

The Insufficiency of Man's Knowledge to Save Himself

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[0:00] John chapter 3, verses 1-3.

Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher 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.

May God add a blessing to the reading of his word. Would you please be seated? Amen. The hang-up that many people have with Christianity is with its insistence that Jesus is the only way of salvation.

And the flip side of that issue, that those who don't know Jesus savingly will spend their eternity in hell. A place prepared and reserved for the devil and the angels who followed him in his rebellion against God.

[1:30] A place of everlasting and eternal anguish and torment. They expressed their frustration with this by saying something like, How could a loving God send people to such a horrible place?

In fact, some people who call themselves Christians want nothing to do with either the notion that Jesus is the only way, or the thought that hell even exists.

A scenario that I've often been presented with by people who struggle with these two thoughts, goes something like this, and you've probably at some point in time heard it too.

It's that poor innocent man scenario. Someone way out there, who maybe perhaps is stranded on a deserted island.

He spent his entire life disconnected from the rest of civilization. And so he is thus incapable of ever hearing the gospel.

[2:39] And so they say it doesn't seem fair that such a person doesn't stand a chance. If God truly is loving, wouldn't he or couldn't he just sneak him in through the back door of heaven?

Or something like that? Or there's another similar scenario that people may present to us, often do, is the person who they say is a sincere believer.

They've been raised growing up in a culture, in a family, with a certain religious tradition, whether that was Muslim or Buddhist or Hindu or Mormon or any other.

And they say they sincerely believe in God, but they never hear the gospel. And so they're confused by trying to think how that could be either just or fair, that such a person would be denied entrance into heaven for not believing and trusting in Jesus Christ.

Have you ever been presented with one of those scenarios before? If you haven't, and people know that you're a Christian, just know that it's coming. Have you ever spent time, significant time, thinking through those scenarios?

[4:11] Maybe even struggling to find answers. We see from our text, and I know that we preached, or I preached on this same text last week.

I haven't lost my mind, but there's so much more to say. Nicodemus was sincere. He was a devoted person in his religious activity.

His good deeds seemed to outweigh his bad deeds. Remember, he's a Pharisee, a teacher of the law. He's a member of the Sanhedrin, an administrator of the law.

This man knew his scriptures well. He was a child of the covenant, a child of Abraham. But Jesus told him, if you remember, that all those things that he had trusted in were worthless to save him.

Last week, we saw how Jesus dispelled that notion that a person can work or earn their way into God's kingdom. And so today, we will see that likewise, he dispels the notion that man is able to know his way, reason his way, or rationalize his way to the one true and living God.

[5:38] Man is incapable of finding true happiness and peace through God with his intellect. Now, you may disagree.

Hold on. Hear me out. Here's the main idea. Man is unable to save himself. He cannot think, reason, or rationalize his way into the kingdom of God.

He must be born again. Now, I'm going to set out to show you from scripture why I believe that is the case. As Nicodemus' interview with Jesus continues, we see that just as his good deeds were unable to save him, so too was his knowledge of Jesus insufficient to obtain the new birth that Jesus said was necessary for salvation and entrance into the kingdom of God.

So, first of all, we must understand that human knowledge is insufficient to save because it has been infected by sin. Verse 2 again.

Rabbi, Nicodemus says, and I want us to focus on two words here. We know. We know that you are a teacher from God for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him.

[7:03] Nicodemus, along with some others, knew some things about Jesus, but they didn't really know him. They acquired some facts about him, but knowing facts about someone is not the same as having a relationship with them.

my favorite baseball player growing up. Many of you have heard me talk about him before. Cal Ripken Jr. Shortstop for the Baltimore Orioles. My favorite team.

My favorite player. And so I acquired a lot of information about him. I know his middle name. Edwin. I know the names of his brothers and his parents.

His wife, whom he's unfortunately since divorced. And his children. I know many of his stats. I know the awards that he won and the years in which he won them.

But say for some strange reason, Cal Ripken Jr. comes to Bartlesville, Oklahoma and is walking downtown, perhaps on his way to eat dinner at Hideaway Pizza or something like that, and I see him.

