

Leader's Guide
Sports in Focus Guide Three

Below are some additional insights for
John 3:1-36
Source for answers: MacArthur New Testament Commentary

KEYS to the PASSAGE:

Clearly, an emphasis on abandoning self and submitting to Him permeated Jesus' evangelistic approach, both in His public ministry and in His private conversations. John 3:1–10 recounts one of those private interactions, a nighttime meeting with the prominent Pharisee Nicodemus. Throughout their conversation, Jesus refused to soften the truth simply to gain the approval of this influential religious leader. Instead, He spoke with clarity and precision—confronting Nicodemus's misconceptions and telling him exactly what he needed to hear. Christ's dialogue with Nicodemus can be discussed under three headings: Nicodemus' inquiry of Jesus, Jesus' insight into Nicodemus, and Jesus' indictment of Nicodemus.

1. What facts from Nicodemus' encounter with Jesus lead you to believe that he was open to the truth about Jesus?

By using the respectful term Rabbi, Nicodemus, although a member of the Sanhedrin and an eminent teacher (v. 10), addressed Jesus as an equal. He did not share the suspicion and hostility that many of his fellow religious leaders had toward Christ (cf. 7:15, 47–52). Nicodemus, and others like him (cf. the plural, we know), accepted that Jesus had come from God as a teacher—even though He had not received proper rabbinic training (7:15). As Nicodemus acknowledged, “No one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him.” Like the people in the previous section (2:23), he was impressed with and believed that the undeniable power manifested in Jesus' miracles was divine. Undoubtedly, he was also aware of John the Baptist's testimony about Christ. That, coupled with the evidence of them, may have caused Nicodemus to wonder if Jesus was the Messiah

Nicodemus was a member of the elite religious party the Pharisees. Their name probably derives from a Hebrew verb meaning “to separate”; they were the “separated ones” in the sense of being zealous for the Mosaic law (and their own oral traditions, which they added to it [cf. Matt. 15:2–6; Mark 7:8–13]). The Pharisees originated during the intertestamental period, likely as an offshoot of the Hasidim (“pious ones”), who opposed the Hellenizing of Jewish culture under the wicked Seleucid king Antiochus Epiphanes. Unlike their archrivals the Sadducees, who tended to be wealthy priests or Levites, the Pharisees generally came from the middle class. Therefore, though few in number (there were about 6,000 at the time of Herod the Great, according to the first-century Jewish historian Josephus), they had great influence with the common people (though, ironically, the Pharisees often viewed some with contempt [cf. 7:49]). Despite being the minority party, their popularity with the people gave them significant influence in the Sanhedrin (cf. Acts 5:34–40).

2. Jesus told Nicodemus, “You must be born again.” What does this mean? Explain it in your own words.

Born again. The phrase lit. means “born from above.” Jesus answered a question that Nicodemus does not even ask. He read Nicodemus' heart and came to the very core of his problem, i.e., the need for spiritual transformation or regeneration produced by the Holy Spirit. New birth is an act of God whereby eternal life is imparted to the believer (2Co 5:17; Tit 3:5; 1Pe 1:3; 1Jn 2:29; 3:9; 4:7; 5:1, 4, 18).

3. Read Ezekiel 36:25-28. How does this message compare with what Jesus told Nicodemus?

I will cleanse you. Along with the physical reality of a return to the Land, God pledged spiritual renewal: 1) cleansing from sin; 2) a new heart of the New Covenant (cf. Jer 31:31–34); 3) a new spirit or disposition inclined to worship Him; and 4) His Spirit dwelling in them, enabling them to walk in obedience to His word. This has not happened, because Israel has not trusted Jesus Christ as Messiah and Savior, but it will before the kingdom of Messiah (cf. Zec 12–14; Ro 11:25–27; Rev 11:13).

4. Describe the events that led to your being “born again.” What people or circumstances did God use?

You might want to contrast the examples of true faith with these comments regarding the Pharisees. Also, remember that FCA is NOT just about providing “good advice.” Instead, we must always put first the “good news” before any good advice. Otherwise, our athletes will replace true religion with behavior modification and ritual.

