

One truth shared: The only one who can save you is Jesus.

No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of Man. Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him.

John 3:13-15

The Only One

You're not good enough. You're too young. You're too inexperienced. You don't know what life is really like—you should sit this one out and let those with more experience handle it! Isn't it frustrating when you hear that? You know full well there's value to experience, but doesn't hard work and persistence and the energy of youth count for something? Just let me try it! And when you do try, what if you fail? The pressure is on!

All of this is natural, and it's not unique to your younger years. It's human nature to try and take care of yourself, to long for independence and freedom... and that aspect of human nature extends beyond daily needs. It can creep into spiritual thinking as well. It's easy to repeat the biblical teaching: "I'm not perfect, I'm sinful and I need a Savior." But it's a lot harder to live in that reality—it's much easier to try and explain away our shortcomings rather than taking responsibility. Everyone around me says those words—it can't be that bad. It's just a picture on a phone—no one is actually getting hurt—it's not that big of a deal. Sure, I'm not perfect, but I go to church more often than not, and I'm generally a nice person. Doesn't that count for something?

Today's Bible reading shows us a man who likely had similar thoughts at times. This man's name was Nicodemus, and he'd been raised in the customs and way of life of God's Old Testament people. Sacrifices, festivals, fasting, a special diet, and so much more—he did it all, and then some! He was a member of the Pharisees—pious religious leaders, well respected among the people. Surely that counts for something!

Ahh, but Jesus knows better. What Nicodemus had done wasn't enough to please God. In the same way, what you and I do isn't enough to please God. It falls so far short it would be laughable if it weren't for the eternal consequence of hell. Notice the repeated words Jesus uses throughout this conversation: *no one*. No one can see the kingdom of God... no one... can enter the kingdom of God... no one... has gone into heaven. The best efforts of people fall short.

But there is an exception. No one, Jesus says, except the Son! Jesus can please God, and he did. What's more, he did it for you. In Jesus you are reborn as God's dearly loved child. God is pleased with you! In Jesus, you can have confidence in life even if other people have doubts, because it doesn't depend on you. You aren't what you make of yourself—you are what Jesus made you to be! A child of God!

Prayer: Dear Jesus, you have redeemed me and called me into your family. Teach me to rely on you and your work on my behalf instead of finding satisfaction in my own actions and the opinions of others. Lead me to live each day secure in the knowledge that I was reborn in the waters and promises of my baptism and my new identity as your dearly loved child. Amen.

Foundation Teen Facilitators Guide

Year A – Lent 2

Our Greatest Needs

One truth shared: The only one who can save you is Jesus.

The Only One

Starting the Discussion: *This first section is intended to be light and easy, to engage and get the conversation going. Have a little fun with these questions.*

- List goals you hope to accomplish this year. Then list what you think will be the biggest obstacle you'll have to overcome. Then explain how you plan to overcome that obstacle. *(Evaluate the responses and take note of how many of them involve hard work, discipline, or personal effort and how many involve the help of someone else.)*
- Point: We tend to work towards being self-sufficient. Generally speaking, this is a good thing.

Connecting: *This section serves as a bridge between the opening conversation and the body of the study/discussion. It should get the group thinking about the topic/text even before they've looked at it.*

Name a *spiritual* goal you hope to accomplish in the next year. List what you think will be the biggest obstacles you'll have to overcome. Then explain how you plan to overcome them. *(Evaluate the responses and take note of how many of them involve hard work, discipline, or personal effort and how many involve the help of someone else. Likely many teens will involve praying or something as part of their plan.)*

Digging In: *Here we want to dig into some texts or the text for the day and see what Scripture says. The questions are meant to be open ended to give a beginning of a scriptural conversation. These are a guide for a spiritual and scriptural conversation.*

- Nicodemus, the Pharisee Jesus was talking to, was raised under the Old Testament law with its sacrifices, dietary restrictions, and the like. Put yourself in Nicodemus' shoes. How might he have described what it takes to have a good relationship with God? How did he think he was doing? *(Observing festivals, bringing sacrifices, carefully following the details of the OT law, etc. He probably thought he was doing okay because he'd made great efforts.)*
- What were God's purposes for the Old Testament sacrifices, rituals, and general lifestyle? *(They were a shadow of what Jesus would do when he came, a general hedge against practices found in other religions: "don't be a pagan," and the realization that even living daily life causes one to be ceremonially unclean at times, demonstrating that pleasing God by human effort is impossible.)*

What are some Bible examples where you see people misunderstanding that purpose? *(Pharisee behavior of making additional laws to keep people from getting close to real laws; OT prophets decry ritualistic piety with phrases like these: "rend your hearts and not your garments," "I hate your sacrifices"; early church struggles with circumcision, eating food purchased at pagan temples [cf. Acts 15], etc.)*

- Read the conversation recorded in John 3:1-15 with a partner. Describe, in your own words, what basic truths Jesus is trying to explain to Nicodemus in v. 1-15. (*vv. 1-3 – Nicodemus’ piety wasn’t enough, he needed to be “born again”; v. 4-5 – this rebirth is necessary; vv. 6-8 – why this rebirth is necessary; vv. 9-15 – Nicodemus, your knowledge of the OT laws and your efforts to keep them are not enough. You need to know the Messiah [Son of Man] and what he does.*)
- Based on what you know about Pharisees and Old Testament law, in what ways is Jesus’ teaching different from what Nicodemus is probably accustomed to? (*OT law on the surface appeared to be very effort-based, and Jesus is describing how that falls short and a messiah is needed.*)
- Based on what Jesus teaches here and in the rest of Scripture, what is the correct role of “effort” in a Christian’s life? (*In coming to God—nothing! You must BE BORN AGAIN [note the passive verbs]—this is something God does to and for you [justification]. Christians make efforts to serve God only make effort AFTER God has made you his child, and then you strive to serve him [sanctification].*)

Conclusion: *Here we want to wrap up the discussion, perhaps circling back to the “connecting question” above.*

What guidance does this Bible story give to Christians like you and me as we make plans and set goals to improve things in our lives? Try to take it deeper than “pray that Jesus will help me.” (*Our effort and discipline will only take us so far, especially when it comes to spiritual goals. Hard work and discipline are often rewarded in life, but we have limits. This is true in pursuing earthly goals, and even more true in spiritual goals.*)