[8:08] And I go up to him. I know all these facts about him, but guess what? I don't know him. I don't really have a relationship with him. He's going to look at me as some kind of a stranger, right?

And he may run off in the opposite direction. Knowing facts about someone is not grounds for a relationship.

He has no idea who I am, though I have many facts about him. James says in chapter 2, verse 19, that even the demons believe and affirm the truth of God, the facts of God, the reality of God, but they don't know him in a saving way.

They do not have that relationship with him. So Nicodemus here has gathered some facts about Jesus and he proceeds to present those facts to him.

Rabbi, we know, he says. But their conversation reveals that he didn't truly know him. His fact-gathering skills, his reasoning through those facts, his conclusions were inadequate to bring him to the truth.

[9:24] To understand why man's mind is an inadequate tool for coming to know God, we need to go back to the beginning. Back to Genesis chapter 3 with the fall of man.

The Bible says that in the beginning, God created man in his own image. And this means many things. But among those things is the fact that since God is a trinity, three persons in one, right? Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. That man in a similar way reflects that. Just as God is one but exists in three persons, so man is one being created by God with three parts.

A body, a soul, and a spirit. Everybody knows about the body. We all see that.

We share this same aspect with many other of God's creations. Take, for example, plants. Now, despite what some people might think today, plants do not possess thoughts and feelings.

[10:32] We're not going to have a service where we bring the plants into the sanctuary and apologize to them for pollution or whatever. Though I am a... We need to take care of God's environment, okay?

They don't have thoughts and feelings. That's the point. Because they don't have a soul. It is with the soul, the Bible says, that man feels, that he thinks, that he aspires.

Other creations of God are likewise able to think and to feel. Animals exhibit these abilities. The soul provides us with a sense of our identity, of who we are.

And animals have a sense of this. Jesus said, if you remember, foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests. That is to say, that they have an intrinsic understanding of who and of what they are.

Foxes do not make nests in trees. They don't attempt flight. They see another fox and they have this intrinsic understanding that there's something like me.

[11:51] Whereas they see a bird and they think, there's something for me to eat. In addition to a body and a soul, the Bible says that man also has a spirit.

And this sets mankind apart from all the rest of creation. The spirit is the part of man that has consciousness of God.

It's the part of man that lives forever. It's how we have our sense of morality. How we can know the difference between right and wrong.

This built-in understanding that we have a law giver who is higher than ourselves. A lion in Africa after making a fresh kill as he's licking the blood of the animal off his paws is never having or entertaining the thought, what have I done?

I've just done it again. That was wrong. I shouldn't have done that. No. Because we're so much different. And so, man's spirit also causes us to do something that the rest of creation does not do.

[13:11] We worship. We worship. Plants don't worship. Animals don't worship. But we do. In fact, we were made to worship.

We have a great need and a great desire for worship. Being from Kansas City, one thing I realized as a pastor in that area is that when the Chiefs were playing well, church attendance tanked.

And if you would go to the game as you would go to an OU game or an Oklahoma State game or many other major sporting events, there is a devoted fan base. And they adorn themselves with the colors and with the logos of their favorite team.

And you'll notice that they have their own traditions, their own chants, their own songs, right? This is what we do when this happens. This is what we do when this happens. And people live and die on every single play.

And some even praying that God would affect the outcome. We do that. We do many other things because we are made to worship.

[14:20] We need to worship. Man is made up of a body, a soul, and a spirit. And this was the kind of man that God placed in the garden. And God said to him, if you remember, the whole earth is for your enjoyment.

You can eat of any of its produce except for one. As a symbol of your dependence upon me, there is one tree that I have set aside, one tree that I have marked out that you may not eat of.

This is the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. And the day of you eat of it, God said, you will surely die. Later, God gives man a wife, Adam receives Eve, and together they eat of that forbidden fruit, that tree that served as a reminder, a constant reminder of their dependence on God.

God is creator. There is none above him. He is the only one worthy of our worship, and Satan hated that truth and deceived the man and the woman into hating it as well.

What happened when Adam and Eve ate of that forbidden tree? Well, as God said, they died. They died in many ways. They didn't instantly drop dead on the spot after swallowing that fruit and digesting it.

