

Sermon for Sunday, October 23, 1977, by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Senior Pastor  
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"A NEW LEAF OR A NEW LIFE"

St. John 3:1-7

Text: "Jesus answered him, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born anew, he cannot see the kingdom of God.'" St. John 3:3

This morning I want to talk about turning over a new leaf. From time to time all of us get dissatisfied with ourselves and we make resolutions to turn over a new leaf, to make a fresh beginning, to start all over. I think Nicodemus wanted to turn over a new leaf when he came to Jesus at night. Why would we think that? Well, Nicodemus was a leader of the Jews. He was a man of position, of responsibility, and of authority. But in spite of this he endangers everything by making contact--no matter how secretly--with a man who is in disfavor with the Jewish leaders. Only a man in trouble would do that. Only a man desperately searching for something missing in his own life would run the risk of losing what he did have. That's the first thing we notice about Nicodemus. He was looking for something that was missing in his life.

Have you ever felt that way? Most of us have. The things we have achieved in life haven't satisfied us. We thought that when we reached certain goals, achieved certain objectives, that we would be happy and life would have meaning. But it didn't work out that way. When we got to where we dreamed of going, we found the dream did not bring us the joy and fulfillment we thought it would. I have a friend who is as brilliant as anyone I know, but lately we have talked together because he is deeply dissatisfied. He has accomplished every objective he had for his life, but now in his late forties he has found that doesn't satisfy. A lot of people are in that boat this morning. No matter what we may have achieved or done, there is still a deep sense of inner dissatisfaction in us. We had thought life would be better, fuller, more meaningful and happier than it has turned out to be.

I think that is something of what Nicodemus must have felt. He had arrived in many ways, yet it did not meet his deepest needs. So, when he heard the stories about Jesus, he sought him out. Maybe Jesus would meet and fulfill all those longings he felt in his heart.

But the second thing we note about Nicodemus is that he went to Jesus by night. Isn't that typical of most of us? We don't like for people to know all about us. We keep up facades, we wear masks, because we don't want people to know we are hurting. Is that true with you? Isn't it a fact that most of us don't want people to know we have needs--and isn't it especially true that we don't want to admit to others that we hope Jesus can meet that need? That's really too bad. As long as we cannot be honest with others, it is hard to be honest with ourselves.

Nicodemus couldn't admit to his fellow leaders that he had a need. They would laugh at him or think him weak or inadequate. He was so concerned about what others would think. Do you have that problem? I know I do. Can you admit this morning that you have a real vacuum in your life, a real need for Jesus? No, most of us can't. We try to come to Jesus by night, too.

But the third thing I would like for us to notice about Nicodemus is what he did when his needs got too bad. What do you do with your needs when they get so desperate, when you are hurting so badly? What do you do when you have such an ache inside because life has lost its meaning? We try to laugh louder, play harder, blame the wife more, shout at the children more loudly, and sometimes we do crazy, sinful things to boost our ego. But do you know what Nicodemus did? He went to Jesus. I hope you are learning to do that. I hope that when we discover

that harder work, bigger objectives, higher goals still don't satisfy us we can admit that what we really need is Jesus.

Do you think Jesus is just for weak people? Nicodemus wasn't weak, He was a strong man, an able man, a successful man. But he still needed Jesus. And he was strong enough to admit that. Do you know it is the weak man who is afraid to admit a need? Do you know it is the insecure person who can't admit a failure? No, Jesus is for strong people who are brave enough to admit that they have a need. Whoever you are this morning, whatever your needs, your failures, that cause you pain and hurt and disillusionment, Jesus can help you. And whatever successes you have this morning that have left you feeling empty and unfulfilled and dissatisfied, Jesus is your answer. And that's why Nicodemus went to Jesus.

But I want you to notice what happened to Nicodemus when he went to Jesus. Jesus said to him, "Nicodemus, you have got to be born again." Well, Nicodemus had not expected that. After all, he wasn't totally bad. He was a religious man. He had tried to obey and live by the Jewish law. All he really wanted to do was turn over a new leaf, to correct a few things. Do you have that same problem? I know I do. You see, I just want to be corrected a little, strengthened a little, fulfilled a little, but Jesus talks so radically! He talks about the difference between life and death, between darkness and light, about old wineskins and new ones. And that is so radical! All I wanted to do was turn over a new leaf, to be patched up a bit and he says, "no, you have got to start from scratch." Yes, we have to start over, to be born again.

Have you ever wondered why Jesus talks that way? Have you ever wondered why Jesus talks so radically when we are not even sure we want that much religion? Well, notice in the first place that we don't so much need to turn over a new side to the leaf as we do for the old side to be forgiven. See how it works! When you turn over a leaf, where is the old side? Well, now it is hidden, it is buried. And do you know, that is the wrong thing to do with failure, with sin? Failures and sin should never be buried. Then they become those secret sins the Psalmist talks about. You haven't gotten rid of the old side of the leaf when you turn over a new side. Instead, you still have the old side. Our sins and failures don't need to be buried and turned over, they need to be forgiven.

Repression of sin is the worst thing we can do to ourselves. We may bury them, but there they lie. From the depths of our unconsciousness they continue to torment and hurt us. They cause us tension, depression, hostility, failure, but because they are repressed we no longer know what is wrong with us. No, sin should never be buried. It needs to be dealt with--to be forgiven. That is what Jesus has to offer us.

