

# Jesus Unfiltered

## Session 7: “Cryptic” Jesus Clarifies Our Message

Unedited Transcript

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Well, good morning, men. Hey, this is like unbelievable. I did something last night that I have never done before in 32 years of teaching this Bible study. That is I went to bed without a message. It's quite interesting. If you're trying to solve the wrong problem, you can only succeed by accident. If you're asking the wrong question, you can only get the right answer by accident. Basically, what I did yesterday is I spent the entire day and earlier in the week, many hours as well, trying to answer the wrong question. I thought that today's text was about our ministry, what we would be doing and the method we would be doing it with. I finally, last night, I just went to bed. I said, "Well, you know, Lord, you never let me down yet. I'm just going to have faith that you won't let me down again." I went to bed and I got up and I realized that the message is the issue, the message of Jesus, not the ministry he's given us.

On your handouts, it says ... And for those of you online, we'll change this before you get it. It says Cryptic Jesus Clarifies Our Mission. Well, you can strike out mission and write in the word message. Cryptic Jesus Clarifies Our Message. As soon as the Lord gave me that, then everything fell into place. By the way, I was only five minutes late getting here this morning and I have a message so I feel good about it. Let's get it kicked off though with a shout out. A group, six men, they've been meeting for four years with us at 7:00 AM on Saturdays. They call themselves No Man Left Behind. Great name. Bill Clites, Bill, I hope I pronounce your last name correctly. He says, "We want to do life together and help each other better understand and learn to perform our responsibilities in the great commission." They're part of Bedford United Methodist Church in Bedford, Pennsylvania. Would you join me in giving a warm and rousing welcome to No Man Left Behind? One, two, three, hoorah. Welcome, men. We are honored to have you with us for four years.

### **WHY JESUS CAME TO DO WHAT FOR WHOM AND HOW**

The series: Jesus Unfiltered. The title: **Cryptic Jesus Clarifies Our Message**. We're going to begin by looking at why Jesus came to do what for whom and how. We're looking at John chapter three this morning. This is the story of Nicodemus. You know, sometimes you look at a man, just at how he behaves, and you say, "I wonder how he could be a Christian." Yeah. You probably have a few people coming to mind right now. Other times, you know, you look at someone and you wonder, "How could they not be a Christian?" We have a man a little bit like that today. We have a godly man. We actually have a guy who's on his elder board. He's part of the Sanhedrin. He's a religious leader. He's got lots of money. He's part of the privileged class. When we look at this man, you would wonder, "How could he not be a Christian?" Yet, Jesus, of course, looks into the heart. Man looks on the outward appearance. God looks on the heart. Jesus looks at Nicodemus and he sees something altogether different.

Let's just take a look. Now, there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council. Just stop there. There are some traditions and something in the Talmud written about him. Apparently, a tradition is that he was eventually baptized by Peter and John. There's another tradition, if I could find it. Where did I put those notes? That's the problem with putting together a message this early in the day. He was baptized by Peter and John. He was defrocked from the Sanhedrin, so it goes. There is a Nicodemus mentioned in the Talmud. It says that he was a disciple of Jesus. It says that he was rich and that he was pious. It also says that he lost his fortune in the fall of Jerusalem in the year 70 AD. That's Nicodemus.

Verse two, he came to Jesus at night. A lot has been made about him coming at night. There's probably something to it that he was not wanting to make too big of a scene, create too big of a raucous, too much criticism. Was he doing it for himself? Probably. Was he doing for other reasons? Probably. He came to Jesus at night and said, "Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one would perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him." Why did he say that? What did he want? What's the question? What's the problem he's trying to solve? He doesn't say anything. He doesn't ask any questions. He's just making a statement. Why did he come to Jesus? Why do people come? Why are people attracted to you? Why do they want to say things to you about God? Because there's something going on through power of the Holy Spirit in men's lives. He's awakening them to spiritual things. They have curiosity about, "Why do I exist? Where do I come from? What's my purpose? Where am I going?" These things attract men to Jesus.