[15:50] Sin would result in the death of their bodies, and their physical deaths did indeed come later on. But they did, in that moment, instantly die spiritually.

That part of them that maintained their desire for relationship and for fellowship with God, it died. It was severed.

And we see that displayed when God comes back. Remember? God who once walked with them and talked with them, He's back. They've sinned.

What do they do? They run and they hide. Different desires now. Not wanting or seeking that relationship and fellowship as they once did.

need. Likewise, their souls also underwent the process of decay. The soul is the place that contains man's intellect, his feelings, his identity, and as we see in the preceding chapters of Genesis, that men start murdering one another.

[17:02] They start involving themselves in more and greater and grosser kinds of sexual immorality. They have bad feelings and thoughts towards God and towards one another.

The corruption of the soul does not mean that mankind has completely lost his ability to reason, but it does mean that his reasoning has been severely marred.

And because of that, he is incapable of reasoning himself to God. God's plan for salvation seems ludicrous and it seems illogical, even offensive to many.

And I'll have more to say about that in a minute, but for now, I have an illustration that I believe will help better grasp the curse of sin and what has resulted from it.

In my mid-twenties, I began having these really severe pains in my right knee and I tried to ignore it, tried to take ibuprofen and then some more ibuprofen and wear a brace, but nothing seemed to help.

[18:13] It got to the point where my knee was hurting so bad I couldn't even bend it. It was painful to sit down, to stand up, to try to get into bed. It was painful to do any and everything.

And so, I went to my doctor who sent me to a knee specialist who told me that I had osteochondritis. And so, I learned that there are tiny blood vessels inside our bones.

And at some point, blood stopped flowing to about a quarter-sized piece of bone at the end of my femur.

And so, without any blood flowing to it, it began to decay. Eventually, it died off into little pieces that got lodged in various places within my knee joint.

And so, I had to have an operation to remove them. And I share that with you because in the same way, without that relationship and fellowship with God, our soul decays and it withers.

[19:22] It dies. Isn't this what Jesus says in John 15? using the illustration of the vines and the branches? Look!

Jesus says, I am the true vine and my Father is the vine dresser. Every branch in me that does not bear fruit, He takes away. And every branch that does bear fruit, He prunes that it may bear more fruit.

Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me.

I am the vine and you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I am, he it is that bears much fruit. For apart from me you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in me, he is thrown away like a branch and withers.

And the branches are gathered and thrown into the fire and burned. Apart from God we can do nothing, Jesus says. Just as the branch that does not receive life from the vine withers and dies, so sin has disconnected us from our source of life.

[20:36] What can a branch do in that case to improve its condition? Nothing but wither. Go under the process of decay and die.

This is exactly what happened to mankind when his spirit died as a result of the fall. Sin breaks fellowship with God who is our source of life.

Man sinned and he died body, soul, and spirit. And what's really interesting about this is that God when he saves a person reverses the order saving him spiritually.

his soul finally in his body. Secondly, we must understand that sin's infection makes us run from God.

Our knowledge is insufficient because we've been infected by sin and sin infects us by making us run from God. So now let's go back to the scenario of the person who seeks for God but has no way to hear the gospel.

[21:46] And the notion that Jesus is the only way of salvation that ruffles so many feathers. This is what the Bible says. All people have knowledge of God but willfully reject him anyways.

Romans chapter 1 verses 18 through 21. for the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth.

For what can be known about God is plain to them because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes namely his eternal power and divine nature have been clearly perceived ever since the creation of the world in the things that have been made.

so they are without excuse for although they knew god they did not honor him as god or give thanks to him but they became futile in their thinking and their foolish hearts were darkened so here paul talks first about godlessness this refers to our vertical relationship with god instead of being humble and submissive and trusting of god we are a people who are uh disproportionately proud very proud

