

# The Gospel Distilled

## *Selected Scriptures*

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*For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.*

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John 3:16 is likely the Bible's most well-known verse. Most Sunday school children can quote it verbatim before they learn to read or write. It shows up on t-shirts, hats, and other gear like a sports logo or political slogan. Even staunch anti-church members of the secular public can communicate the gist of this familiar verse.

Sadly, while most people have heard John 3:16, they don't know John 3. The verse itself may have permeated the culture, but it has been stripped of its vital context.

The third chapter of John's gospel records the clandestine conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus the Pharisee. Jesus told him that he could never see the kingdom of God unless he was born again (John 3:3), that there was nothing he could do to make that happen (John 3:5), and that he needed to be regenerated by the Holy Spirit (John 3:5) if he was to ever inherit eternal life.

Nicodemus's response was utter astonishment: "*How can these things be?*" (John 3:9). It was not that he didn't understand what Jesus was saying. It seems he got the message plainly enough. But it overthrew his deepest convictions and left him virtually speechless. That question is the last thing we hear from Nicodemus in the narrative of John 3. He had nothing further to say.

The focus of the chapter then turns exclusively to Jesus, who delivers one of His most important discourses ever—an extended lesson on gospel truth. As Nicodemus listened in total silence, Jesus proceeded to draw a clear contrast between believers and unbelievers, the humble and the hypocrites, the truly reborn and the merely religious. And it was all too clear in His judgment that the Pharisees - Nicodemus included - were on the wrong side of that divide.

John 3:11–21 is rich enough that we could devote weeks to unpacking it - and that still wouldn't begin to plumb its depths. But for the sake of this study we'll just consider some obvious ways that Jesus' words upend the hopes of those expecting their piety and works to merit salvation.

## ***Self-Deceived Shepherds***

First, notice that Jesus directly implicated Nicodemus as an unbeliever:

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*“Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know and testify of what we have seen, and you do not accept our testimony. If I told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things?”*  
*(John 3:11–12, emphasis added).*

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To postmodern ears, that sounds extraordinarily harsh. Contemporary evangelicals typically bristle at the thought of challenging anyone's profession of faith. For some, the thought of being perceived as harsh or negative is more odious than actually being undiscerning. That's why the church is overrun with shallow celebrities and false teachers whose doctrine and lifestyle show no real fruit of salvation. People like that have flourished and even begun to dominate the non-Christian public's perception of what Christianity is, mainly because more sound and solid evangelical leaders are reluctant to plainly denounce them as charlatans.

Nicodemus's ignorance about his need for regeneration was proof of his unbelief. He had studied the Old Testament in an academic way, and from the standpoint of his fellow Pharisees, he was one of the top experts on the subject. But he had never bothered to apply its teaching to his own heart, and therefore Jesus was perfectly blunt with him: *“You do not believe.”*

## ***No Spiritual Privileges***

Second, don't miss the point of the Old Testament allusion Jesus makes in verses 14–15: *“As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up; so that*

*whoever believes will in Him have eternal life.*” The reference is to an incident that occurred during Israel’s wandering in the wilderness during the Exodus. Numbers 21 records that the people grew discouraged; they began to despise the manna God provided daily for their sustenance, and in frustration they rebelled against both God and Moses.

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*“The people spoke against God and Moses, ‘Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we loathe this miserable food’” (Numbers 21:5).*

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God unleashed a plague of poisonous snakes into the camp, *“and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died”* (Numbers 21:6). In response, the people repented and begged Moses to intercede with the Lord on their behalf. The Lord commanded Moses to make a bronze serpent, set it on a pole in the midst of the camp, and tell the people *“that everyone who is bitten, when he looks at it, he will live”* (Numbers 21:8). The whole story was an illustration of justification by faith, and that was the point Jesus was making here.