Jesus, verse three, in reply, declared, "I tell you the truth." It's interesting. I always get a chuckle in interviews on TV, athletes especially say, "Well, to tell you the truth." Like, "Okay, I wasn't telling you the truth before, but now I'm going to tell it to you." Well, to be honest, like I wasn't being honest before. Of course, it's just a figure of speech, right? Anyway, Jesus says, "I tell you the truth. Unless a man is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God." Okay, there we go. Cryptic Jesus. It's so fascinating just how often in the New Testament Jesus will cloak something in mystery that could otherwise be clear if he would just say so. Why does he do that? He does it to tick off the mathematicians and the engineers. I mean, you know, if you think about it, if you're looking for a mathematical answer to life, you're not going to find it in Jesus. That's just not the way he operates. He's a poet. He's a poet savior. I will say this. If you're a logician, you will find much in the gospel of Jesus, if you're a logician. If you're looking for a rational faith, if you're looking for a mathematical formula, forget it. If you're looking for something that makes sense, holds together, is logical, is scientific, then the gospel is the place to be.

Have I told you about the guy that I had lunch with who had 100 questions and wouldn't give me a chance to answer any of them? He's a seeker. He's a seeker, but we sat down at lunch. He just started up. He peppered me with questions. I've peppered God with these same questions. You've had these questions too. How can a serpent talk? How can he could get all of those animals in the boat? What kind of a God would tell a man to kill his son? How could a virgin have a baby? How could a fish swallow a man and live for three? You know, how many times have you heard those questions? How many times have you thought those questions? Here's what I said to him at the end. I said, "I don't have the answer to any of those questions. I'm as baffled by them as you are. Let me just tell you this. 5% of the Bible," I told him the whole mystery abounds story.

I've told you this before, how I put MA, the initials MA at the bottom of every page in the Bible one year that I found something I didn't understand on. I asked him, "What percentage of the pages do you think that I put MA at the bottom of for mystery abounds?" He said, "I don't know. What? 30%?" I said,

"You're kidding me. All of them, 100% of them. On one page I had written seven times MA. There was something that I didn't understand or raised an initial question." Here's the thing I want you to understand. I said to him, "Here's what I'd like you to understand. 5% of the Bible baffles me, but 95% of it's crystal clear." I mean, what the Bible is trying to get across, it's crystal clear. I'm not going to let the few things that are confusing to me confound that which would satisfy any logician, any scientist.

Cryptic Jesus. What he's doing here is he's going to now clarify our message, his message and ours. Nicodemus in verse four, "How can a man be born when he is old?" Now, he must not have been that old. He was still on the Sanhedrin. He was still alive in 70 AD. Nicodemus asked, "Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb be born." He didn't understand what Jesus was saying. He was thinking it was something physical. Then Jesus now begins to clarify. Verse five, he answered, "I tell you the truth." There he goes again, "I tell you the truth. Unless a man is born of water in the spirit," stop. Probably baptism in the spirit, but, you know, I've got to read and I'm the only one. I couldn't find a single commentator who even considered this. I'm thinking, well, maybe it's like born of a woman, her water breaks because of the next sentence. "Born of water in the spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God." You have to be born of the water in the spirit to enter the kingdom of God.

Some people use this as a justification to demand that baptism is a condition precedent to being born again. I don't think Jesus ever said that. It's something that's part of the deal. John Calvin himself, who is as formal as anybody on theological matters, clearly says you don't have to be baptized to be born again. Now, I don't know what your tradition is in this, but you just have to look at the thief on the cross. Did he make into heaven or he didn't make it into heaven? You decide. Verse six, "Flesh gives birth to flesh." Now, this is why I was thinking, you know, who knows? It could be born of a woman, her water breaks and so forth. I don't know. "Flesh gives birth to flesh but the spirit gives birth to spirit." Verse seven, "You should not be surprised at my saying you must be born again." He's trying to now clarify the message here. "The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound but you can't tell where it comes from, where it goes. So it is with everyone born in the spirit." Then he said, "How can this be?" Now we do have Nicodemus asking questions. He came without a question. He probably said, "Oh, wow, Jesus. You are teacher of the law. We all know it." Then Jesus starts to give him some information and it raises questions.

