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## **Into the Neighborhood 2 – Jesus and Nicodemus**

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As you may or may not know, Ted kicked off a new series for us last week called *Into the Neighborhood*. I live in a ten-house subdivision. Nine of the people that live in that subdivision are fulltime residents. For one of them, it's just a vacation home. So, they come three or four times a year and every time that home comes, the entire subdivision gets an email from our HOA, telling us everything we are doing wrong. Now, the HOA won't tell us who complained of these things, but the timing is pretty precarious. So, we'll just call her Karen. Sorry for any of you who have ever been given the name Karen. I know a lot of sweet Karens, but for the sake of pop culture, we'll just call her Karen. And she's mad.

I have two boys, an eight-year-old and a six-year-old. They just want to play basketball. According to our HOA, I'm allowed to have a basketball goal in my cul-de-sac, but I have to lay it down at night. It makes absolutely no sense to me, but I want to say this as we do this series: Karen, if you're watching, I love you. I'm not kidding you. They were here on vacation a couple of weeks ago and my wife was walking our goldendoodle. My wife tried to wave at her, and she literally put her hand up to her eyes in the passenger seat of the car and goes straight to her house. What did we do? Did my six-year-old fire Roman Candles at your house that I don't know about? What did we do?

I also live in a neighborhood with some phenomenal neighbors. Our Care Pastor Don Rooks is my neighbor. We talk all the time from my balcony down to his house. I said, "Don, we have got to go love her. She's mad at us for some reason. She hates our dog. She hates our kids. Let's go love on her well." We're going to figure out a way to love her because some people like to be loved all in, but with some people, you've got to be more subtle about the way you love them.

We're going to get into that. We're actually going to talk about *Into the Neighborhood* by looking at a passage in John 3. It's Jesus and Nicodemus. If you know this story, it's the only time in the gospels it's mentioned. Nicodemus isn't mentioned anywhere else in the gospels. So, there's Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, the four gospels. Those first three gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, are known as the synoptic gospels. They are in sync with one another. They're real consistent stories, real consistent parallels, real consistent, right? Matthew was written to the Jews, Mark was written to the Romans, which ruled the world at the time, and Luke, a physician, was written to the Greeks, the stoic philosophers, the highly intellectual people.

John, which is separate from those four, considered a love gospel, was written to the gentiles, you and me. So, it has a different perspective. It was for the whole world. As we know, one of the most quoted passages of all the scriptures is in John.

We're going to start in John 3: 1 and we're going to show how this passage is actually enlightening to how you and I can better love our neighbor just by following the example of Jesus. Let's begin.

John 3 - ***Now there was a Pharisee...*** Now it's really interesting here that John wants to mention that Nicodemus a pharisee. He didn't have to tell us that he was a pharisee. He could have said there was this man, a man that showed up and had a conversation with Jesus. But John is very intentional with telling you and me that he was a pharisee. Why? He wanted you to know he was a religious person and not just any religious person, he also wanted to tell you who he was and his name. ***...a man named Nicodemus, who was a member of the Jewish ruling council. ...***

The word *Nikodemus* is really interesting here because the word *Nico*, which comes from the Greek work *Nike*, which means victory and then *demus* means of the people. So, the word *Nikodemus* literally means "victory of the people." How ironic that he is sitting down and having a conversation with someone that he doesn't realize yet is the ultimate victory for the people. So, he's having a conversation with "Victory of the people," Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. This is fascinating.

This guy is really smart. He knows the Pentateuch inside and out, he knows the Torah, he knows the major and minor prophets, he knows the poetical books. Nicodemus is wicked smart. He's one of the top of the tops, he's a part of the Sanhedrin. He sneaks away to have a conversation with Jesus. That tells us why John told us he was a pharisee because John wants us to know we don't need religion, we need a relationship with Jesus.

In the first verse of John 3, he lets us know here's a religious leader and, guess what? It's not about religion. It's not about dos and don'ts. It's not about walking in here today and checking a box to make sure you've done everything you need to do. No, HE cleans us up; we don't clean ourselves up; that is the work of Jesus, and John wants us to know that right away. **We don't need a religion, we need a relationship with Jesus.** And that relationship with Jesus permeates itself into our relationships with our neighbors. We're going to talk about who our neighbors are here in a second.

**To love our neighbor well, we must pursue a relationship with them.** Woodland Hills, how are we doing with that? People online, how are we doing with that? Pursuing relationships with people in our neighborhood, people in this community, how are we doing? In a sense, with cell phone, this world has robbed us of that intimate relationship that Jesus exemplified for all of us.

