

Check Your Credentials At The Door

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[0 : 0 0] who have been with us for a while may be familiar with the regional church that we're a part of in every fall. We have a gathering that's far away. So this past week, I was with pastors from Wyoming and Montana and Colorado in Lander, Wyoming, and there's lots of exciting things going on in our regional church. There's new churches being started. There's new RUF chapters that are starting as well that we're excited about. All that to say, I'm not preaching this morning since I've been out, but our RUF campus minister at USOFA, Jeff Kriesel, will be joining us. We've heard Jeff many times and we praise God for his ministry with the cadets there and we welcome him to our pulpit now. So welcome, Jeff. All right, well, good morning, everyone. My name is Jeff Kriesel. I'm excited to be here with you all this morning. From the bottom of my heart, thank you for supporting our ministry, for making what I do a reality, not only financially, but also lending us Matthew in a couple weeks as he's going to be our speaker at our fall conference, and we're so excited to hear what he has to say. So the Air Force Academy is an interesting place. Unlike most colleges, colleges, which assess students based off of their GPA, their grade point average at the academy, our students, they are assessed also by their MPA, which is their military performance appraisals, and their PEA, which is their physical education average. So those three are kind of, at the end of each semester, our students receive a number. They receive their rank in each of those three areas, and then they receive their overall rank. The three are weighted, and they receive a number. A number is attached to their name at the end of every semester. And you can imagine that the number attached to their name can cause a number of reactions. And Tim Keller once said that don't let your successes go to your head, and don't let your failures go to your heart. And I deal with students who deal with both the success going to their head and the failures going to their heart. The number attached to their name, it largely determines what their job in the Air Force will be. So it tends to create a very competitive environment. And in my experience, the type of competition that it breeds kind of kills community.

So USAPA may be more upfront with its works-based ranking system, but if we're honest, we're all swimming in the same works-based pool. Everyone feels the pressure to bolster their credentials, to build their resume, to be impressive to the watching world. We all ask the question, have I done enough? And if we answer the question with a negative, if we say no, then we get to work.

We believe we have to start sacrificing parts of our life in order to build our spiritual or physical resume, right? Our worldly resume. And so we may sacrifice our physical health. We may sacrifice our families, our marriage. We may sacrifice our hobbies, and we have no outlet to be recreated.

We may sacrifice church or our daily devotionals with God. And then after we've sacrificed so much, we then ask the question again, have I done enough now?

Now, this morning, we'll be looking at John chapter 3, a story of a man who had the most impressive list of credentials. But he couldn't beat the question, have I done enough, out of his head.

[3 : 4 7] Nicodemus, his SPA, his spiritual performance average, would have had him ranked in the top 1% of Israelites. He was the distinguished graduate from the pharisaical academy.

But he still couldn't rest. He couldn't stop swimming in the swimming pool that is works-based righteousness. He couldn't stop asking the question, have I done enough? And so, Nicodemus decides that he's going to go and meet this guy named Jesus, a guy who had been turning kind of the religious world upside down. He had performed miracle after miracle. He was teaching profound truths. He was gathering this loyal group of followers. And he was royally annoying the Pharisees and the Sanhedrin.

Well, Nicodemus, he comes to Jesus, and he essentially says, check out all of my credentials. Certainly, I, of all people, have done enough. And Jesus essentially says, if you want to enter the kingdom of God, you need to check your credentials at the door. And then fix your eyes on the spiritual resume of the one who will be lifted up. The one who actually has the power to heal and to bring new life.

So with that, I invite you all to please stand for the reading of God's word. We'll be looking at John chapter 2, verses 23, 3 to 15.

Now, when he was in Jerusalem at the Passover feast, many believed in his name when they saw the signs that he was doing. But Jesus, on his part, did not entrust himself to them because he knew all people and needed no one to bear witness about man, for he himself knew what was in man. Now, there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews.

[5 : 43] This 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. Jesus answered him, truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God. Nicodemus said to him, how can I be born when he, how can a man be born when he is old?

Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born? Jesus answered, truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh. That which is born of the spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, you must be born again. The wind blows where it wishes and you hear it 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. Nicodemus said to him, how can these things be? Jesus answered him, are you the teacher of Israel? And yet you do not understand these things. Truly, 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. If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the son of man. And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the son of man be lifted up that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. This is the very reading of God's word. Let me pray for us. Heavenly father, you are a good and gracious God. We pray this morning that you would heal us by helping us see Jesus, our great healer. We pray all these things in his name. Amen. You may be seated. All right, so in the late 19th century, there was a guy named Charles Blondin, and he became the most famous tightrope walker in the entire world when he scaled Niagara Falls. As Charles Blondin's fame grew, he grew in confidence.

So first, he ditches his pole, like the balancing pole, and he walks across Niagara Falls without any support. Then he gets even more confident. He walks across blindfolded, and then he walks across backwards, and then he walks across on stilts. And if that wasn't enough, he strapped a stove onto his back. He walks across. Once he got to the midway point, he sits down on the rope, takes the stove off his back, cracks a couple eggs on the stove, makes an omelet, and he eats it in front of all of his adoring fans.

This guy was absolutely nuts, and he did things that nobody else could do. No one else could cross Niagara Falls on a tightrope, especially the way that he was crossing. Charles Blondin was in a league all by himself. In first century Judaism, Nicodemus was viewed in a similar light. He was viewed as someone who was in a league all by himself. He wasn't just a Pharisee. He was selected by his contemporaries to serve on the Sanhedrin, which was the ruling body of the Israelites.

He was not only a member of the Sanhedrin. Jesus says in verse 10 that Nicodemus was the teacher in Israel, of Israel. He was like the dean of the theology department. He knew his Bible inside and out.

[9 : 27] He was a celebrity. He was one of, some scholars believe, he was one of, if not the most respected and influential people in all of Israel. Nicodemus was a big deal. Nicodemus was the guy that everyone looked at, and they said, that's what right looks like. That is the picture of like success. That is what I aspire to be. Nicodemus was the kind of guy who had like a jam-packed schedule with really important meetings and really important tasks, and yet he still found time at like four in the morning to like go do CrossFit, you know. He was that kind of guy who like raised his kids to be like perfect.

They were all in the National Honor Society, and they probably all were captains of their respective sports teams. Nicodemus was the picture of self-discipline, self-control, political influence, spiritual zeal. But according to John, Nicodemus was also the picture of something else. He was the picture of someone who was walking around in the dark. Now, if you were a first century Israelite, and you heard or you read this story about Nicodemus walking around in the darkness, it would have been shocking. And that's kind of the point. It's meant to shock not only them, but us. If there was anyone in all of Israel who had the credentials to earn God's favor, to earn his way into God's kingdom, to earn his way into God's family, it was Nicodemus. He was in a league all by himself.

But in verse two, we see Nicodemus comes to Jesus in the darkness. You know, John doesn't tell us explicitly why Nicodemus came to Jesus under the cover of darkness. But given the theme of light and darkness that runs throughout the entirety of John's gospel, I think the answer is pretty obvious, like why he makes this point to say that he was coming in the darkness.

Despite all of his credentials, his heart was still dark. Despite all of his credentials, that question, have I done enough, was still plaguing him. But due to his credentials, due to his reputation and his high standing in society, he was embarrassed to be seen with Jesus in the light of day. And so he comes at night. Now, I like to imagine that Nicodemus was lying in bed, tossing and turning, and he couldn't fall asleep because he kept replaying these conversations that he was having with his Pharisaical friends about Jesus. And he just like, he just could not sleep. And so he wakes up. He goes to see Jesus.

He pays him a visit because he had a feeling that Jesus was different, but he couldn't quite put his finger on it. And so Nicodemus sneaks over to Jesus's place. And he probably quietly knocks on the door while staying within all of the shadows. When Jesus answers, Nicodemus bursts into the stream of compliments. He says, Rabbi, which in and of itself is a compliment. That was an honorary title given to a man that we don't even know if he went to some elite religious school. But Nicodemus, the teacher of Israel, calls Jesus teacher. Then he says, 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. In other words, he says, Jesus, you're legit.

[13 : 17] We believe that you have come from God. No one can do these things. We've taken notice of your spiritual resume, and it is quite impressive. Your credentials amaze us, and we want to invite you to join our Pharisaical club. We're the top 1%. We're the distinguished graduates, and we'd like to invite you to join our club. And how does Jesus respond to these many compliments? He doesn't say, wow, Nicodemus, I'm so honored to join your prestigious club. I really appreciate that you would think of me, that you took notice of my spiritual resume. Jesus doesn't even say, thanks, but no thanks.

