

1 – “The Religiously Immunized” // John 2:23–3:16 // *Can’t Believe (Gospel of JOHN)*

Introduction

Ever seen one of these? It’s called a “gospel tract,” and it is how I was taught to share the gospel. Think of it as a short, tri-fold pamphlet that explains the basic points of the gospel. There’s no end to the number of these, ranging from the “no-nonsense, give-it-to-me-alliterated” version to the (monopoly pic) “creative adaptation of cultural icon” version to the “fake 10 dollar bill with the ‘here’s a real tip, trust Jesus’” admonition on the back (dollar bill: “disappointed?”). I loved the “in your face” tracts (Uncle Sam pic) “Chick tracts” were deluxe, featuring a multi-paged comic theme with scary pictures of demons coercing people to listen to Christian rock music and read versions other than the KJV. (“caught in web?” and “two viruses” pics, side by side)

We learned how to give these tracts to waitresses or those seated next to us on planes (especially if they looked nervous). If personal interaction made you uncomfortable, you could deposit these tracts stealthily in public restrooms, leave them in VHS tapes you were returning to Blockbuster, or (one of my favorites) asking the toll both attendant to give it to the person in the car behind you while you paid their toll. Or this one: (condom rack) One pastor even showed me how to hold a tract next to your car and release it so that it would land at the feet of someone standing on the side of the road as you drove by at a cool 35 MPH. I wish I were joking about some of this.

If someone asked Jesus into their heart during a gospel-tract presentation, there were a number of things we were supposed to say to them, printed helpfully for us right on the back of the tract.

- You were supposed to place an emphasis on Bible reading, prayer, and church attendance.
- You were also supposed to say something like this to them: *“Now that you’ve accepted Christ as your Savior, you are saved forever. You are guaranteed to go to heaven. He promises never to leave or forsake you and no one can pluck you out of your Father’s hand. So, from here on out, you are saved no matter what. Welcome to the family of God.”*

Did you know that a 2011 Barna study¹ shows that 50% of Americans say they have prayed a prayer like that, and subsequently believe that they are going to heaven, because that’s what they have been told... however, half of them have no regular presence in any kind of church; about the same number think the Bible is wrong about a lot of what it teaches; and about 2/3 have lifestyles and worldviews that in no way differ from those outside of the Christian faith.

These people hear the message of Jesus, about the need to be saved, and come to Christ, and they think, *“oh... been there, done that... I’ve prayed the prayer; been to the class; been baptized or confirmed; or whatever. I’m good. My grandma was there. It was super-meaningful.”*

But what I want to show you today is that the Bible speaks frequently about a kind of faith that is superficial, that doesn’t go very deep and that doesn’t save at all.

The tragedy is that for a lot of people their superficial faith has immunized them from understanding their need for the real gospel.

¹ <http://www.barna.org/faith-spirituality/514-barna-study-of-religious-change-since-1991-shows-significant-changes-by-faith-group>

- Do you know how an **immunization** works? They inject you with just a little bit of the disease; usually a dead, impotent version of the disease, so that your body develops antibodies so that if you are ever exposed to the real thing you are resistant to it! That's what's happened with these people. They never get infected with the real gospel (and this case infection is good) because they have been immunized by superficial religion.
- These people often "can't believe" in Jesus, because they don't see the need to come to Jesus. I want to show you how Jesus addressed them.

Intro of series:

We start a new series today: "*Can't Believe.*" We're going to look at **7 stories from the Gospel of John** of people who *couldn't* believe.

- Some of these people had blind spots; some of them wanted to believe but, for whatever reason, felt like they couldn't.
- We're going to look at how Jesus engaged them.
- "Believing" is a major theme of the Gospel of John. John uses the word 99 times, and he says toward the end of the book, "*These things are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God.*" **John 20:31**. That's what the book is all about.

So if you feel like you "can't believe," or you know someone who has trouble believing, the book of John is written for you.