"How can this be?" Then he says, "You are Israel's teacher and don't understand these things? I tell you the truth," third time. "We speak of what we know and we testify to what we have seen." Who's the we? Well, it could be the Trinity or it could be Jesus in the company of the prophets of old or it could be Jesus and all of his disciples. We don't know. "We testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony. I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe. How then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things?" Let's park on that word believe for a little bit here. In John chapter 20 verses 30 and 31, hold your finger in this part of your Bible or, if you're in a digital, I don't know how you bounce back and forth. Go to John chapter 20 verse 30.

Right here, John now gives us the purpose of his gospel. John gives us the reason for why he has written the gospel that we're now studying. He says, "Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing, you may have life in his name." The purpose of this gospel is to help people believe and you'll see that as we go through this book over the weeks to come. It's believe, believe, believe. That's kind of like that's John's word. It's the same Greek word *pistis*, which is faith. Faith, believe, they're interchangeable. The word here is believe.

"I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe. How then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things? No one has even gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven, the Son of Man. Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert," one of the weirdest things that ever happened in the Bible. All these people got bitten by snakes and God tells Moses to make like an idol of a snake or something and put it on a stick and hold it up. Everybody who looks at the snake gets healed of their snakebites. Whoa. There's one of those big questions. "Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up." Here we have a clear foreshadowing of the cross, Jesus being lifted up on the cross. People who look to Jesus being saved. Again, it's still cryptic Jesus here. Notice he doesn't go into a big elaboration of it.

Now, this is what John recorded. Jesus may have, in that moment, in that time, he may have said something else about it. We don't know. This is what God thought we needed to know. God did not think you needed to have an elaboration on that point. In verse 16, back to 15, "Must be lifted up, that everyone who," there's this word again, "believes in him may have eternal life." Then the key verse or probably the most well-known verse in the whole word, certainly one of them, John 3:16. Tim Tebow. At one point, it was the most Googled, what was it, scripture of all time or something like that. I don't know. Anyway. Amazingly. The guy with the funny hair, the rainbow hair and the big wig that positions himself. I think there's more than one of them. They position themselves to get in the camera shot at professional football games and other professional sporting events.

"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." Jesus came to do what and for whom and how? Why Jesus came. Why did Jesus come? Because of the limitless, infinite, unconditional love of God for the world that he created and the creatures within it. For God so loved the world, that's why Jesus came. He gave his one and only Son. What did he do to do what? "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish." Jesus came to give us eternal life. Who is this? It's whoever believes. How does this actually take place, this getting of eternal life that's not perishing? It comes by believing.

I find it interesting that the further we get away from Jesus, the more complicated salvation becomes. Now, even to the epistles, you know, Paul begins to add not to the gospel, but he does begin to describe more and more what belief entails. Then you have the early church fathers trying to explain it. Then you get to the Reformation. Then you have today this plethora of books about what it means to believe. Notice that Jesus just says believe. He just says believe. What I want to do today is challenge us to think through a pledge that we can make when we share our faith. This is it. I pledge to never make the message more complicated than believe in Jesus. Do you see Jesus making the message more complicated than believing in him? "He who believes in me will never die." Even Paul said to the Philippian jailer, "Believe on the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved." He didn't say, "Believe on the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and these 15 other things or these two other things and you will be saved." No, he said, "Believe on the name Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved and your household." The Big Idea today: **I pledge to never make the message more complicated than "believe in Jesus."**

Why didn't Jesus add more conditions? Well, it's because of this. Jesus came to get people into the kingdom, not to keep them out. By the way we present Jesus to the world, would people draw the conclusion that we're trying to help them get in or trying to keep them out? Sometimes it looks like that we're adding so many rules, regulations, traditions, so forth to the gospel it actually looks like we're trying to keep people out. I have two huge regrets, only two, in this one little narrow area. One is forcing

somebody into the gospel and the other is unfairly withholding the gospel from someone. We used to have a young woman set up tables at the Bible study who was lesbian. One morning, I'd been building a relationship with her. I sat down and was sharing the gospel with her. I didn't know she was a lesbian. We got to the part of praying and so forth. Then she revealed that she was gay. In my unflinching stupidity, I told her that she needed to repent of that before receiving Jesus. I sent her away that day without having received the Lord that she wanted to receive.

