody else might think about them if they did.

Now, for six years of my life I had the privilege of traveling around in evangelism. Let me tell you the beauty of being an evangelist: you come into a context like this, you preach your heart out and then you get to leave. You say, "Bye, see you later." It's great, not because I don't love you but because you can say what you need to say and not have any ramifications afterwards, but in those contexts, let me tell you what also happens. I don't know what it is about humanity but we just feel a little more free to respond. I cannot tell you how many times there were people both young and old who had a reputation, who had an image, who had something about their life that was with standing in the community of "faith" that had been holding onto the pew, had been arguing and struggling with God for years and they finally just let go and said, "Okay, I need to be saved. I've been religious, I now need a relationship." You see, religion is so easy to get trapped into. Show up to the right place at the right time and do the right thing and everybody thinks you're good. Relationship is real and what Nicodemus had was the ultimate religious experience. He had never missed a Passover. He had never offered a bad sacrifice. And yet at the same time he said, "But what about when I breathe my last breath because this isn't going to do it?" Jesus said, "You must be born again."

Ah, but there is one last problem that Nicodemus had that you have too. It's called proficiency. You know so much about religion that you couldn't possibly think that it could be another way. I show up to the right place, I do the right thing, I say the right stuff, I go to the right places, I don't go to the wrong places and all of a sudden everything just works out. You see, sometimes our incredible knowledge and familiarity with something is to our own self-destruction. In our culture, so many of us are so familiar with the things of religious activity and endeavor that oftentimes we miss Jesus in the midst of religion. So when you look at Nicodemus and you say, "How could a person who knew so much, who had so much authority and had so much money, how could he miss it?" Let me reverse the question: how could you who have so much and have such reputation and have so much knowledge, how could you miss it as well? The reason we miss it more often than not is we get trapped in religion and not relationship. It's not about how much you can do or what you can do, but it's who you know. I remember years ago when my parents dropped me off as a freshman in college, one of the statements that my dad said to me, he said, "Son, it's not the grades you make, it's going to be the hands you shake." What he meant by that is it's not what you know, it's who you know.

I want to conclude today with this last illustration. Years ago, a very prominent evangelism strategy came to the forefront, one of which I kind of, I guess my fervor for evangelism started, it's called evangelism explosion. If you're not familiar with it, basically there are some questions that you ask somebody when it comes to sharing your faith and one of the questions you ask is this: if you were to die today and if you were to stand before God and he asked you the question, "Why should I allow you to enter into my heaven?" what would you say? Can I give you a hint? The answer is not, "I'm a Baptist." It doesn't work. The answer is not, "Oh, I don't just give 10%, I give more than that. I've been on 14 mission trips. That ought to qualify me." Did you know that one time I spoke to a lady, she was a little somewhat elderly, she was of retirement age, I asked her that question once and do you know what her answer to me was? She said, "I volunteered in Boy Scouts for 21 years. If that doesn't get you there, nothing will." The commonality of all those responses is none of them have to do with Jesus, they all have to do with doing something. Nicodemus had done everything religious and he realized he didn't have a relationship. Maybe today you realize you are a Nicodemus as well.

Let's pray.

With our heads bowed and our eyes closed, you know, maybe today you are that person, maybe today you find yourself in church for the first time or maybe you find yourself in church for the 10,000th time and you realize today that you've got religion but you don't have relationship. Let me encourage you today to have a serious serious conversation with God. You don't have to say it out loud, you don't have to even say the same words that I would say but maybe your conversation would go a little something like this. "God, I realize today that you know me better than I even know myself. God, you know the things I have tried to do to win your favor and you know the things I've tried to avoid to make you pleased with me but I understand today that it's not about a series of do's and don'ts, it's supposed to be about a relationship with Jesus Christ. And I understand today for the first time that Jesus really loved me enough to come for me, that he lived for me, he went to the cross for me, and he rose from the dead so that I could be forgiven and saved and not based on what I do or don't do, but based on what Jesus alone has done on my behalf. So God, I come today and all I desire is a new birth. All I desire is a new beginning. All I desire is to become a new creation. And I know that that doesn't come by doing or not doing something, it only comes by Jesus. So I'm asking you to forgive me and I'm asking you to save me the best way I know how and, God, I just want to live my life for you."

Maybe you're that person today, if so, if you had that conversation with God, we'd love to have a conversation with you. We'd love the opportunity just to spend a few moments talking with you in just a few moments. Or maybe there are other decisions, maybe you're like someone who has made that profession but has never followed in baptism. Or maybe you've decided this is the church that you or your family need to be a part of or maybe anything else. We would just love the privilege to celebrate with you what God has done in your life this day.

Lord, as we come to this time of invitation, thank you that you are a God of second chances. Thank you that much like Nicodemus, that you don't give up on us but you engage us and you converse with us, and more than anything, you just want us to have a relationship with you. So God, I pray that whatever our struggle, whatever our problem, whatever the voices are that we're hearing in the background, that you would eliminate and eradicate those and it would be the call of your Holy Spirit would be the only thing we hear in this moment. It is in the name of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.

I'm going to ask you to stand with me. Any decision you have, if you'll come, I would love the privilege of talking with you.