My hope and prayer in this series is that for many of you who feel like you "can't believe,"

- *God will open your eyes to see Jesus glory* (that's what John says the core of faith is—seeing Jesus' glory: "we beheld his glory, the glory of the only Son of God, full of grace and truth," John 1:14);
- *That you believe in him, and more than that, adore him—*
- *and that if you already believe in him you would see his glory new* (ever notice that sometimes you get really familiar with something and forget about how beautiful it is?
 - Me in Wake Forest—so I pray that you see him afresh);
- *and I pray that that adoration would send you out with renewed confidence both to face life and to tell the world about Him.*

So, group #1 of those who "can't believe" group #1: the religiously immunized

[23] Now when he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, many believed in his name when they saw the signs that he was doing. [24] But Jesus on his part did not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people [25] and needed no one to bear witness about man, for he himself knew what was in man.

- Here you have a group of people that believed in Jesus, but Jesus would not give himself to them, because he could see that their faith was superficial.
- They believed in Jesus, but Jesus didn't believe them.
- He knew what was in them, and he could see that their interest was a fleeting interest; a convenient belief.
- In their case, it was because they had seen the signs and were temporarily impressed; curious as to what else Jesus might do for them.
- In our day... it might be people who believe because it is their background; it's the kind of home you were raised in; it's what your parents and your friends believe.
- We have a lot of our college students back. If someone asked you, "*Are you a Christian?*" you'd say, "Well, yeah, I'm not Jewish or Muslim."
- There is a group he is describing here in chapter 2 that believed in Jesus but Jesus did not belong to them.

So write this down:

(1) the dangers of superficial belief

- John 2 is not the only place this occurs:
 - **Matthew 7**... These are people who prayed prayers. Went on mission trips.
 - **Luke 8: Parable of the seeds**: got excited about faith. Brought other people to church. Started to read the Bible. Joined a small group.
 - **David Platt** (a pastor friend of mine whom I have discussed this with a lot, who I heard teach through this passage recently, which is where I got the idea to present it to you): *“Jesus is not talking, in Matthew 7 or in John 3, about irreligious pagans, atheists, or agnostics. He’s talking about deeply, devoutly religious people who are deluded into thinking that they are saved when they are not. He’s talking about men and women who will be shocked one day to find that though they thought they were on the narrow road that leads to heaven... people who believed, but were not born again.”*²
 - Again, **50% of Americans say they have prayed a prayer asking Jesus into their heart**, and even though half of them have no regular presence in any kind of church and 2/3 have lifestyles and worldviews that in no way differ from those outside of the Christian faith. If passages like John 2 and Luke 8 and Matthew 7 are not describing that group, then I don’t know whom they’d be describing.
 - People hear statistics like the ones I gave above, that 80% of people call themselves Christians and 50% claim to have a personal relationship with Jesus, but less than half actually live differently because of that, and they say, “See, Christians are hypocrites.”
 - But I read something different in those statistics: What I read is that there are a lot of people who think they are Christians *and are not*.
 - The question presented in John 2 is “what kind of belief saves?” This is an eternally important question! And do you have the kind of faith that is superficial or the kind that saves?
 - We have created a culture where millions are comfortable calling themselves “a Christian” when they are not disciples of Jesus.
 - Is it possible that is you? That are you in this group described here in John 2:23?

So that leads to (2) a description of saving faith

Chapter 3 is the answer to the question presented in chapter 2. (Remember, there is no chapter break in the original writing of this book, which means the story at the beginning of chapter 3 is the solution to the problem raised at the end of chapter 2—if there are people who believe in Jesus that Jesus does not give himself to, then what kind of faith saves?)

[3:1] Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. [2] This man came to Jesus by night (see, Nic at Night) and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him.”

- See? That’s tying him back to vs. 23 of chapter 2. He was one who saw the signs and believed.

[3] Jesus answered him (question? Was there a question: Jesus has a way of answering questions that you should be asking), **“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.”**

Now, “born again” is a familiar phrase to us. President Jimmy Carter first made it famous, but to ol’ saint nic it was unfamiliar, and so he asked what we would have asked,

[4] Nicodemus said to him, “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?” [5] Jesus answered, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and

² David Platt, SBC Pastor’s Conference

the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. [6] That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. [7] Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.'

Genuine saving faith turns on one phrase: You must be born again.

Nicodemus was a religious man, and Jesus was telling him that despite all of his good works, despite all of his learning and church attendance and religious ritual, he was dead in his sin!

The gospel is bad news before it is good news (and this is where most people miss it—because they will never really grapple with the bad news), but it's where Jesus started his gospel presentation, and where we must start, too.

