

Outrageous!
Unimaginable Requirement
April 26, 2015

**PRELUDE – Made New
Worship – Made New / The Saving One
Feature – “Whataya Want from Me?”
(Adam Lambert)**

Good morning everyone.

“Whataya want from me? What’s the requirement to get ‘in’ with you? What must happen for me to be accepted by you? Whataya want from me?”

That’s a great question to ask in any relationship – not just a romantic one (which is the context of the Adam Lambert song we just heard). And it’s actually a great question to ask of God. “God, whataya

want from me? What's the requirement to get 'in' with You? What must happen for me to be accepted by You?"

As Shannon said, this morning we are continuing in our series *Outrageous* – looking at some of the things that Jesus said and did that, to our pluralistic, tolerant and politically-correct way of thinking, often seem more than just a little bit “out there.” And in just a few minutes, we're going to look at His outrageous answer to the question but, first, I think it would be valuable to back up just a bit and remind ourselves just *who it is* that's giving the answer.

A Look Back

In the first week of this series (back on

Easter Sunday), we discovered that Jesus made an incredible number of extraordinary claims concerning who He was and what He was doing; claims that serve to set Him far apart from every other religious leader in human history. Jesus, simply put, is not the Western world's version of Muhammad or The Buddha or any other influential spiritual guide for none of them (or their followers) ever claimed what He claimed. Jesus is unique. There has never been anyone else like him. Ever.

And we saw that the only reason a sane person would ever take Jesus seriously is if Jesus actually *did* something extraordinary to validate His extraordinary claims ... which is exactly what happened and why Christianity came into existence in the first

place. The disciples did not become Apostles ... Jews and Romans did not come together to form churches ... and believers did not withstand persecution because the message of Jesus was so winsome and wonderful and radically different (though it was). They did those things only because they had seen and experienced the renewed, restored and regenerated Jesus in the flesh for well over a month and then saw Him return to His Heavenly Father.

Even today, 2,000 years later, the resurrection of Jesus is still the only reason (fundamentally) for the existence of this church or any other. If Jesus didn't really rise from the dead, we should all leave right now and go join the Hare Krishnas or the Wiccans or the atheists.

And, even today, it's what Jesus *did* to validate His claims that compels us to take seriously the shocking exclusion we learned about two weeks ago and the stunning invitation we learned about last week.

What was that exclusion?

If you think of yourself as a “good person” ... if you think of yourself as one who is already acceptable to God because you just haven't messed up like everyone else or as bad as everyone else ... or you *have* messed up but you have worked hard to make up for it in some way ... if you're already righteous, then Jesus really isn't interested in you.

“It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.” Luke 5:31-32 (NIV)

“I’m not interested in those who believe they have no need for a savior. I’m here for the people who are willing to be honest and admit they do not measure up and have fallen short of what God intends humans to be.”

That was – and is – the exclusion ... which is why the *invitation* that Shannon taught us about last Sunday was so stunning. To those who were sinners – not to those who believed they were righteous – to those who were sinners ...

Jesus said ...

“Follow Me.”

Matthew 4:19, 8:22, 9:9, 19:21

Mark 1:17, 2:14, 8:34, 10:21

Luke 5:27, 9:23, 9:59, 18:22

John 1:43, 12:26, 21:19-22

And He said it again and again. “Follow me.”

And even more stunning than the fact that Jesus said this to sinners was that he didn’t add any of the qualifiers that most people would expect of a religious leader. He didn’t say ...

- “If you’ll change, then you can follow me.”
- “If you’ll start giving your money to my ministry, then you can follow me.”
- “If you’ll stop drinking (or being mean or being lazy or being gay), then you can follow me.”

He didn't say ...

- “If you'll agree that the creation accounts in the first three chapters of Genesis are literal history, then you can follow me.”
- He didn't even say “If you believe in me, then you can follow me.” (If he had, no one would have ever followed since the disciples didn't truly believe until he had risen from the dead and they had seen him and touched him).

Most people think the invitation of Jesus is “change (in some way) and then you can follow Me” when in reality, it's the other way around: “Follow Me ... get up close to me ... learn from me ... become friends with me ... see that I really am who I say I am ...

and *then God will do something in you* and you will find yourself changing and becoming more of who I want you to be in the process.”