Remember, according to John 2, verse 25, Jesus already knew what was in the heart of man. And so Jesus already knew what was in the heart of Nicodemus. And what was in Nicodemus' heart? Darkness.

And so Jesus goes straight to his dark heart. And he says, if you want to see the kingdom of God, you have to be born again. Literally, in the Greek, this phrase can be translated, you have to be born from above.

He says, despite all of your credentials, unless you're born again, unless you're born from above, until you move from darkness to light, you cannot enter God's kingdom. If you want to come into my house, you have to check your credentials at the door. You have to be born again. Now, Nicodemus did not understand what in the world Jesus was talking about, right? He's like, what do you mean? What do you want me to do exactly? You want me to crawl back into my mother's womb? He's like, that's impossible.

What you're asking me to do is impossible. And that's the point. The one requirement to enter God's kingdom is impossible for you to accomplish.

[15 : 37] Just think about your physical birth for a moment. What role did your will play in your physical birth? What role did your intellect play or your upbringing? What role did your credentials have in your physical birth? How much effort did you contribute to being born? Zero.

You had no say on when you were born or where you were born or why you were born. You were delightfully passive throughout the entire process. Your birth wasn't done by you. It was done for you.

You did nothing to earn your physical birth. And in this discourse, Jesus is saying the same thing about your spiritual birth. You contribute nothing. In theological terms, this is what we call regeneration. Okay? Jesus says a few chapters later in John 6, he says, no one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him. God is the one and the only one who not only initiates your new birth, God is the one who is ultimately responsible for your new birth, for you becoming a Christian, for you being born from above. It is all God. And you are delightfully passive throughout the entire process.

It's not done by you. It's done for you. Now, I'm not really into zombie movies. My brother is. He's obsessive about certain zombie shows and movies. But follow my train of thought here, okay? Imagine there was a zombie who decides that he wants to be a human. And so he goes to the local mall and he spends every penny that he owns to buy the best clothes. He gets a slick new haircut. He gets a mani-pedi. He gets like the best skin treatment that the world can offer. And then when he walks out of the mall, when he's wearing his nice, you know, pataguchi clothes, he realizes that he still wants to eat people.

Why? Because he's still a zombie, right? Despite his best efforts to clean himself up, it doesn't matter what he's wearing. By nature, he's still a zombie who wants to eat people.

[18 : 20] Listen, like Nicodemus, you cannot smart your way into God's kingdom. You cannot willpower your way into God's family. There is no ladder that can get you to the heavens. There is no tower you can build.

Like Nicodemus, your credentials, your spiritual resume cannot earn you a ticket into the new heavens and new earth. If you are responsible for even 1% of your salvation, you are doomed.

Because the 1% is infinite. You can't even come close to bridging that gap. You have to be born again. In this new birth, it comes from outside of you. It is an outside-in grace.

It's an outside-in power. And it's this outside-in grace that is evidenced by an inside-out transformation. It doesn't start from the inside. It comes from the outside. Even though Nicodemus was the most credentialed man in Israel, even though he knew his Bible inside and out, he was still in the dark.

He was still spiritually dead. He was like a spiritual zombie trying to dress himself up all cute. That which is born of the flesh is flesh. That which is born of the Spirit is Spirit. You have to be born from above by the Spirit. Now, it is not a coincidence that much of the imagery used in John chapter 3, it comes from Ezekiel 37. Jesus is using Valley of Dry Bones imagery to describe Nicodemus.

[20 : 13] Because his soul was spiritually dead. And if you recall, in Ezekiel 37, the great prophet, he comes across this valley that is just filled with dry bones. And these bones have been dead for quite some time, right? They were dry. They were dead dead, right? They couldn't will themselves back to life.

They couldn't think their heart to beat again. Their heart was gone. These bones had no hope to save themselves. And in John 3, Nicodemus' soul was like that valley. His soul was dry bones. He had no hope to save himself. You see, becoming a Christian is a supernatural work. Just as dry bones can't will themselves back to life, you can't work yourself into Christianity. It won't work. It will never work.

Now, I think that most Reformed Christians understand this. We understand that people are saved by God's grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, for God's glory alone, as revealed in the scriptures alone. We believe that God is responsible for our justification. But when it comes to our sanctification, this is where many Reformed Christians swerve off course. Now, this is what happened to the Christians in Galatia. They had Paul as their pastor. He was like the king of Reformed theology, right?