I violated this big idea. Another way of saying it, Bishop William Temple, one of the great quotes of all time, he said, "Conversion is giving as much of yourself as you can to as much of God as you can understand." If you're a young gay person, male or female, and you have a same sex attraction but you are exposed to Jesus and you know that you need Jesus and you don't fully understand, can you still become a Christian or do you need to wait til you get all your ducks in order, til you fully understand the Bible, until you have good theology and right doctrine? That's just not the way that Jesus does it. Look at how Jesus does it. Right here, he just says, "Hey, look. For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in him would not perish but have everlasting life." That's it.

### **WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BELIEVE IN JESUS?**

Now, I, at this point, suspect that there is a great deal of tension in some of you because of all the things that you know. We're going to talk about that very briefly, because I don't really care that much about what you think. I'm just kidding. I actually care a lot about what you think and that's why I want to address this. I want to answer this question. What does it mean to believe in Jesus? I've written a book, I've written a few, and one of them is called *Is Christianity for You?* Now, this book is very interesting because my other 19 books are all written from the perspective of I've done my homework, you can trust me, here's what you need to know. This book is an apologetic. It's an explanation of Christianity. The perspective of this book is don't take my word for it, here's the evidence, you decide.

I was, fortunately, picking it up today because, otherwise, I wouldn't have had a talk to give this morning. There's a chapter in here called The Christian Belief System. I write, "The risk in explaining the faith that Jesus proclaimed is to add any extra test or rule or behavior that Jesus did not." You with me? That was one of the reasons he was upset with the religious people, because they had all these traditions you had to follow in order to be good enough. I write, "Let's at least make sure that if anyone rejects Christianity, they are rejecting what it actually is." See if I find anything else in here interesting. Well, there's some other things in there. You don't need to know everything to know enough. The young lesbian, you don't need to know everything to know enough. Nicodemus, you don't need to know everything to know enough. Some of you here in the room, I assembled 24 young men a month ago to do a storyboard for a new book I'm writing. Thanks again, guys. I just finished the table of contents and the chapter synopses this week. It's going to be great. Thank you for that.

As I was meeting, and 10 of the 24 I had not met before. I took them for coffee, just wanted to make sure that they weren't walking into a room to help somebody they've never met before. I had coffee with them, Starbucks right over here. On one of those occasions, one of the men, as we were talking, it became very clear to me he didn't know the Lord. He's Nicodemus. He's very religious. He believes in Jesus in the way that John Wesley believed in Jesus. Big storm, Moravian pastor, Moravians aren't afraid, Wesley's terrified. He starts talking to the Moravians, talking to a pastor. The pastor asks John Wesley questions. He said, among other things, he said, "Do you know Jesus Christ?" John Wesley said, "I know that he's the savior of the world." The pastor said, "Well, do you know that he's your savior?" Wesley couldn't answer that question.

In that same way, this man already at Starbucks, he believed in Jesus at this high level but he had never put his own faith and trust in Jesus for his own eternal life, for his own salvation. I said to him, I said, "Well, would you like to become a Christian today?" He said, "Yeah, I would. How do we do that?" I said, "Well, I'll just explain it to you. We can pray a prayer and you can invite Christ in your life." He said, "I'd like to do that." We did. We sat right over there in Starbucks and he received Jesus. I don't need to worry about some extraordinarily theologically correct prayer. All I have to do is help him say, "I believe in Jesus for me," which is what he did.

I'm going to give you something that comes out of the Reformation. Martin Luther was a great mind, but he was not a systematic theologian. His lieutenant, Philip Melancthon, was. Philip Melancthon wrote the first systematic theology out of the Reformation. He came up with this construct. I learned it in seminary 25 years ago. It's one of those things, the first time you hear it, boom, you never forget it if you're interested. There are like these three levels. Each one's a little deeper. These are Latin words. Notitia is knowledge. You have to have some content to respond to. Jesus was giving some content here. "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believed in him wouldn't perish but have everlasting life." There's some knowledge. Assensus or ascent, that's the conviction that that's true. John Wesley, for example, he believed that Jesus is the savior of the world. He believed that. The man over at Starbucks, he believed that. Then, fiducia, or faith, is the other step. It's putting your personal trust in Jesus. I just don't believe he's the savior, I believe he's my savior.