And if you read the story of the first followers of Jesus in the New Testament that is exactly what happened to them. They were transformed by *their relationship* with Jesus.

By the way, I thought Shannon did an outstanding job of illustrating that whole concept for us last Sunday and, if you weren't here, I encourage you to watch, listen to or read her message.

You can get to it from the home screen of our new app (“North Heartland Comm Church” available from the Play Store or

the iTunes Store).

When the app comes up, you just touch the series title, *Outrageous*.

... which will take you to the message list screen ...

... where you then touch the date and title of the message (4-19 “Stunning Invitation”).

Then choose the format you want – video, audio or text.

Pretty cool stuff.

What MUST Happen

Now, with all that said, I think it’s pretty clear that Jesus was promoting something

very different from the typical understanding of religion which, for most people, is first and foremost about keeping the rules. Jesus, first and foremost, is about relationship.

However, as is true of any kind of serious relationship, eventually the question posed by that great contemporary theologian Adam Lambert (I'm kidding) comes up: "what do you want from me? What's the requirement to really get 'in' with you? What must happen for me to be accepted by you?"

And to answer that question (actually, to see how Jesus answers it) we're going to look at a conversation that took place between Jesus and one of the spiritual leaders of Israel.

But before we do, I want to say that I've been thinking about this message all week – actually for several weeks – and looking forward to it with great anticipation and excitement because I think, for some of you, *what you are about to hear is the single most important spiritual truth you've ever heard in your life.*

- Some of you are brand new to this “church thing” and you came in with the typical rules-based religion model. You thought that was what Christianity was all about and we've been blowing that up over the past few weeks and you just can't wait to know what the next step is. Today you're going find out.

- And some of you have been around for a while – maybe even for a long time – and you have listened to message after message and sensed God speaking to you – you know something is going on down deep inside at the soul level – but you have never quite been able to figure out how to seal the deal. Today, you’re going to find out.
- And some of you are a lot like me in that what you’re going to hear in the next few minutes is something you learned a long, long time ago. And your first thought is probably going to be “oh *that*.” But I bet that by the end of this message you, too, will be thinking, “wow, I never really thought of it that way before. Thank you God for what you have done for me.” At

least, that's what I hope will happen.

So let's get into it. The conversation we're going to look at is found in the third chapter of the Gospel of John but I actually want to start in the second chapter so as to give it the correct context.

John chapter 2 verse 13 tells us that Jesus is in Jerusalem and has probably been there at least a few weeks. And while he is there goes into the Temple and throws everybody out because they have turned it into a corrupt business and dishonored God.

Of course, that raises the ire of the *leaders* of the Temple – the Pharisees and the teachers of the Law – and they want to know by what authority he is doing such a

thing ... which, of course, is their basic issue with him all along: he's doing and saying things that only God Himself has the right to do.

Anyway, while Jesus is in Jerusalem, it's the feast of the Passover, so thousands of pilgrims are also there. And many of them, John tells us in verse 23, see the kinds of things that Jesus is saying and doing – especially the miracles of healing and casting out demons. And they believe in him ... which you would think is a good thing ...

... except that John goes on to say that ...

But Jesus didn't trust them, because he knew all about people. No one needed to tell

him about human nature, for he knew what was in each person's heart.

John 2:24-25 (NLT)

Jesus did not believe in their believing. He had no faith in their faith because He understood human nature.

Now, hold that thought in the back of your mind as we flip the page to chapter three of John's Gospel ...

... where he writes:

There was a man named Nicodemus, a Jewish religious leader who was a Pharisee. After dark one evening, he came to speak with Jesus. John 3:1 (NLT)

From other scriptures we know that

Nicodemus was a member of the Sanhedrin, a council of 70 elders that provided spiritual leadership to the people of Israel. The Sanhedrin was also a powerful political entity that had been given authority to govern Judea (the southern province of Israel that included Jerusalem) under the direction of Herod who had been appointed by the Roman Empire.

So, if this had happened in our day and time, Nicodemus would have been like a combination of a Roman Catholic Cardinal and a United States Senator all rolled into one – he had both spiritual and political authority. He was a man who commanded respect and who was probably used to being respected.ⁱ

And he comes to Jesus by night ... which

leads some commentators to suggest he's afraid of being seen with Jesus. But, given his power and position – and the current popularity of Jesus – that doesn't make a lot of sense.