So, there are all these things that Jesus says in this Bible. There are a lot of things he says. Specifically, the gospels. If you have a red-letter Bible and you were to open it, you will see a lot of red lettering in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. You would see some red lettering in the Book of Acts and a little bit in Corinthians and in the book of Revelation. But out of everything Jesus said, which was a lot of amazing stuff, why is this most humble man to ever walk the earth the greatest leader there every was? There are things he says that were the greats. So, of everything he says, there's two greats. He leaves us with his great commission, which I found in Matthew 28: 19 that says, ***19 Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.***"

And then there's this great commandment found in Mark 12: 29 31 that says, **"Of all the commandments, which is the most important?"** They want to know. They know all the commandments throughout the Old Testament.

**29 "The most important one," answered Jesus, "is this: 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. 30 Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' 31 The second is this...** It's crazy. There are hundreds of commandments and he says, love God first, and here's the second one, **'Love your neighbor as yourself.'**

Fascinating, right? That Jesus would say to love our neighbor as ourselves. Perhaps he understood that you and I would never have a problem loving ourselves. Now I'm not saying anything about high or low self-esteem. You can laugh, but we don't have a problem loving ourselves. When we're hungry, the first person we're thinking about is ourselves. When we're tired, the first person we're thinking about getting into that bed is ourselves. When we're angry, the first person we think about is ourselves.

Jesus knew that you and I would never have a problem thinking about ourselves. When you go to bed at night, when you wake up, when you're looking in the mirror, you're thinking about yourself. I'm not talking about a high or low self-esteem, I'm saying you don't think about anyone else more in the day than yourself – what you need to do and what you are going to do. Jesus knows that. He says, **"Love your neighbor as yourself."** It's amazing what he's really telling us. You know if you take the word joy – J-O-Y... The core of it? He laid out what he just said in this passage. Jesus first, Others second, Yourself third. That's a pretty good equation. And you do you want joy? There's where you find joy – Jesus first, Others second, Yourself third. Don't make it all about yourself, make it about Jesus and others and it all comes together.

**"There is no commandment greater than these."** These are the words of Jesus. Love your neighbor as yourself. So, would you spit venomous rhetoric online to yourself? Just curious. Would you do that? Would you throw yourself the one finger wave when someone cuts you off in traffic? Would you do that? Love your neighbor as yourself. Do you treat people how you treat yourself? No, you pamper yourself. You take care of yourself. You go to the spa, ladies. You take care of those toenails; you get them did, okay? You take care of yourself.

John 3 goes on to say, **2 He came to Jesus at night and said...** This is really intriguing, and a lot of people miss this in this passage. That tells me two things. One, after a long day at work, after Jesus had performed miracles, interacted, preached, loved on people, healed people, did all these things, he was still, at night time, when he's completely exhausted, willing to engage in a relationship with someone that had further questions.

I don't know about you, but when I get home around 5:00 or 5:30, I'm tanked. I want to sit on my couch, get an ice-cold glass of water and just veg out for a second. I'm not always fired up to run into a six-year-old and an eight-year-old and love and get my daily delay with my wife. I'm tired, exhausted.

As a matter of fact, our Care Pastor Don... I told you he lives right next door to me. He does three services. He works his tail off on Sundays. I finished my porch last Sunday afternoon. He gets home from church around 2:00. I'm like, "Don, check out my porch!" He's like, "I don't want to hear it; leave me alone," And just walks straight into his house. Don's my buddy; we have the best friendship and I love that he's in my neighborhood. I get it; he's exhausted. He's been having conversations all morning on Sunday. I get it. So, when we come home, the first thing we want to do is not have a conversation with our neighbor, it's not to love on our neighbor. It's probably to do what Karen does to me. Like I said, Karen, if you're watching, I love you. Come over, I will cook you your favorite meal.

Here's the other part about this that's really interesting. Nicodemus doesn't want to be noticed. He pulled what some of you husbands pull. You act like you're going to bed with your wife and then once she falls asleep, you kind of sneak out of bed and start playing a couple more hours of Duty and Fortnite.

Nicodemus did the same thing. He probably waited until his wife went to bed because she doesn't want him messing with this guy who is stirring up all this trouble. She doesn't want him with a guy who is threatening what Jews think is supposed to be. Jesus doesn't look like what he's supposed to be. So, he sneaks out at night.

What we learn from this is **to love our neighbor well, we can't make them feel like an inconvenience.** Nothing in this passage do we feel like Nicodemus was an inconvenience to Jesus. As a matter of fact, Jesus was willing, after a long day of work, to go overtime and spend more time with this religious leader.

