
Spiritual Formation Part 3

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Barriers to Knowing Christ Part 1

John 3: 1-21

GOD AS OUR SAVIOR

John 3-5; 14-15 Barriers??

What God Desires

Verses

Others ↑ ← ← ME → →↓ Self

Our Environment and Experiences

The first encounter we will look at is in John 3: 1-21. This passage contains the quintessential slogan, catchphrase, or motto to what it means to be an Evangelical Christian. These precious words of Jesus in the sixteenth verse contain both the heart and the controversy of the gospel; “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.” This is a passage that tells us of God’s ultimate love, yet is the focal point for contention and strife for the rest of the world.

The term, *born again*, has become very popular in American culture in the past three decades, and is even a slang term or colloquialism to describe so many different kinds of events that have nothing to do with the way the New Testament uses it. I have heard it describe the successful rebirth of basketball or football teams, a renewal of a marriage, and revitalized a few years back in the old town of Pasadena, where I live. And, I have heard this term used as a “put down” to a person in the media who has made a commitment to Christ!

This term, *born again*, is the heart of God’s love for us. Yet, in so many ways, people seek to cheapen it or use it as a byword to attack someone who has the Lord as the Ruler of their own heart and will. People, in general, do not like anything taking the place of their will; they want to rule themselves as if their will is their own, as if it belongs to no one else, not even God. After all, this is a part of freedom—of being an American, as some people would say. The American Congress has, in recent months, used the term, being *born again*, to denounce some of President Bush’s appointments to the federal court because they are Christians. They fear these would make decisions based

on their faith and not from the court. Or, consider the sensational attacks last year from the Western World's media to bring down anybody in political power who happened to be a Christian. This is the first barrier to encountering Christ we have to go through. Fortunately for us, we do not do this alone; God sends His Spirit to penetrate that barrier. However, we still must cross it by faith.

Nicodemus came face to face with the ultimate barrier, to go from His fallen, sinful self to being born again and accepting God's grace. Nicodemus was a Pharisee and a ruler of the Jews. He was a member of the Sanhedrin, the council of seventy men who ran the religious affairs of the Jewish nation, and who had religious authority over any Jew anywhere in the world. We need to understand the mindset of the typical Pharisee. If ever there was a group in church history that could be called "religious fanatics," it was the Pharisees. They were a very select group from just a few to as many as 6,000 of them. They would make solemn vows in public and devote every moment of their entire life to obeying the Law of God as a way of pleasing God. The Pharisees took the Ten Commandments, and how we come before God in worshipping the one, true God, very, very seriously. What is wrong with that? The Law includes the many, many extra laws they made up for themselves and forced upon others, thus clouding people from follow the one, true God. And, the Pharisees were prideful and pretentious; many of their shows were just that—shows and not from the heart. That is why Jesus attacked them so forcibly. God hates fake pretension and pious frauds.

The Pharisees were very zealous about not having idols, honoring father and mother, refraining from lying, adultery, and combating the 600+ various, and other sins. They seemed to have sincere hearts, seeking to follow God, but, for the most part, it was all just a show. The Pharisees were also the Taliban of their day, demanding strict adherence of the Law down to every last conceivable detail, with the exception they were not terrorists nor were violent. However, they ruled with an iron glove. In their zeal, they put so many rules and regulations on how to seek God in addition to the Law, that the true law and how to reach God was covered and blinded by traditions and made up rules and regulations. So, the average Jew on the street was blinded from freely worshipping and seeking their God. Instead, they had hundreds of laws to follow. These were the rules they used to confront Jesus.

To add more clouding to God's truth, the Pharisees had the scribes transcribe their new laws, called the *Mishnah*. The Jews still have this today, and it is one of their main commentaries. The other main book, besides the Torah, which is the first five books of the Old Testament, is the Talmud, which is made up of commentaries on the Mishnah. For example, in the Talmud there are 156 pages devoted just to the observing of the Sabbath as it applied to life! So, the Jews placed traditions and rules on top of traditions and rules, covering the original rules of God with their own roadblocks of reasoning and self-proclaimed devotions. Many Christians do this too; we can place so much emphasis on tradition that we forget what it is, and who it is we are to worship and do church for. We become blinded by our traditions and made up rules and regulations, so we never see beyond that barrier to Christ's real, saving grace. We can see how serious the Pharisees were about keeping the Law. They wrote down all of the laws,

such as the Ten Commandments, then applied layers and layers of duties and commentaries over them, so that the original meaning became lost over centuries of doing this. Thus, when a rabbi wanted to speak on a topic or give a sermon, they went to the Talmud as their first, and sometimes only, prime source.

We have similar ways of thinking and systems today. One of my favorites is called *case law*. This is the set of court rulings over the past two hundred years that American lawyers will use to argue and defend their positions in the courtroom and in arbitrations. The more case laws you can find to support and back up your position, the more likely the judge will have no choice than to rule in your favor, lest their ruling be overturned by a higher court. This would be a terrible thing to happen to a judge professionally. Yet, in this country, we have the Constitution, the Bill of Rights, and the various Amendments as the definitive law of our country. However, most law students will never actually read the original constitution or the Bill of Rights; they only study the case laws that come from them, period. A lawyer cannot even bring up the constitution in most courtrooms, unless he wants his case to be thrown out, or be held in contempt. I am not making this up. Just ask a lawyer, as I did in preparing this illustration. It is this mindset that sets up the law as a system unconcerned with real truth and justice. The Pharisees were unconcerned with real Biblical Truth or how to know God and make His truth known; they were only concerned with their regulations.

So, carefully consider any barriers in your thinking that blocks you from the core truth and reality of life: "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."

Discovery Questions

Read John 3:1-21 and make some observations:

1. What do you think and feel when someone turns on the light or makes a loud noise while you are sleeping, about being interrupted? Consider how the Spirit interrupts us.
2. Do you have traditions or presumptions that get in your way of growing in Christ? How so? What can you do about it?
3. What is a good tradition verses a bad one? How can you discern?
4. What are your thoughts about Nicodemus?
5. What barriers do we place in the way of knowing Christ as our Lord?
6. Maybe this is not a problem, but what perceptions and presumptions do you have that keep you from growth in sanctification?
 - a. What holds you back?

- b. Traditions or habits?
- c. Presumptions or misguided beliefs?

What about you? Do you yearn for the lights to stay off; do you just acknowledge Jesus as a great teacher and founder of a religion, not wanting to be bothered with Him outside of Sunday morning?

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