I think a better explanation is that Nicodemus is a devout Pharisee and devout Pharisees would often set the nighttime aside for study and for pondering the Law of Moses. Psalm 16:7 says that “our hearts instruct us by night” and Psalm 63:6 says that “the righteous meditate on God on their beds.” A better explanation is that Nicodemus is accustomed to nightly study and reflection on the things of God. And on this particular night, the subject of his study and reflection is Jesus of Nazareth.ⁱⁱ

“Rabbi,” he said, “we all know that God has sent you to teach

us. Your miraculous signs are evidence that God is with you.”

John 3:2 (NLT)

Now, obviously, Nicodemus is very aware of what's been going on in his city. And, even though he's probably experienced at least some tension over the whole Temple-clearing business, he is impressed with Jesus – as most everyone was – because of the miraculous things Jesus has been doing. He calls Jesus “rabbi” which is what he himself would have been called, signaling that he thought of Jesus as a peer. And he pays him what seems to be a high compliment. “God truly is with you.”

But if Nicodemus has come to Jesus at night to learn, Jesus is going to see to it that no ordinary learning takes place. His aim is not going to be to help Nicodemus “know”

but to reduce him to unknowing. Nicodemus is part of a constituency that *knows* things—the Law, the oral traditions, the customs, the prophets, the prophecies. “Rabbi, we know,” he says to Jesus. “We know who you are, we know what you do.”

But Jesus doesn't care about what Nicodemus knows. He cares about Nicodemus' life. He wants to save it, and to do that, he first has to undermine it, undermine the sensible, reasoned thing that passes for a good and virtuous life.ⁱⁱⁱ

Jesus replied, “Well, Nick, I sure do appreciate you stopping by for a few minutes to shoot the breeze with me.”

No, that's not what Jesus says:

He says ...

“I tell you the truth, unless you are born anōthen [which is the actual word in the Greek – and we’ll talk more about that in a minute] ... unless you are born anōthen, you cannot see the Kingdom of God.” John 3:3 (NLT)

Now, if you’re a bystander watching this scene between these two men, you would be scratching your head at this point and thinking, “wait, am I missing something here?”

Here’s this really important highly-respected spiritual leader who has probably been praying and meditating on God as he does every evening. And then he senses a prompting to go meet up with this amazing

teacher and miracle worker and maybe talk about the glories of God and His Word and just share some fellowship. And when he pays him what is probably one of the highest compliments he's ever given to another human being, Jesus completely ignores it and instead, points out Nicodemus' greatest spiritual problem.

“Know this Nick: unless you are born *an~~o~~then* you cannot see the Kingdom of God. *That's the requirement.* Unless you meet it, you cannot get in. “

Wow! Even though Nicodemus recognizes Jesus as a master teacher; even though he is moved to believe by Jesus' miracles; even though he has humbled himself to come and seek instruction ... Jesus is telling him that's not enough. There is another

requirement to “get in.”

And that’s important to note, I think, because the attitude and perspective of Nicodemus towards Jesus mirrors the attitude and perspective that many of us also have. We think of Jesus as a master teacher. We’re impressed by His miracles. So we say yes to His invitation to “follow me” in spite of all of our shortcomings and we come to church and read the Bible to seek instruction in his ways.

But that’s not enough, Jesus says. There is another requirement ... being “born anothen” ... a concept which on the surface seems as unimaginable to us as it did to Nicodemus.

*“What do you mean?”
exclaimed Nicodemus. “How*

*can an old man go back into his
mother's womb and be born
another?"*

John 3:4 (NLT)

Now, at this point, it's worth noting that the Greek word *another* can have two meanings. Sometimes it means "again" and sometimes it means "from above."

Obviously, when Jesus says to Nicodemus "you must be born *another*" Nicodemus hears it as "again" and, because of his respect for Jesus, takes it literally. "I don't know Jesus. Do you really expect me to go back in to my mother's womb a second time and come out again? I know it's only the first century but we know enough about biology to know that can't happen."

But that's not what Jesus means ...