They understood that they were justified by God's grace alone. But then something happened. They started out in faith. They were born from above. But over time, they started to think that they had to work to stay in God's good graces. And so Paul calls them out. He says, oh, you foolish Galatians, who has bewitched you?

He says, did you receive the Spirit by works of the law? Did you earn the Holy Spirit by what you do with your resume, with your credentials, or by hearing with faith? Are you so foolish, having begun in the Spirit? Are you now being perfected in the flesh? In other words, what's Paul saying? He's saying, what are you thinking? What are you doing? You started off right. You started off over here in the Spirit, trusting in Jesus alone that he is your righteousness. But now you're over here and you're trying to get yourself perfected in the flesh. So you didn't start off that way.

[23 : 05] The truth is, many of us are no different from the Galatians. Many Christians start off right.

We start off in faith, believing that we are saved by grace alone, that we are born from above by the Spirit. We start off depending solely on Christ's righteousness. But then at some point in life, something happens. And I would argue it's probably sin. And then we sin again, and we start to feel guilt and shame, and we think that we have to now do something to get back into God's good graces, that we have to earn our way back into his love. Over time, we start to think to ourselves, God doesn't love me anymore. How could he love me? He probably hates me now. Eventually, God's grace has to run out, right? And so I need to get to work and prove to him that I'm worth loving.

And over time, we who started out in the Spirit, we start to think that we have to add something. We have to contribute something to earn God's favor, even though we already have God's favor in Christ.

Listen, my friends, you don't work to get God's favor. You work because you already have it. That is a paradigm-shifting truth. My friends, self-justification doesn't work.

And this is why Paul is so shocked, why he's so disturbed with the Galatians, because they have so quickly turned to a different gospel. That's what Paul calls works-based religions. He calls them a completely different gospel, even if they're prettied up with Christian ease. You see, this is a difference that runs at the very heart of Christianity. It hits the fundamentals of what Christianity is. The gospel is not you getting to God. It is God getting to you, not just at the beginning of your Christian walk, but every step throughout, all the way to the finish line. Nicodemus, in John 3, he was beginning to realize that a works-based system of salvation was not good news. In fact, I think he was starting to realize that it was really, really, really bad news. You see, the law says, do this and live. And we're looking at all that the law requires, and we think to ourselves, we know to ourselves, I can't do it.

[25 : 58] And then we start asking that question, have I done enough? And we never really know. The law shows us our need for new life, but the law cannot give us new life. And the law will show you no mercy. The standard is set, and the standard is perfection. I imagine that Nicodemus, as he's walking over to Jesus' house, in the darkness, was beginning to realize that his best efforts still didn't meet God's standard. They didn't even come close. Keep in mind, Nicodemus knew the law better than anyone. And the more you know about the law, if you're looking at it honestly and not lowering the bar, if you're looking at the law honestly, the more you realize that you don't measure up.

A couple years ago, my family and I went to Disney World, and every day, without fail, one of my children would go up to a ride that they had set their heart on. They would get over to the little measuring stick, and they would fail to measure up. And they would cry, and it was always sad.

But the standard was set, and Disney World shows no mercy. And neither does the law. Right? Neither does God's law. And so if we can't find mercy in God's law, where do we find it? And that brings us to verses 14 and 15. And I love this. Like, Nicodemus is a biblical scholar, and so Jesus meets him where he is. He will meet the woman at the well in John 4, where she is, but in a different way than Nicodemus here. He opens his Bible, and he tells a story from Numbers 21, a story that Nicodemus would have been very familiar with. God has just delivered the Israelites from slavery in Egypt, and now they're wandering in the wilderness. God has provided for their physical needs. He's given them manna from heaven. He's given them water from the rock.

But as the journey to the promised land continues, the people become impatient, and they begin to grumble and complain against not only Moses, but to God. And so God sends a plague of poisonous snakes to discipline the Israelites in order to bring them to repentance. And almost immediately upon sending the snakes, God gives Moses the antidote. God says, make a bronze serpent and put it on a pole.

And if anyone who has been bitten by a serpent looks up at the pole, they'll be healed. You see, the Israelites were killing, the serpents were killing the Israelites, and God says, take a symbol of what is killing them. Put that symbol on a pole. Raise it up, and when they look at it, they will be healed.