It continues on in John 3, ***"Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him."*** That's an amazing statement that Nicodemus is making right there. You realize what he just said, Woodland Hills. "We know that you are from God. No one can be doing these things you're doing. We know that you are from God."

So many of you in here today, you know God, you know Jesus; you heard it your whole life. You went to Sunday school. You come to church on Sunday. You know God. But you really know Him? Nicodemus knew him, could recite all the passage of the Pentateuch and the Torah.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I'm here to tell you today that there are **12 inches that literally can change the course of history. Forget that. They can change the course of eternity.** What are those 12 inches? Those 12 inches are from your mind to your heart. Think about, throughout history, how much 12 inches has literally changed everything. What about Alexander Hamilton and Burr? Twelve inches on that shot and Hamilton lives, and history is completely changed forever.

What about Joe Montana and Dwight Clark? Twelve inches too high and it's a completely different Superbowl Champ. Sorry Cowboy fans.

What about Michael Jordan and the Utah Jazz? Twelve inches to the right, twelve inches to the left, twelve inches short and John Stockton and Karl Malone finally get an NBA Championship that they never received.

What about poor Justin Gatlin that was just in the wrong era of a man named Usain Bolt, right? How many gold medals would he have received just 12 inches if Usain Bolt wasn't faster than him and all the gold medals he would have received.

How many golf championships have been won or lost by 12 inches? How many lives have been literally spared by traffic accident by 12 inches? Twelve inches changes a lot in the course of history, but no 12 inches are greater than the ones between the head and the heart. You see, there are a lot of Christians that say they know Jesus, but they haven't actually given them their heart.

This is why I say that. For a Christian that has really given Jesus their heart, they look radically different than someone who just knows him. This is what I mean by that. Jesus said, "They will know you are my disciples by the way you love them." And when we don't love people well and we just have a mind of Jesus but not a heart of Jesus. You see, the mind is very similar to Nicodemus – self-righteous, pharisee, judgmental, critical, wants to tell everybody what they're doing wrong. A heart of Jesus wants to step into the neighborhood and love people well. That's why Jesus is the greatest leader there ever was and no leader will ever be more impactful than he was.

So, 12 inches to change history. From the head to the heart. Romans 10 says, **9 If you declare with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.** You can have all the head knowledge you want but knowledge without application is meaningless. You could have all the great advice and the wisdom in the world, but unapplied, it is useless.

John 3 goes on to say, **3 Jesus replied...** And you are going to see three different times that Jesus says truly, truly, which is crazy because in John 14: 6 he says, "I am the way, the truth and the life. No one shall come to the father except through me." He being Jesus. He'd saying, Nicodemus, this is the truth; believe the truth. **"Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again."**

**4 "How can someone be born when they are old?" Nicodemus asked. "Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother's womb to be born!"** He obviously doesn't understand that Jesus is talking spiritually. He doesn't understand the verse that will come from Paul is 2 Corinthians 5: 17, which says, **If anyone is in Christ, they are a new creation. The old is gone and the new has come.** He's not talking physically, we know that it's physically impossible to be born again. He's talking about being born again as a new believer, born again in Christ. The old is gone, the new creation has come. Anyone who has surrendered their life to Jesus and trusts in him as their personal Lord and Savior becomes a new human being. They get a Holy Spirit inside of them and they are completely transformed. Nicodemus doesn't understand that, and even though he doesn't understand it, Jesus' response is not one of annoyance, like ours when someone thinks differently than we do politically. Here's the reality.

**To love our neighbor well, we must exercise patience with their cluelessness.** Some of us are laughing and giggling and some of us are quiet because we know we haven't done a great job of exercising our patience with tourist driving... cluelessness. Or we haven't exercised our patience with what we consider cluelessness of a different political belief than ours. Or we have exercised our patience with someone's cluelessness when they think differently than we do spiritually or biblically.

How do we respond to someone else's cluelessness? Let me drive it a little closer to home. How do you respond to your spouse's cluelessness? I just saw so many heads turn. I do not want to be at that lunch conversation. The way Jesus responds is amazing. Look how he responds to cluelessness.

**5 Jesus answered, "Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit."** He's talking about salvation and baptism. **6 "Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. 7 You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.' 8 The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit."** What a gentle response. Not, "You idiot, I can't believe you believe that politically." "Are you kidding me!?" Fill in the blank.