The Pharisees became ritualized and external. Having unchanged hearts, they would only replace true religion with mere behavior modification and ritual. In response to their pseudo-spirituality, Jesus scathingly pointed out: “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cummin, and have neglected the weightier provisions of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness; but these are the things you should have done without neglecting the others” (Matt. 23:23; cf. 6:1–5; 9:14; 12:2; Luke 11:38–39). Even worse, the wide gap between their teaching and their practice led to gross hypocrisy, which both Jesus (e.g., Matt. 23:2–3) and, surprisingly, the Talmud (which lists seven classes of Pharisees, six of which are hypocritical) denounced. As a result, despite their zeal for God’s law, they were “blind guides of the blind” (Matt. 15:14), who made their proselytes doubly worthy of the hell to which they themselves were headed (Matt. 23:15). Even if they had not been hypocrites, keeping the law could never have saved them, “because by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified” (Rom. 3:20; cf. 3:28; Gal. 2:16; 3:11, 24; 5:4)—a truth that the zealous Pharisee Saul of Tarsus eventually discovered (Phil. 3:4–11).

5. What practical insights into evangelism can you glean from Jesus’ encounter with Nicodemus?

Throughout their conversation, Jesus refused to soften the truth simply to gain the approval of this influential religious leader. Instead, He spoke with clarity and precision—confronting Nicodemus’s misconceptions and telling him exactly what he needed to hear. Christ’s dialogue with Nicodemus can be discussed under three headings: Nicodemus’ inquiry of Jesus, Jesus’ insight into Nicodemus, and Jesus’ indictment of Nicodemus.

“Everybody talkin’ about heaven ain’t goin’ there.” This line, from an old spiritual, accurately describes many in the church. Outwardly they identify with Christ, but inwardly they have never been genuinely converted. Because they cling to a false profession, they fool themselves into thinking they are on the narrow path leading to life, when in reality they are on the broad road that leads to destruction. To make matters worse, their self-deception is often reinforced by well-meaning but undiscerning Christians who naively embrace them as true believers. Such confusion stems from the watered-down pseudo-gospels that are propagated from far too many pulpits. Cheap grace, market-driven ministry, emotionalism, subjectivism, and an indiscriminate inclusivism have all infiltrated the church with devastating consequences. As a result, almost any profession of faith is affirmed as genuine—even from

those whose lives manifest no signs of true fruit (e.g., Luke 6:43–44). For many, no one’s faith is to be questioned. Meanwhile, key New Testament passages regarding the danger of false faith (e.g., James 2:14–26) and the need for self-examination (e.g., 2 Cor. 13:5) go unheeded.

The ministry of our Lord provides a stark contrast to the contemporary evangelical confusion. Christ was not interested in shallow responses or quick pseudo-conversions. He refused to compromise the truth or give anyone false hope. Instead of making it easy for people to believe, Jesus turned away more prospects than He received. The rich young ruler, for example, eagerly sought out Jesus and asked Him sincerely, “Teacher, what good thing shall I do that I may obtain eternal life?” (Matt. 19:16). Yet the Bible says that he went away grieving and unsaved (v. 22).

6. According to John 3, what are the consequences of sincere belief in Jesus (see vv.12, 13, 16, 18 and 36)?

John 3:16 For God so loved the world. The Son’s mission is bound up in the supreme love of God for the evil, sinful “world” of humanity (cf. 6:32, 51; 12:47; see notes on 1:9; Mt 5:44, 45) that is in rebellion against Him. The word “so” emphasizes the intensity or greatness of His love. The Father gave His unique and beloved Son to die on behalf of sinful men (see note on 2Co 5:21). eternal life. See note on v. 15; cf. 17:3; 1Jn 5:20.