people very rebellious people and unbelieving unrighteousness refers to our horizontal relationships with other people instead of being humble and submissive entrusting of one another we are more often characterized as being self-centered proud and manipulating sin has resulted with our being a godless and unrighteous people who then suppress truth suppression is not the same as ignorance it's not that we don't know the truth of god it's that we don't like the truth that god has implanted within us the truth is in there but sin keeps us from acknowledging it keeping us wanting to suppress it to push it down verse 19 says that god has revealed himself to everyone in two places first he's revealed himself in our hearts human beings long for meaning in life we want our life we want our life to have purpose we need to feel like what we are we are doing what we are living for matters and has meaning and not only that we also desire to live forever no other creature employs the use of wrinkle cream no other creature seeks to have plastic surgery to preserve their youthfulness but we do because i believe we know it shouldn't be this way i know to many of you i'm young but to our teens i'm old and i've noticed in recent years as i look in the mirror that there are hair growing out of places that it didn't used to grow out of before and as i look at my hair color i see flecks of gray that weren't there before when i wake up in the morning and i walk down our hallway it seems it starts with my feet and it continues all the way up my spine and to my neck it just pops and cracks you know i'm thinking who just poured a bowl of rice crispies it's my body and we experience these things because we're under this process of decay and we know that it shouldn't be this way we want our lives to have meaning and we want desperately to live forever god's put it in our hearts he's also revealed it in creation all around us everything has order everything has design not just in our planet but in the entire universe everything is perfectly fine-tuned to support life on planet earth and we are the only ones within this immeasurable universe people have been there in the entire universe we have been there in the entire universe paul says we may have never heard god's name but we instinctively know that he is there but our hearts are so infected and corrupted by sin that rather than submit ourselves to that knowledge we do one of the following things

sinful people rebel against the knowledge that god has given them often how we do this is uh is becoming religious box checkers thinking that all we got to do is check check the boxes that our good deeds outweigh our bad deeds and we establish our own systems that we believe will put god in a place where where he's got to let us in to heaven but if you read the bible you see that's truly rebellion against him in his way of salvation the only way also sinful people distort the knowledge that god has given them right so we've been created in god's image but because of our sinfulness desire to suppress the truth you know what we end up doing recreating god into our image making god out to be somebody that that we feel more comfortable with making him out to be somebody who we feel is worthy of our devotion and of our worship and and and you know you're doing this whenever you hear people make comments like this they hear things like jesus is the only way we talk about hell we talk about these things that the bible say they say they say something like well that doesn't sound like god to me i can't believe in a god like that distorting the truth that god has given them and then also sinful people deny the knowledge that god has given them just flat out shaking their fist in his face hating the knowledge that god has implanted within seeking to determine their own truth becoming their own judge their own authority really their own god and then in the rest of romans chapter one paul describes what these attitudes result with and sadly they very much accurately portray the culture that we are living in right now and then he caps it off in romans 3 23 he makes his diagnosis for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of god in other words the innocent native on the deserted island somewhere pure in heart and spirit doesn't exist there's nobody like that so now let's turn back to nicodemus a very religious man a stand-up productive member of society he knows some things about jesus as do others but those pious efforts and that knowledge that he's gathered for himself about jesus knowing that he's a teacher knowing that he's been sent from god observing the signs and wonders that he's performed did not lead him to saving knowledge of christ he wasn't wrong in what he had observed jesus is more than a teacher he is more than just a worker of miracles god had sent other men like that god had sent other men like that before but this was no ordinary man this was the god man this was the god man and nicodemus didn't know it he didn't see it he came to jesus at night fearful of being seen with him and shrouded truly in spiritual darkness that darkens every heart towards god because of sin's penetrating and saturating effect on our body on our soul and on our spirit unfortunately for nicodemus the point of the story is that his whole conception of christ was wrong in spite of his knowledge his intellect had deceived him and that is why jesus rebukes him in verse 3