- **Our sin cut us off from God and left us spiritually dead.**
- In the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve severed their connection with God.
- Sin is the “I” problem.
 - I want to be in charge. I want to serve myself and have other people serve me as well. I want all the glory. I want to be the primary point of my and everyone else's life.
 - That's the path Adam and Eve started down in Genesis 3, and it is a path we have all, voluntarily, continued down. We are born in a state of rebellion against God. I want to be in charge of my life. I want the glory and the attention. My agenda, my interests, are much more important to me than God's.
- That choice left us, as a race, condemned, under a curse: death. That's what God had said: If you sin, you will die.
 - Death is at work in our world. We can see that all around us, can't we? Famine. Pain. Disease. Injustice. Genocide.
 - We can feel it **in ourselves**: corruption; weariness; dysfunction; death.
 - Yes, there is still a lot of good in the world, and we are still physically alive, but think of it the way a **watch face fades** after being cut off from the source.
 - One day when our bodies die we face the full manifestation of death; it's completion, hell.
- We are under condemnation. John 3:36 says that the wrath of God abides on our race.
 - John says (3:20) that we are “lovers of darkness.”
 - Paul says that our minds are blinded (Rom 1:21, 28); we are disordered in our emotions (Rom 1:26)—naturally curved in upon ourselves; defiled in our bodies (Rom 1:24).
 - Paul in Ephesians calls us “children of wrath” (Eph 2:3). He says that the law of death is at work in our bodily members (Romans 7:24); Genesis 6 says that all of our thoughts are only evil continually.
- *That's why we must be born again. “Sin didn't knock us down to God's JV team or put us on probation or put you on a slower track to get our mansion in heaven. Sin wiped us out.”*³
 - Sinful flesh cannot hope to see the presence of God.
 - In our sinfulness we could no more hope to stand before God and hope to see his kingdom than a wilted dandelion could hope to withstand the blast of a nuclear bomb.
- You're not going to hear this verdict on humanity on Dr. Phil or Oprah, but it's where Jesus starts the gospel, and where we must start, too.
 - Our sinful rebellion against God was infinitely worse than most of us have ever imagined.
 - Francis Schaeffer, one of our country's greatest apologists, was once asked, “What would you do if you met a modern man on a train and had just one hour to talk to him about the gospel?” Schaeffer replied, “I would spend 45–50 minutes on the negative, to really show him his dilemma—that he is morally dead—then I'd take the last 10–15 minutes to preach the gospel. I believe that much of our evangelistic and personal work today is not clear, simply because we are

³ From Louie Giglio sermon on John 3, “Choose Life.”

too anxious to get to the answer without having a man realize the real cause of his sickness, which is true moral guilt (and not just psychological guilt feelings) in the presence of God."

Truly, truly I say to you, Jesus said... you must be born again... unless someone is born of water and the Spirit he'll never enter the kingdom of God.

- Jesus' references to flesh and water is most likely a reference to Ezekiel 36:25–27: **"I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules."** (Ezekiel 36:25-27 ESV)
- We need to be washed; we need to be made new. We need a new heart that desires God.
- VOMIT
- God's not just after obedience; he's after a whole new kind of obedience, an obedience that grows from desire.

[14] And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness...

- (Numbers 21:4–8) As the people of Israel were headed into the promised land, they forgot the kindness and goodness of God to them, so they started to get impatient, to doubt God, to complain, and their hearts started to wander after other gods.
 - This is really a picture of all sin. We doubt God; disbelieve him; grow dissatisfied with his ways; and our hearts wander from him and serve other gods. "God I'm not satisfied with you, I need romance; I need money; I need comfort."
- So God sends fiery serpents into the camp. Vipers of death. Everywhere. Thousands of them. The people began to wail in pain and they cry out to God.
 - That is a picture of the curse of sin: the pain, the brokenness of life.
- So God, in mercy, tells Moses to make a bronze image of one of the serpents, and put it high up on a pole on the top of a hill. And he tells people that if they can get their eyes on that, and look at in faith, they will be healed.
 - So imagine people, riling in pain, gasping crawling in desperation to get a view of this serpent.