... as He further explains to Nicodemus:

Jesus replied, “I assure you, no one can enter the Kingdom of God without being born of water and the Spirit. Humans can reproduce only human life, but the Holy Spirit gives birth to spiritual life. So don’t be surprised when I say, ‘You must be born an~~o~~then.’”

John 3:5-7 (NLT)

Obviously, when Jesus uses the word “an~~o~~then” he doesn’t mean “again” in a physical sense. He means “from above” in a spiritual sense. But he doesn’t mean that metaphorically. He means literally. Being born from above is something God has to bring about in our lives – though it’s impossible to explain exactly how it

happens.

“The wind blows wherever it wants. Just as you can hear the wind but can’t tell where it comes from or where it is going, so you can’t explain how people are born of the Spirit.”

John 3:8 (NLT)

“You can’t explain it, Nick. But it’s a requirement. It’s not optional. You must be born again not physically but from above.”

And at this point, it’s pretty clear that Jesus has just blown Nicodemus’ mind.

“How are these things possible?” Nicodemus asked.

Obviously, this is a completely new idea to him which seems to frustrate Jesus.

*Jesus replied, “You are a respected Jewish teacher, and yet you don’t understand these things? John 3:9-10
(NLT)*

“You know so much, Nick. How do you not know *this*?”

Now, that seems pretty harsh. But Jesus clearly expected this well-respected rabbi to know what He was talking about.

I think he was expecting Nicodemus to realize that God’s ultimate plan was not people trying hard to improve themselves by changing and cleaning up their act – which was the way of the Pharisees in Jesus’ day (to say nothing of it being the way of many “religionists” in our day).

Instead, God’s plan was clearly spelled in a great prophecy that would have been well known to someone in Nicodemus’ role as “the teacher of Israel.”

It’s from Ezekiel 36 where God is recorded as saying:

“I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean. Your filth will be washed away, and you will no longer worship idols. And I will give you a new heart, and I will put a new spirit in you.”

Ezekiel 36:25-26 (NLT)

“I will take out your stony, stubborn heart and give you a tender, responsive heart. And I will put my Spirit in you so that you will follow my decrees and be careful to obey my regulations.”

Ezekiel 36:27 (NLT)

“You shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers, and you shall be my people, and I will be your God.” Ezekiel 36:28

Notice the similarity between that and what Jesus said about being born from above?

“You must be born of water and the Spirit” he told Nicodemus ... which was the same thing God had said through Ezekiel. “I will wash you and make you clean by forgiving and removing the stain of all your sins. And I will create something new inside of you. My Spirit will live in you.”

Long before Jesus came on the scene, it had been foretold that entering the Kingdom of

God would require a dramatic cleansing of the old and creation of the new. And Jesus expected Nicodemus to be aware of that. “You must be born *anōthen* – again, from above.”

Tough Questions (& Answers)

Now, at this point, I think it would be a good idea to call time out on the story and talk about some of the questions that typically arise from what we have just heard. Obviously, this particular statement of Jesus – this requirement – has a pretty heavy payload. It’s pretty much central to the whole idea of Christianity. To put it another way, you simply cannot be a Christian without also being “born *anōthen* – again from above.” They mean the same thing.

Unfortunately, however, the terminology “born again” has fallen into disfavor in recent years. In fact, for at least a few of us here today, the whole notion of being “born again” is so negatively associated with a conservative political agenda that the idea that *we ourselves* would *ever* be counted among the “born again” is as much of an unimaginable requirement as it was for Nicodemus.

So let’s tackle that issue first since I’m sure it’s at the top of mind for some of us.

1. Does being “born again” also require one to become a religious fundamentalist and/or a political conservative?

No.

This has nothing to do with politics or how we read and interpret the scripture. It has everything to do with how we react and respond to the real person of Jesus of Nazareth ... which *may* lead us to become more literal in our approach to the scripture and more conservative in our political views.

But it also may not. There are many born again Christians who are definitely *not* conservative. In fact, what's ironic about the whole negative impression of being born again is that the first person who made it both a public and political issue in the USA was former President Jimmy Carter in the mid-1970s ... a born-again Christian, deeply committed to Jesus and the church and the Kingdom of God but

hardly someone who would be described as fundamentalist or conservative.