You see, the problem that we have as Christians isn't our Jesus, it's those who claim to following him who show a poor reflection of him. Mahatma Ghandi, who was a peace activist in India, said it best. *"It's not Jesus I have a problem with; it's his followers who look so unlike the Jesus they claim to follow."* That doesn't mean we have to be perfect. But let me ask you this. In your community, in your world, in your neighborhood, as we step into the neighborhood, do those who don't believe in the Jesus that you believe in, do they look at you and say, "Man, there's something so different about the way they love and listen and care and give, it makes me scratch my head because they have something I don't have"? Or, do they look at you and say, "Those people claim to follow Jesus and they look just like I do, not following Jesus. They engage in the same hateful rhetoric. They engage in the same activities and places and all the same things."

Ladies and gentlemen, non-believers should act like non-believers. Why are you surprised? They don't have Jesus living inside of them compelling their hearts to love and to give. I know in this day and age in cancel culture, it's really hard to be a Christian because we get muddied in with those crazy people out there with picket signs and yelling and boycotting and everything else.

Jesus was concerned about the things of the kingdom. He wasn't concerned about getting in all these other things that would mess up his testimony or his witness. And he did it with so much passion and compassion. He was so loving and so gentle. This challenges me like how I'm going to approach the lady in my neighborhood and try to love her well and serve her well. And figure out the four times of year she's in to tell me everything I'm doing wrong and just say, "Yes ma'am your right, I need to follow the HOA. I know there are agreements. I didn't realize a basketball goal meant that much to you, but I'll take care of it."

How are you doing in loving the clueless ones in your life and showing them compassion?

**To love our neighbor well, we must help create clarity where there is confusion.** I think my neighbor is confused about who I really am. I'm not perfect. I'm not a saint. I'm not an angel. But I really don't think she realizes how much my wife and I would love to love on her. We love on every neighbor in our neighborhood. I have a late 80s couple that lives right next door to us. I got to shovel his drive way when snowmageddon hit this year. I get to help him with his dog. My wife and I love it.

If Don and Cheryl ever need anything, we would them in a heartbeat. Sweet neighbors that live next to them... So, rather than being toxic at a waiter or waitress that doesn't understand something, help create clarity where there is confusion. You do that by having healthy conversations. Not jumping into some social media, vomiting your feelings and then exiting. That doesn't create clarity; that creates more confusion. Not yelling at somebody that made a mistake or did something wrong at the airport or in traffic; that creates confusion. Throwing a one finger wave and having an egghose on the back of your car is very confusing for a lot of people. Or a cross on your car as you lay on the horn at somebody. That creates confusion for who Jesus really is.

It goes on to say in John 3, **9 "How can this be?" Nicodemus asked.**

**10 "You are Israel's teacher," said Jesus...** Jesus knows the answer; he knows he's the teacher of Israel. This brother knows the Old Testament inside and out. **"and do you not understand these things?"** Watch what he does here. He brings him to the Old Testament. He helps create clarity where there is confusion. **11 "Very truly..."** Jesus is very adamant about this truth part. He's telling the truth. **"...I tell you, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony. 12 I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things? 13 No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of Man,"** which is Jesus.

The Son of Man is sitting across from Nicodemus at this conversation, and he doesn't realize he is the Son of Man yet. Now he's bringing it back to have relatability with him. He brings it back to something Nicodemus will understand. He finds a connecting point with his neighbor. He's loving him well. Regardless if it's a Boston Red Sox fan and a Yankees fan, he's finding a common ground. Whether it's a Cubs fan or a Cardinals fan, he's finding a common ground. You see what he's doing here? Whether it's a Chiefs fan or a Raiders fan, he's finding a common ground. He's seeing past their differences and seeing how he can connect with him. How can you connect with your neighbors who don't think like you, act like you, cheer for the same things you do, think the same way politically you do, and eat the same foods you do? How can you connect with them?

**14 "Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, 15 that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him."** Jesus just flipped this guy's world upside down. He just basically told him, "Guess what? You think that following the law and the rules and all the checklists were going to get you to heaven? Well, I'm here and the only way you're going to get to heaven now is through the Son of Man." Poor Nicodemus. His mind is just blown. He knows this man is different.

I don't know if any of you have had the opportunity to watch this free series on YouTube called The Chosen. The director and producer, Dallas Jenkins, has done a phenomenal job. Keep in mind that he's taken the liberty to add fictional parts to this series that we don't know for sure scripture said it. He doesn't take any scripture out of context, there's no heresy or blasphemy through this series. If you haven't watched it, this should be a phenomenal series for you and your family to watch. He just launched the first episode of Season Two on Easter Sunday and it is unbelievable. I've laughed, I've cried. My wife and I have just absolutely loved it.

I'm going to show you a one-minute clip from this series. Once again, it's free on YouTube. It's called The Chosen. This is a conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus that he captured, I believe, so unbelievably well.