There are all kinds of analogies that are really good analogies that people have come up with like belief, the assensus would be believing that a plane can fly but personal trust is getting in the plane and stuff like that. All those are good, but this is a nice way to think about it. What I want you to know, when we say the word believe, it's all of this. Now, don't you have to repent of your sins, proclaim from the rooftops, "I am a sinner"? Track with me. When we say that we believe in Jesus, inherent in that is this idea that I am changing my mind. Repentance is a very loaded word mainly because of the sign. I remember walking into the US Open tennis tournament one day. Across the bridge, there's this guy with a big sign, "Repent." I think, "Wow, that's an appropriate message for the US Open tennis tournament." He just totally turned me off. The word is extremely loaded. All it means is just change your mind. To believe in Jesus is to stop believing in something else.

Now, does a person need to understand the fall, that Adam and Eve failed, and that's why Jesus got nailed and that's why grace prevailed? Absolutely. Do they need to know that on the first day? Eh, you know, I'm going to leave that up to Jesus because Jesus said, "Believe and you will be saved." Oh, gosh. It's all over the Bible. "Believe in your heart that God raised Jesus from the dead and you will be saved." "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." "Whoever lives and believes in me will never die." No mention by Jesus of a necessity to, you know, make this meticulous inventory of all your sins, but I think that's part of it, but I think it can come in astute time because conversion is giving as much of yourself as you can to as much of God as you can understand. Big Idea today: **I pledge to never make the message more complicated than believe in Jesus.**

### **PRACTICAL WAYS TO HELP MEN BELIEVE THE TRUTH OF JOHN 3:16**

Then, some practical ways to help men believe the truth of John 3:16. I'm out of time so I'm just going to rattle these off to you. They will know you're Christians by our love. We will know we are Christians by our love, just the example. That should apply in the area of social media. That should apply in the area of politics. I love what Michael Jordan said. Michael Jordan was interviewed. He said, "Why don't you comment more on the issues?" He's a Democrat. He said, "Why don't you comment more on the

issues?" He said, "Because Republicans buy sneakers too." You know, that's a good mantra for keeping our own council. Now, if your calling is to do that, great, but if you're just out opinionating because you're angry, well, that could be a different matter. In terms of wanting to be an example.

Second, just unconditional love. Hey, this idea of throwing your kids out and stuff like that, I'm not saying there's not a place for that. Those are personal decisions. You know, I think the idea of cutting people off, you're cutting them off, I just don't think it makes sense. Prayer, I do think that we should be and can be praying for people, for them to believe in Jesus. This book, *Is Christianity for You*, should get some of those. Some of you carry these in your cars and your trunks and so forth. This book is everywhere. Churches give it away. You can buy them for 82 cents a piece or something like that. I don't know what we sell them for here. Anyway, you can get them by the case for 82 cents a piece at [BooksbytheBox.org](http://BooksbytheBox.org). That is a very easy way to help people believe in Jesus. Invite them to a cup of coffee. Listen to them. Invite them to your church where they can hear the gospel being preached. Invite them here to the Bible study. Whatever venue that you can think of, just invite them. By the way, there's no such thing as a closed group. You don't see any basis for a closed group in the Bible. If you've got a group and you know somebody that needs to know more about what it means to believe in Jesus, your group is a great place to put them.

Big Idea: I pledge to never make the message more complicated than believe in Jesus. Let's pray. Lord, I think it was Chuck Swindoll that wrote the book, it was, Chuck Swindoll who wrote the book *Grace Awakening*, in which you inspired him to collect sayings and thoughts from the ages that we would better to err on the side of offering too much grace than not enough. Lord, we would love to be just right, but we know that if add anything to your gospel beyond believing in Jesus, we run the risk of withholding the gospel from someone that you would extend it to. We don't want to do that so we pray, Lord, that you would give us more grace so that we might extend more grace. We ask this in Jesus's name, amen.