[29 : 09] And keep in mind that the snakes were still on the ground. They were still biting at their ankles. Every part of them probably wanted to look down and avoid the snakes or start stomping on these poisonous snakes. But God tells them, don't look down. Look up. I'll take care of the snakes.

And so Moses lifts up the pole, and everyone who looked at the pole in faith was healed. And there was a 100% success rate. Nicodemus would have known immediately what Jesus was saying.

Jesus was saying, when I'm lifted up like that, I want you to look at me. Even when your sin is still biting at your ankles, don't look down. Look up.

Because here's the thing, Nicodemus, when I am hanging on a cross, I am going to become the thing that is killing you. I'm going to become your self-righteousness.

I'm going to become your legalism. I'm going to become your guilt and your shame and your addictions and all of your idolatries. I am going to become what is killing you.

[30 : 27] And if you look up in faith and you see me on that cross, you will be healed. You will be reborn. You will move from darkness to life.

You will move from death to life. And there's a 100% success rate. Let's return to Charles Blondin. Of all of his daredevil feats crossing Niagara Falls, there was one that made him really famous.

One day he walked over to the crowd, and he said, Does anybody believe that I can carry a person across? And the crowd started yelling, Yeah!

Yes, you can do it. We believe that you can do it. But when he asked for a volunteer, nobody raised their hand. Nobody stepped forward. You see, while the people genuinely believed that he could do it, they didn't trust him with their life.

But then there was one man, and he did step forward. His name was Harry Calcord. Now, I want you to imagine if Harry, he gets on Blondin's back, and they start to make their way across the tightrope.

[31 : 42] And about halfway, he's like, You know what? I think I'm good from here. You can let me down. I think I'm good to make it on my own. Blondin would have been like, You're nuts, man.

No, you're going to cling to my back. Because if I let you off, you will not make it on your own. My friends, depending on your own righteousness, to earn God's favor is like walking across a tightrope that you cannot cross.

Maybe you get a few steps, but eventually you will start to sway, you'll lose your balance, and you will fall. 100% failure rate to anybody who tries.

Listen, to get to the other side, you have to cling to the one who is truly in a league all by himself. And not only at the beginning of the Christian life, but every step throughout the Christian life.

Christians never stop clinging. Before Blondin walked across the tightrope, he gave Harry these instructions. He said, Look up, Harry.

[32 : 57] You are no longer Harry Calcord. You are Charles Blondin. Until I clear this place, you be a part of me. Mind, body, and soul, if I sway, you sway with me.

Do not attempt to do any balancing yourself. Brothers and sisters, through faith in Christ, you are united to Christ, mind, body, and soul.

His righteousness is your righteousness. His credentials are your credentials. His sacrifice is your sacrifice.

His death is your death. His resurrection is your resurrection. And therefore, your life is not a balancing act to earn God's favor.

Just cling to Jesus. He'll get you across. He won't let you go. He won't let you fall. He has a 100% success rate in getting all of his people all the way home.

[33 : 59] Even people like me and you and the Galatians and Nicodemus. In John 19, thankfully, we see Nicodemus again.

His story doesn't end in John 3. Jesus has just been crucified and Nicodemus comes not by night, but he comes in the light of day.

Something happened. Nicodemus looked up and he was healed and he moved from darkness into the light and Nicodemus brings with him 75 pounds of myrrh and aloes for Jesus' burial preparation.

It was an outside-in grace that produced an inside-out transformation. Nicodemus looked up at the cross and he was healed. His dead bones were brought to life and so he checked his credentials at the door and he fixed his eyes on his sinless Savior, a Savior who took upon himself the serpent's bite, who took upon himself the sting of death.

My friends, the gospel frees us from the question, have I done enough? Because when you look up and you see Jesus on the cross, he is your enough.

[35 : 26] Today, tomorrow, and every day. Amen. Let me pray. Heavenly Father, we pray that you would give us this kind of healing, that we would be a people who cling to Christ not only at the beginning of the Christian life, but every step throughout.

we can't do this on our own. We need your help. We need the Spirit to draw us near to you, to convict us of our sin, but also to remind us of our need for a sinless Savior.

And we pray, Lord, that we would see Christ a little bit more clearly as a result of Nicodemus' story, and that we would reflect him, that we would also move from darkness to light, from death to life, by clinging to Christ.

It's through his name we pray. Amen. Amen.