[video clip plays]

I literally get chills every time I watch that video clip. He knew. Nicodemus knew who he was sitting across from, but he wasn't ready to give him his heart. He wasn't ready to get to that point. When we talk about going into the neighborhood and stepping in and loving our neighbor, it's fascinating because in Luke 10, this lawyer tries to justify who he has to love. He wants to pick who he gets to love. Jesus completely flips that and tells the Parable of the Good Samaritan. Basically, in this story, Jesus is telling this lawyer, "I want you to love the very individual you don't want to love. I want you to love the person who thinks differently than you do politically. I want you to love the person that emails your HOA and gives you an email every time they visit town. I want you to love the person that drives you crazy.

As a matter of fact, I want you to think about that person that when they walk in the room every time the hair on the back of your neck stands up. That person is the very person Jesus told us to love and step into their neighborhood. That is the person we're called to love. He didn't give us an option. He didn't say, "I just want you to go love the people that are really easy to love, that get along with you, that tell you what you want to hear, that don't disagree with you on anything..." No. That's not who he told us to love. And he said, "You will know you are my disciples by the way you love others." And guess what? They also will know that you are his disciples by the way you love others.

I've never heard anyone in my whole life say this. "Please stop loving me." "Will you keep cussing at me and come at me with your toxic rhetoric so then I'll want to hear about your Jesus." Said on one ever.

"You just chewed me out. Now tell me about Jesus. Now tell me why I want to come over to your house for dinner."

The scariest 12 inches in all of life is that we can have this knowledge of Jesus but not a heart for Jesus. We haven't given him our heart. And when we give Jesus our heart, it compels us to love people we don't want to love. It compels us to care for people we normally wouldn't even think twice about.

The Lawyer says, "Who is my neighbor?" And Jesus says, "It's the person you don't want to love. And you're supposed to love them the same way you would love yourself." It tells us that to love our neighbor well, we must find ways to relate to them, not to make them mold to the way we think and the way we want them to act. We must find ways to relate to them.

I think about the journey God has taken me on and how many little languages I've learned along the way trying to love people well and speak their language instead of assuming they speak mine. You know why the French can't stand us as tourists? It's because we go over to France and expect them to speak English. It's unbelievable. I had friends growing up that were Philippine and I tried to learn their language. "Kamusta ka na" means how are you. Or Mandarin – "Ni hao." We went over to Tanzania with our missionary, Bob, that's a part of this church. He helped me learn how to say it in Tanzania. I

want to relate to them. I don't want them to come over to me and expect me to... No. How can I step into your world and love you well?

Here's the greatest thing about this thing. We just looked at John 3: 1-15 and I'll close with this. You all know what the next passage is. It's the most quoted verse in all of the Bible. John 3: 16. I think there is such an important piece that is actually missed in that verse that says, "For God so loved the world he gave his only begotten son that whoever would believe in him should not perish but would have eternal life.

Let me tell you what we miss so much in that passage, and I have for so many years of my life. That God so loved the world he gave. You see, loving someone and giving is connected. Giving of our time, giving of our resources, giving of our patience, giving. You can't love someone and not give. So, giving and taking are opposites of one another. So, if you're just a taker and you only want something from your co-worker because you want the promotion or your only friends with somebody because they might be able to help you financially or your social status, etc., you aren't loving them the way Jesus loves them. And you're definitely not loving them the way the Father loved us when he gave.

Giving and loving are connected to one another; they can't be separate. Giving and taking are opposites of one another. As Christians, if we are takers, we are a really poor example of our Lord and Savior Jesus who gave the ultimate price, which was his life for ours. He tasted death so you and I don't have to. That's why you and I get to step into the neighborhood and love our neighbors well, because he has called us to. He said, "I'll know you're my disciples by the way you love others." May I go love my Karen well. May you go love this neighborhood well. Imagine the impact that Woodland Hills Family Church could have with our patience, with our compassion, and with our love for this community. Oh, my goodness, the love of Christ has not stopped impacting for generation after generation. Amen?

Father God, thank you so much for the lessons that Jesus and Nicodemus teach us. God, help me to love my neighbor well. Help me to love the people who don't think like me and act like me well. Help me to pursue people you desire to reach. Help all of us in this room to listen to people the way you listen, to see people the way you see them, to speak to them the way you speak, and have a heart for them the way you have a heart for them.

God, forgive us of the times that we do not reflect you well. I pray you use this church body to love Stone and Taney and Northern Arkansas and Springfield and just this whole area well. May people be curious about this group of people by the way they love them as it is an overflow of your love for us.

It's in the powerful and pure, mighty and matchless name of Jesus that we pray. And all God's people said... Amen.