And Jesus says, **...so must the Son of Man be lifted up, [15] that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.**

- Jesus, like this image of the serpent, would be lifted up on a cross for our sins, so that all who looked to him would be saved.
- It used to confuse me, bother me, when I first learned about this as a kid, that God chose a serpent to depict his son. Why not a lamb? But then I realized that the serpent was the result of their sin.
- What Jesus did was take the serpent into himself.
- We had sinned, the viper of death bit Jesus.
- 2 Cor 5:21 says that he, who knew no sin, became sin for us, he became the serpent, that's why he was put up on the pole, because...

[16] "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

Charles Spurgeon: *"I sometimes think I might have been in darkness and despair until now, had it not been for the goodness of God in sending a snowstorm one Sunday morning while I was going to a certain place of worship. When I could go no further, I turned down a side street, and came to a little Primitive Methodist Chapel. In that chapel there may have been a dozen or fifteen people. I had heard of the Primitive Methodists, how they sang so loudly that they made people's heads ache; but that did not matter to me. I*

wanted to know how I might be saved, and if they could tell me that, I did not care how much they made my head ache.

The minister did not come that morning; he was snowed in, I suppose. At last, a very thin-looking man, a shoemaker, or tailor, or something of that sort, went up into the pulpit to preach. Now, it is well that preachers should be instructed; but this man was really stupid. He was obliged to stick to his text, for the simple reason that he had little else to say.

The text was, "LOOK UNTO ME, AND BE YE SAVED, ALL THE ENDS OF THE EARTH."

He did not even pronounce the words rightly, but that did not matter. There was, I thought, a glimpse of hope for me in that text. The preacher began thus—

"My dear friends, this is a very simple text indeed. It says, 'Look.' Now lookin' don't take a deal of pains. It ain't liftin' your foot or your finger; it is just, 'Look.' Well, a man needn't go to College to learn to look. You may be the biggest fool, and yet you can look. A man needn't be worth a thousand a year to be able to look. Anyone can look; even a child can look. But then the text says, 'Look unto Me.' Ay!" said he in broad Essex accent (think that southern twang people from Pittsboro have), "Many of you are lookin' to yourselves, but it's no use lookin' there. You'll never find any comfort in yourselves... Some of you say, 'We must wait for the Spirit's workin.' You have no business with that just now. Look to Christ. The text says, 'Look unto Me.'

Then the good man followed up his text in this way:

"Look unto Me; I am sweatin' great drops of blood. Look unto Me; I am hangin' on the cross. Look unto Me; I am dead and buried. Look unto Me; I rise again. Look unto Me; I ascend to Heaven. Look unto Me; I am sittin' at the Father's right hand. O poor sinner, look unto Me! Look unto Me!"

When he had gone to about that length, and managed to spin out ten minutes or so, he was at the end of his tether. (He could think of nothing else to say.)

Then he looked at me under the gallery, and I daresay, with so few present, he (must have known) I was a stranger. Fixing his eyes on me, as if he knew all my heart, he said,

"Young man, you look very miserable."

Well, I did; but I had not been accustomed to have remarks made from the pulpit on my personal appearance...

However, it was a good blow—it struck right home. He continued,

"And you always will be miserable—miserable in life, and miserable in death,—if you don't obey my text; but if you obey now, this moment, you will be saved." Then, lifting up his hands, he shouted, as only a Primitive Methodist could do, "Young man, look to Jesus Christ. Look! Look! Look! You have nothin' to do but to look and live."

I saw at once the way of salvation. I know not what else he said —I did not take much notice of it —I was so possessed with that one thought. Like as when the brazen serpent was lifted up, the people only looked and were healed, so it was with me. I had been waiting to do fifty things, but when I heard that word, "Look!" what a charming word it seemed to me! Oh! I looked until I could almost have looked my eyes away. There and then the cloud was gone, the darkness had rolled away, and that moment I saw the sun; and I could have

risen that instant, and sung with the most enthusiastic of them, of the precious blood of Christ, and the simple faith which looks alone to Him. Oh, that somebody had told me this before, "Trust Christ, and you shall be saved."

Yet it was, no doubt, all wisely ordered, and now I can say,—‘Ever since by faith I saw the stream Thy flowing wounds supply, Redeeming love has been my theme, and shall be till I die.’”⁴

It’s just a look that saves.

- That’s the whole theme of John. Behold the Lamb of God! See him! Just look at him, in faith, and live!
- The choice is yours! No one is stopping you. You can look whenever you want.

You need to look because you are dying!