[30:34] truly truly i say to you he cuts him off unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of god again we see nicodemus inability to reason himself to knowledge of jesus as lord and savior because that response that jesus gives him sounds so illogical to him so unrational how could a man be born again and then jesus goes on to answer his question as we'll see in the coming weeks that this new birth is accomplished solely by the means of god's holy spirit human knowledge is insufficient to save because it has been infected by sin and sin's infection makes us run from god it kills us so if we are going to come back to life we must be administered a life saving cure a life giving cure and only god is able to bring dead things dead people back to life and so thirdly the cure for man's intellect results from the new birth again jesus answered him truly truly i say to you unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of god so the cure for man's intellect begins within his spirit it's there that communication and fellowship with god was broken by sin the new birth means that god has restored those broken lines of communication we are grafted back into the vine the truth and life of god flows back through us resurrecting our hearts giving us new minds we were dead the bible says but now we live we were blind but now we see just as the fall affected our minds so the new birth does as well we receive a new mind more specifically we receive not just a new mind we receive the mind the mind of christ romans 12 1 through 2 i appeal to you therefore brothers by the mercies of god to present your bodies as a living sacrifice holy and acceptable to god which is your spiritual worship do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewal of your mind that by testing you may discern what is the will of god what is good what is acceptable and perfect and then second Corinthians 10 5 explains what we do with these new minds that we've received we destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of god and we take every thought captive to obey christ in other words we seek to be used by god to administer his cure to others that they might be saved we've been given a new spirit a new soul a new understanding that now wills for the things of god we want others to come to that knowledge that we've received it's the gospel that brings that cure and it's the holy spirit who administers it and he uses us to do that now listen if not nicodemus then cornelius is probably most like that uh true to life a true to life version of that fictional man on the deserted island of the genuine seeker of god who has never heard the name of jesus i want to take you there acts chapter 10 verses 1 through 6 at caesarea there was a man named cornelius a centurion of what was known as the italian cohort a devout man who feared god with all his household gave alms generously to the people and prayed continually to god about the ninth hour of the day he saw clearly in a vision an angel of god come

and say to him cornelius and he stared at him in terror and said what is it lord and he said to him your prayers and your alms have ascended as a memorial before god and now send men to joppa and bring one simon who is called peter he is lodging with one simon a tanner whose house is by the sea so here we see that cornelius is a devout man a man who gave a man who prayed but he wasn't saved did you catch that if he was saved then why would god tell him to send for peter you ever think about that or why the angel seems like a pretty good messenger to me you know why couldn't the angel just share the gospel with him in that vision god works in strange ways but in great ways and if you remember on the other side of the region peter is praying and he has a vision he sees the blanket unfold i call it the the pigs in the blanket vision take and eat kill and eat and then he wakes up not sure what's going on here's a knock at the door behold it's messengers from cornelius and he goes with them to cornelius's house and if you remember as peter arrives cornelius first falls down to worship peter and peter puts an end to all of that right i'm not i'm not the one i'm the messenger because cornelius is still ignorant he's still worshiping the wrong things in the wrong ways and so peter picks him up and then in verse 33 after explaining to peter the dream that he received this is what he says to peter so i sent for you at once and you have been kind enough to come now therefore we are all here in the presence of god to hear all that you have been commanded by the lord peter had to go cornelius had to hear the name of christ he had to hear the gospel to be saved and so i'm telling you that somewhere out there i believe god has a cornelius for you and you are their peter and god has commanded not just some of us but all of us to go and to make disciples we have a new spirit a new soul we will receive a new body when our lord comes back in the meanwhile we have an important job to do to use this knowledge that god has given us and so i'm going to end with three applications what do we do with this knowledge of christ that we have received as lord and savior first of all we must share the knowledge that you've received with unbelievers matthew 28 jesus says go therefore and make disciples romans 10 says how will they

hear unless one is sent how will they hear the gospel unless we go and share it with them and how beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news to dead people second add to the knowledge that you've received read and study your bible it is the word of god bask and dwell in its truth let his word richly abide within you be present here in the different studies get yourself involved fill yourself with the word of god and add to the knowledge that ye has given you and then thirdly give all the glory to god when others see your good works they will give god glory and when they see it it is critical that we make sure that they know why why is because of jesus christ he is the only way of salvation because he is the sinless son of god who willingly came and died on the cross for our sins who was dead and buried for three days and who rose again on the third day as proof that he was who he said he was he was god's son and to show that our sin has been paid for and that if we believe in him his work for us we trust in him through faith by grace we will be saved now and forever more this is a message that is so critical for us to be sharing with the world in desperate need of hearing it and so my encouragement to you is share your knowledge add to your knowledge give the glory to god but be praying god who is my cornelius and please send me to them that they may know the knowledge that you have given me of your great son Jesus Christ you