2. Why is it necessary to be “born again from above”?

And, as I hope I have made clear, according to Jesus it *is* necessary. He told Nicodemus “you *must* be born an^othen” ... not “I *suggest* you consider the possibility of being born an^othen” ... not “gosh, your life would improve *so much* if you added this born again from above experience!”

So, why is it that “unless one is born again from above he or she cannot see the kingdom of God”?

I like the way pastor John Piper describes it. He writes:^{iv}

Most people do not know what is really wrong with them. One way to help them make a true and terrible and hopeful diagnosis is to show them the kind of remedy God has provided, namely, the new birth. If you have a sore on your ankle and after the doctor does his test, he comes in and says, “I have bad news: We have to take your leg off just below the knee,” that remedy would tell you more about the sore than many fancy words. So it is with the remedy “you must be born again.”

Before the new birth happens to us, we are spiritually dead. We are morally rebellious. And we are legally guilty before God’s law and under his wrath. When Jesus tells us that we

must be born again he is telling us that our natural condition is hopelessly unresponsive, corrupt, and guilty.

And this concept of death, rebellion and guilt runs all through the New Testament. And in every case, the solution is a new birth from above by the Spirit.

Here's how the Apostle Paul once put it in a letter to another pastor by the name of Titus:

Once we, too, were foolish and disobedient. We were misled and became slaves to many lusts and pleasures. Our lives were full of evil and envy, and we hated each other.

But ...

When God our Savior revealed his kindness and love, he saved us, not because of the righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He washed away our sins, giving us a new birth and new life through the Holy Spirit. Titus 3:4-5 (NLT)

He generously poured out the Spirit upon us through Jesus Christ our Savior. Because of his grace he declared us righteous and gave us confidence that we will inherit eternal life.

Titus 3:6-7 (NLT)

Life, forgiveness, and legal justification (“righteousness”) is possible, Paul is saying, because of the new birth from above that comes from the Spirit.

And by the way, this also gives us the answer to another question which so often

comes up regarding this issue.

3. Might we need to be “born another” multiple times?

If you’ve been a Christian for a long time, you’ve probably wondered about this because we all have ups and downs spiritually. Sometimes we’re really close to Jesus and sometimes we’re not. Sometimes we fail and fall pretty hard. So, does that mean we need to be born again ... again ... and then again?

No.

When a person has been truly born again, Piper writes, “judgment is behind us and death is behind us, because our judgment happened when Jesus was judged in our place, and our death happened when Jesus

died in our place. And therefore, new life is in us and this life cannot perish and cannot be taken away. It's eternal.”^v

Or, as Paul writes to the Christians in Rome is “there is no condemnation for those who belong to Christ Jesus ... for the power of the life-giving Spirit has freed you from the power of sin that leads to death.”^{vi}

Practical Questions

Now, there are lots of other interesting questions we might consider at this point – mostly in the category of theological rabbit chasing – but, as we bring this to a close, I want to focus in on three questions where this gets very practical in application.

1. How can I know that I have been

born again from above?

This is a really hard question and, in fact, Jesus himself says there is no formula. He says it's like the wind blowing: you know that it's happening but you can't with the naked eye identify "this particular particle of air that came from here and is going there."

That said, I do think we can *know* that we have been born again and have new life. I think we can *know* that the wind of the Spirit has blown in our life and that we've responded in a way that produces the washing and the regeneration of a heart that's spiritually reborn that Ezekiel and Jesus talked about.

The question is do I see evidence of a tender, responsive heart to God? Is there a desire and a

willingness to know and love and follow Jesus fully and completely?

Now, that's not to say that we exhibit those characteristics perfectly (in fact, we never will in this life) but when we don't, is there a sadness and brokenness that drives us back to Jesus – trusting in his grace and mercy that then motivates us to continue to know and love and follow Him even though we have failed?

And again, I know that's a little bit nebulous, but if that dynamic isn't present in you – if you don't experience that kind of thing on regular basis – you might want to seriously consider whether or not you truly have been born of the Spirit ... which leads us to the final two questions.

2. How can we sense the “wind of the Spirit?”

Jesus compared the working of the Holy Spirit in leading us to be born again to the wind. How do you know when it that wind is blowing?