- Like the people of Israel bitten by those vipers. You don’t need a moral improvement, a religious booster, or a fresh start, or to turn over a new leaf. The wrath of God is upon you; the curse of death is over you and at work within you.
 - That’s why I’ve never been able to get away from the word “saved.” I don’t really like it, because (to be honest) it sounds a little redneck. I get the image of the pudgy preacher in a suit yelling out, you need to SAVED!
 - But, in light of the realities, what is the better word? Helped? Improved? Enhanced? Come to Jesus and be enhanced?
 - You don’t need that. You need to be saved. We are dead in our sins, continually dying and he’s our only hope.
 - That’s why when people say to me, “Jesus is just a crutch for you,” I want to laugh. I say, “Crutch? Jesus is not a crutch. If anything, he’s a stretcher, because I couldn’t even limp into heaven without Jesus.”
- Let me again quote my friend, David Platt: *“What we don’t need is superficial religion; we need supernatural regeneration. We are dead in sin, and we need to be born again.”*

Conclusion:

- There is a superficial belief that keeps people from real faith. It works like an immunization.
- And maybe, for some of you, that’s what you’ve had. You’ve prayed the prayer. You walked the aisle. Checked the card, raised the hand, went to the class.
- *But have you been born again?* Have you been infected with the gospel virus? (*Again, in this metaphor this is a good virus; a life-giving one*).
 - Has life gone to work in you? Here’s how you know. You are changing.
 - A virus, especially a significant one, changes you. When the gospel goes to work in you, it changes you, too. Your mind used to be filled with thoughts of self, and lust, and pride. Now holiness and a love and desire for God is at work.
 - I don’t meant to imply that you are perfect, or you never have to work at it, or you sit around and think about God all the time, or hop out of your bed each morning strumming Chris Tomlin tunes on the harp you keep beside your bed, but there is life at work in you and you are different.
 - Your spiritual temperature is raised as your passions for God go up.
 - You start sneezing out blessing and generosity all over people.
 - And you’re contagious, spiritually. Other people are attracted to your faith.
- Is this you? Or are the people at the end of John 2 a better picture of you?

⁴ C. H. Spurgeon, *Autobiography, Vol. 1: The Early Years*, 88.

- You believe in Jesus, but it's not a belief that has changed you, or one that can withstand persecution or hard times or being alone or temptation.
- You don't really "walk with God." You believe in him, per se, but there's no relationship there. You don't know really how to talk with him.
- If that's true, then isn't it clear that you have the superficial religion described in chapter 2 and not the supernatural rebirth described in chapter 3?
- Or, to change the analogy...
 - **I told this to our church earlier this year... imagine I was late coming up here... (hit by a semi)**
 - There's no way that you encounter Jesus and not look fundamentally different.

If that's true, look to Jesus! Just a look of true, surrendered, hopeful faith will save!

One last thing (instrumentation starts here):

- This is why we are so driven to go to the nations.
- This is what we do as we live among unreached people... we point, up to the mountain of Calvary... saying, "Up there! The one hung up on a cross. All you have to do is *look to him*, he's already done the work, and live!"
 - **Hindus walking through the streets of Calcutta and washing in river Ganges**
 - Muslims: there is one already seated
 - Look to Him and live!

PRAYER and RESPONSE:

- Look to Jesus! See him; surrender (repent of your rebellion); believe in his mercy.
- Not convinced yet? In John, "Come and see." Come and see these next 7 weeks.

Bullpen:

- John 1:12, "*But as many as received him, to those who believe on his name, he gave the right to become the children of God.*"
- Have you received him?
 - We were so bad that Jesus had to die for us; Jesus was so loving He was glad to die for us.
- It's the look that saves.
 - Behold the lamb of God!
- I didn't have an experience like this... the experience is not important. The look is. What are you looking at right now as your salvation?
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I was taught to share the gospel by means of the infamous "gospel tract." If you're unfamiliar with one of these, think of it as a short, tri-fold pamphlet that explains the basic points of the gospel and calls for a response. My church had a whole rack of them, ranging from the "no-nonsense give-it-to-me-alliterated" version to the "friendly newspaper comic strip" version to the "fake 10 dollar bill with the 'here's a real tip, trust Jesus'" admonition on the back. "Chick tracts" were deluxe, featuring a multi-paged comic theme with scary pictures of demons coercing people to read versions other than the KJV.