But consider the difficulty of that analogy from Nicodemus’s perspective. As a ruler of Israel, he had always thought of himself as in the role of Moses. Jesus Himself said, *“The scribes and the Pharisees have seated themselves in the chair of Moses”* (Matthew 23:2). But the analogy suggested that Nicodemus needed to see himself in the place of the sinning Israelites. Even the Old Testament imagery Jesus used was a contradiction of the Pharisees’ spiritual self-image. To a casual observer - especially to anyone trained in the rules of postmodern discourse and the canons of political correctness - it might seem as if Jesus was deliberately trying to provoke Nicodemus, smacking him hard again and again, demeaning his pharisaical pride in every conceivable way. In reality, Jesus was not being mean-spirited, but precisely the opposite. Nicodemus needed to recognize his spiritual poverty and see his need for a Savior. And Jesus cared more for the truth than about how Nicodemus felt about it.

Before Nicodemus could receive any help from Jesus, he needed to see how desperate his situation was. *“It is not those who are healthy who need a physician, but those who are sick”* (Matthew 9:12). And when a patient has a life-threatening illness that urgently needs treatment, the physician needs to give him the bad news candidly. That was the case with Nicodemus.

## ***Compassionate Confrontation***

So notice, third, the way Jesus ended His discourse on the gospel by bringing the emphasis right back to the problem of human depravity and God’s condemnation of unbelievers:

He who believes in Him is not judged; he who does not believe has been judged already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. This is the judgment, that the Light has come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the Light, for their deeds were evil. For everyone who does evil hates the Light, and does not come to the Light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. But he who practices the truth comes to the Light, so that his deeds may be manifested as having been wrought in God. (John 3:18–21)

This, too, is contrary to most contemporary ideas about how to do personal evangelism. Today’s evangelicals generally think if we offend someone by pressing the claims of the gospel too firmly or too plainly, we’ve done something terribly wrong. The reality is quite the opposite: if you think the gospel can be proclaimed in a way that is always appealing and never upsetting to unbelievers, you have the wrong idea about what the gospel message says.

That is why Jesus left the issue with Nicodemus on a note of condemnation. John 3:16, of course, is famous for its stress on the love of God and the giving of Christ so that *“whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.”* That’s the central truth of the gospel message and the promise that makes it good news. But it is not good news for those who remain in unbelief. Therefore Jesus’ conversation with Nicodemus ended on a harsh and sobering note about the severe condemnation that rests on all unbelievers and hypocrites. Since Jesus had already implicated Nicodemus in verse 12 with the words *“you do not believe,”* this

was a very direct and personal challenge aimed squarely at him and the pharisaical belief system he represented.

## *An Encouraging Epilogue*

As a matter of fact, Jesus' discourse on the gospel in John 3 ends on such a negative note that if this were the only place we encounter Nicodemus in all of Scripture, we might conclude that he left without saying any more and remained in unbelief all his life.

However, there is every reason to conclude that Nicodemus, who originally came to Jesus under cover of darkness, was eventually drawn to the true Light and became a genuine believer. The last time we meet Nicodemus in Scripture is in John 19:39, where he and Joseph of Arimathea hastily prepared the Savior's body for burial. It was an act that could well have cost him everything, at the very moment when the rest of the Sanhedrin had whipped public fury against Jesus into a murderous rage. He clearly had become a different man than he was when he first approached Jesus as an unbelieving, inquiring Pharisee.

Nicodemus reminds us that evangelistic encounters should never be evaluated by how the conversation ends. If we are biblically faithful in sowing the gospel, we can confidently leave the not-yet-converted sinner in the sovereign hands of God. Only He can regenerate them, and we know that nothing can stop Him from gathering His sheep into His fold (John 10:27–30).

Christmas invariably presents us with inquirers like Nicodemus. The normal hostility of unbelief often gives way to open curiosity as we gather around the scene of Christ's birth. May we follow Christ's example and firmly, yet graciously, call unbelieving family and friends to repentance and saving faith in Him!