John 3:18 believed in the name. This phrase (lit. “to believe into the name”) means more than mere intellectual assent to the claims of the gospel. It includes trust and commitment to Christ as Lord and Savior which results in receiving a new nature (v. 7) which produces a change in heart and obedience to the Lord (see note on 2:23, 24).

7. What was John the Baptist’s attitude as Jesus become more popular? How did John’s followers react to these developments?

Unlike his overly zealous followers, however, John was not bothered in the least by his declining popularity. Despite his tremendous initial influence, he had always remained focused on the purpose of his ministry that he had probably known from childhood—to testify to Christ (cf. 1:27, 30). Now as his ministry began to wind down, John’s purpose did not waver. His humble reply must have startled his disciples: “A man can receive nothing unless it has been given him from heaven.” In this way, he affirmed and embraced his subordinate role as the herald of the Messiah. God had sovereignly granted him his ministry (cf. Rom. 1:5; 1 Cor. 4:7; 15:10; Eph. 3:7; 1 Tim. 2:7); if God now chose to change or end that ministry, John was content. Everything among God’s servants, including popular ministry, is a gracious gift from God, not something to which a person is entitled. Therefore there is no place for jealousy, as John’s self-effacing reply indicated (note the opposite reaction by the Pharisees in 12:19).

John’s emphatic reminder to his envious disciples, “You yourselves are my witnesses that I said, ‘I am not the Christ’ (cf. 1:8, 20), but, ‘I have been sent ahead of Him’ ” (cf. 1:23; Matt. 3:3; Mark 1:3; Luke 1:17, 76; 3:4–6; Acts 19:4), was a rebuke for their obtuseness. Nothing he had said could account for their misunderstanding of his role; on the contrary, he had always maintained that he was the forerunner of the Messiah, not the Messiah Himself. Thus, John saw Jesus’ increasing popularity not as a concern, but as the fulfillment of his ministry. Far from upsetting him, it brought him great joy.

8. What qualities from the life of John the Baptist would you like to emulate? Why?

Unlike his jealous disciples, John found great joy in phasing out so that Jesus' ministry could receive Israel's full attention. Having brought him the bride, the faithful friend of the bridegroom ... rejoices greatly because he hears the bridegroom's voice expressing joy over the bride. So John's joy was made full as he watched the crowds leave him for Jesus: "This is the joy which John claims for himself, the joy of the bridegroom's friend, who arranges the marriage, and this joy is attained in Christ's welcoming to Himself the people whom John has prepared for Him and directed to Him" (Marcus Dods, "John," in W. Robertson Nicoll, ed. *The Expositors' Bible Commentary* [Reprint; Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2002], 1:720).

John summarized his view of himself in relation to Jesus in perhaps the most humble statement uttered by anyone in Scripture: He must increase, but I must decrease. Leon Morris observes, "It is not particularly easy in this world to gather followers about one for a serious purpose. But when they are gathered it is infinitely harder to detach them and firmly insist that they go after another. It is the measure of John's greatness that he did just that" (*The Gospel According to John, The New International Commentary on the New Testament* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979], 242).

Must speaks of divine necessity. It was God's will for John to give way to Jesus; there was no reason for the crowds to hang around the herald once the king had arrived. Because he understood this, John the Baptist joyously accepted God's plan for his ministry.

9. Is John 3:16 the most famous summary of the Gospel? Why or why not? How does verse 15 connect to it?

John 3:16 Here is the most famous summary of the gospel in the entire Bible. For connects to v. 15 and explains what happened to make it possible that someone can "have eternal life" (v. 15), that is, through believing in Christ. God so loved the world was an astounding statement in that context because the OT and other Jewish writings had spoken only of God's love for his people Israel. God's love for "the world" made it possible for "whoever" (v. 15) believes in Christ, not Jews alone, to have eternal life. God's love for the world was not mere sentiment but led to a specific action: he gave his only Son, which John elsewhere explains as sending him to earth as a man (v. 17) to suffer and die and thereby to bear the penalty for sins (see note on 1 John 2:2; cf. Rom. 3:25).