- Jesus explains very clearly in John 16:8 that the Holy Spirit convicts us of sin, righteousness and judgement. So, whenever you hear things about God which have that kind of effect on you, that’s the wind of the Spirit.
- In addition, he says that whenever we have an interest in knowing more about him (Jesus), that’s a sign of the Spirit’s work as well. “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws them.”^{vii}

- Finally, whenever spiritual truth begins to make sense to us in a way it never has before, that's also a sign that the Spirit is at work. Paul writes “the one without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned” (1 Corinthians 2:14). When you have a moment where the light comes on and you say, “aha, I get it” that's the wind of the Spirit.

Now, here's what's really cool about that. For almost every person in here today – if you came here this morning of your own volition, i.e. you weren't dragged here and/or you didn't come out of obligation

(“gotta do my spiritual duty”) ... lucky you, the wind of the Spirit is blowing.

3. How can we respond to the wind of the Spirit?

We can't make the wind blow, but once it does we can respond to it! But how?

Let's review the conversation: Jesus responds to Nicodemus by telling him that one must be born again.

When Nicodemus doesn't understand, Jesus clarifies, saying that one must be born of water and Spirit. One needs a new birth, with forgiveness and cleansing of all sin and a new spirit oriented away from sin and toward God.

When Nicodemus still doesn't get it, Jesus

gets even more straightforward, telling Nicodemus his identity and what he must do. And this is the rest of the story.

He says ...

“No one has ever gone to heaven and returned. But the Son of Man has come down from heaven.

And as Moses lifted up the bronze snake on a pole in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in him will have eternal life.”

John 3:13-15 (NLT)

The reference to Moses comes from Numbers 21. In that chapter, the Israelites were wandering in the desert after leaving Egypt. They were tired and grouchy and

complaining about God leading them out there. So, God sent a plague of poisonous serpents that harassed them and bit them. Many people died.

As a result, the Israelites repented of their complaining and called out to Moses for help. Then God told Moses to raise a bronze serpent on a pole – whoever would look at it would be saved from the snake bite.

Jesus uses that historical image to convey to Nicodemus the coming of the cross. Just as the Israelites had to focus their attention on a symbol of their sin that was lifted up for them to see, so do we have to focus our attention on Jesus who was lifted up on the Cross. Being born again is about recognizing our state of helplessness, and letting the Holy Spirit lift our eyes to the

Cross and trusting in what He did there.

As John put it:

To all who believed him and accepted him, he gave the right to become children of God. They are reborn—not with a physical birth resulting from human passion or plan, but a birth that comes from God. John 1:12-13 (NLT)

The issue is not just “do you believe?” not just “do you follow?” And, yes, you need to follow. You need to check Jesus out and we get that. Jesus gets that. But there’s a point where you believe *and accept*. You turn and say, “there is no other hope. I’ve got to look at the bronze snake. I’ve got to look at the cross, and I’ve got to receive that for myself.”

Closing

Now, tradition has it that Nicodemus did eventually respond to this wind of the Spirit blowing in his life. He did come to believe and then receive Jesus as his savior.

But the question is, what about us? What about us? As I said earlier, for some of us, this whole thing is brand new, it's like, "oh, I never got this before." And the question is, what are you going to do today? Are you going to, not just believe, not just follow, but actually receive and embrace Jesus as *your* savior?

Now, as we close, I want to give everyone here the opportunity to respond in some way. I've asked the band to do this

particular song. And this song is like a declaration. I think it's a great way to say "yes, I need the another birth. I need to be born again from above."

So, I'm just going to be quiet and let the band do this song. I'm going to let God speak to some of you because, right now, some of you need to say "yes."

Feature – I Choose Jesus

Exit Communion

Endnotes

ⁱ http://reformedperspectives.org/articles/rus_smith/NT.Smith.John.3.1-21.pdf

ⁱⁱ <http://sicutlocutusest.com/2014/03/13/now-you-can-begin/>

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid

^{iv} <http://www.desiringgod.org/sermons/you-must-be-born-again-why-this-series->

and-where-are-we-going

^v Ibid

^{vi} Romans 8:1-2 NLT

^{vii} John 6:44