Back in the mid-sixties, Jim Cantrell was pastor of the Third Presbyterian Church in Birmingham, Alabama. He was asked to visit a man named Bill Bowen who was on death row in Kilby Prison awaiting execution for murder. Bill came to know Jesus and he wrote Pastor Cantrell, "I knew what I did was a terrible thing....I felt that no one would ever love me again, not even God. But Jesus came to me here on death row. He forgave me, He gave me peace of mind and heart." At last the day came and Bill Bowen paid for his crime with his life. In the last letter he wrote to the man who had become his pastor, this is what he said: "If in my hour I can show some people that the love of God will reach even the lowest of men, that He comes to death row as well as any place else, then I will go happy." Do you see? When we have done our worst, we don't need to turn over a new leaf, what we really need is forgiveness.

Notice in the second place that we don't so much need a new leaf as we need new power. Think about the times you have determined to turn over a new leaf. What are you really saying when you do that? Are you not saying something like this: "I'm going to start over. I'm going to forget the past and make a new start. I am going to try harder and this time I am determined that I'm going to live a better life and be a better person." And on whom does the success of that new leaf depend? Isn't it you? Yet, the very reason we want a new leaf, the very reason we want to get rid of the old one is because we have failed! And what is to keep us from failing again?

So, I don't really need a new leaf as much as I need some new power. If I have to depend on the old me, very shortly the new leaf will look just as badly as the old one. Isn't that what has happened to all those new leaves you have turned over? That's what happened to mine. I don't need a new leaf as much as I need a new me--I need new power to live a new life.

And that's what Jesus said to Nicodemus--he said, "you must be born again. You don't need a new leaf, Nicodemus, you need a new life, a new power."

When you invite Jesus into your life he gives you the Holy Spirit--he gives you power to live a new life. When you surrender your will to Jesus, when you turn the control of your life over to him, he puts the power of the Spirit into your heart.

I don't know about you, but I have turned over a lot of new leaves in my life and it has never yet worked for me. I've got enough old leaves to start a bonfire! No, I don't need a new leaf, I need a new life--I need the power of Jesus in my heart to help me do and be and become what I ought to be. And that's exactly what Jesus has to offer you--new power to live for him.

Then, notice in the third place that Nicodemus didn't so much need a new leaf as he needed a new presence in his life. Do you ever feel lonely, isolated, cut off from anyone or anything? But do you remember the promise that Jesus made? At the very end, when he was with his disciples for the last time, he said to them, "Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the ages..."

Let me share with you a story about Roy Clark. Roy is the star of one of the most popular television shows being aired today, for he is the host of the hilariously funny Hee Haw. Back when he was struggling to make a name for himself, Roy and his wife Barbara were driving through Arkansas. Barbara had been sick and as they drove through the night in a desolate stretch of highway, her condition became critical. At last Roy spotted an all-night gas station and was directed to the nearest hospital 20 miles away in Conway, Arkansas. There in the emergency room, the doctor told him that his wife was bleeding internally and he would have to operate immediately. As it turned out she had a tubal pregnancy that had ruptured and the doctors almost lost her in the operating room. But during the surgery, as Roy waited all alone in the empty waiting room, he began to pray. "Lord," he said, "being a successful entertainer doesn't seem so important to me now. I love Barbara...she means more to me than anything. She's all I really care about. Please help her."

Roy describes what happened next this way: "Then a strange thing happened in that little Arkansas hospital's waiting room. On the heels of my desperate prayer, a surge of warmth flooded my body, a feeling I'd never experienced before. It was like warm hands on cold flesh. No longer did I feel alone in the room. Someone was there with me--a caring Presence. Then came a voice, a comforting voice, and to this day I swear it was God's, 'Barbara's going to be all right.'"



Yes, "No longer did I feel alone in the room. Someone was there with me--a caring presence." That is what I needed, too. Someone--a presence--who cares and who will walk with me even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death.

No, we do not need a new leaf--we need a new life. A new life that brings us forgiveness, that brings us new power to live for Jesus, that brings us a presence so that we can say, "Someone was there with me--a caring presence." Isn't that what you need?

I don't really need a new leaf as much as I need someone who will walk with me. I don't need a new leaf as much as I need someone who will walk with me. I don't need a new leaf as much as I need someone who will walk with me. I don't need a new leaf as much as I need someone who will walk with me.

But that's what Jesus said to Nicodemus--"You must be born again." You must be born again. You must be born again. You must be born again. You must be born again.

When you invite Jesus into your life, he gives you a new life. When you invite Jesus into your life, he gives you a new life. When you invite Jesus into your life, he gives you a new life. When you invite Jesus into your life, he gives you a new life.

I don't know about you, but I have found that a lot of new things in my life don't come from a new leaf. I don't know about you, but I have found that a lot of new things in my life don't come from a new leaf. I don't know about you, but I have found that a lot of new things in my life don't come from a new leaf.

That's why I don't think you need a new leaf. That's why I don't think you need a new leaf. That's why I don't think you need a new leaf. That's why I don't think you need a new leaf.

For we share with you a story about boy Clark. For we share with you a story about boy Clark. For we share with you a story about boy Clark. For we share with you a story about boy Clark.

Boy described what happened that way: "Then a strange thing happened in that little kitchen. I was sitting at the table, and I was feeling a little strange. I was feeling a little strange. I was feeling a little strange. I was feeling a little strange."