It is always amazing to discover how intelligent people can be, & yet have no capacity for appreciating/understanding gospel truth.

They may be able to find solutions to obscure/complex mathematical problems w/ relative ease, or to discuss w/ profound insight the complexities of international politics/economics.

But when it comes to spiritual truth, they draw a complete blank.

In today’s text, we will witness this phenomenon as X talks w/ Nicodemus, a brilliant man, & an expert/scholar in the OT.

Nicodemus exemplifies the best/brightest among Jewish leaders.

But when Jesus lays out for him some basic spiritual truths, he will respond incredulously, “How can these things be?”

This might surprise us, except that Paul says in I Cor 2:14⇒

“A natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; & he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised.”

He doesn’t understand because he has no real interest in them.

From his p.o.v., they have no value.

In I Cor 1 (vs 30) Paul explained why Xns can/do understand & appraise them properly⇒ “By His [God’s] doing you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from
God.”
I.e., the reason we Xns can understand/accept the truth of God’s Word, is not that we are so smart, but because we have received wisdom from God in X.
It’s because, “by His doing” our hearts/minds are enabled to do so—His Spirit has intervened in our case.
We praise God that we are in X, who has become God’s wisdom to us.
Without the Spirit’s intervention in a non-Xn’s heart, he finds spiritual truth to be unacceptable, worthless foolishness/mystery.

Why can’t the unregenerate understand spiritual truth?

* They are spiritually blinded (II Cor 4) => “The god of this world [Satan] has blinded the minds of the unbelieving so that they might not see the light of the gospel” (II Cor 4:3).

* Sin has caused them to hate spiritual truth/light (Jn 3) =>
  “Everyone who does evil hates the Light, and does not come to the Light for fear that his deeds will be exposed” (John 3:20).

* They are spiritually dead in their trespasses/sins (Eph 2:1).

But ultimately, the sinner’s inability to understand spiritual truth can be traced back to his non-relationship, or his adversarial relationship with the Author of truth—God Himself =>

* He’s an enemy of God (Rom 5:10), a son of disobedience who has no regard for God’s commands (Eph 2:2)
* He is alienated & hostile in mind towards God (Col 1:21)
* Denying God’s existence, he becomes ignorant of Him, & therefore his deeds become corrupt (Psa 14:1).
* If he acknowledges God’s existence, and pretends to obey Him but has no real relationship with Him, he actually hates God in his heart (Psa 81:5), and lives in constant rebellion against Him (Psa 5:10).

The key to the wisdom that opens up our minds to spiritual truth, is a relationship w/ Jesus X—the Son of God/Man. When He regenerates us, the H.S. gives us the spiritual capacity to properly appraise the value of God’s truth, & He becomes our truth-Teacher, guiding us into all truth.

Again, we praise God for this.

Jesus descended from heaven to earth as the embodiment of divine truth—“the way, & the truth, & the life” (Jn 14:6).

Because heaven is X’s home, He brought to earth a treasure-trove of divine truth that no one else could have known/discovered.

That wealth of spiritual knowledge is available to anyone who believes Jesus’ testimony, acknowledges his own sin, looks to X alone for salvation from sin, and trusts in Him for eternal life.

In Jesus’ conversation w/ brilliant, but spiritually ignorant, Nicodemus, Christ will=>

1) Indict this Pharisee for his spiritual ignorance
2) Declare the **irreverent** nature of his ignorance
3) Present Himself as the **incarnation** of truth, and therefore the remedy for spiritual ignorance.

*The Indictment of Ignorance*

Jesus has just declared that only the H.S. can regenerate a person’s soul, enabling him to believe in X and enter into the Kingdom of God.

Because this is virtually the opposite of everything Nicodemus had ever believed/thought/taught, he wouldn’t accept/believe it.

So Jesus will indict/rebuke him for choosing ignorance over truth.

**[John 3:9]** => “Nicodemus said to Him, ‘How can these things be?’”

Nicodemus was the kind of leader X will later describe as the blind leading the blind, so that they both fall into a pit.

He was a highly respected Jewish teacher/rabbi.

Others relied on him to teach them the truth of God’s Word.

But he was blind to spiritual truth himself, because he couldn’t let go of the false system of legalistic Judaism he had embraced/mastered, as a rabbi.

He had taught, that Jewish heritage & one’s own good deeds were sufficient to unlock the Kingdom of God to men.

He must not have been too confident about this himself, or he wouldn’t have wanted to ask Jesus about it.
But he was committed to this Satanic lie, & until it could be 
dislodged from Nicodemus’ mind, he would never 
understand that salvation is a sovereign/gracious gift 
from God and work of God’s Spirit. 
Nicodemus is a prime example of a learned religious authority 
who (ironically) is spiritually ignorant. 
He’s one of those Jewish leaders Paul described in Rom 10 
as having=> “a zeal for God, but not in accordance 
with knowledge. / For not knowing about God's 
righteousness and seeking to establish their own, they 
did not subject themselves to the righteousness of 
God” (Rom 10:2-3. 
Nicodemus didn’t know about God’s righteousness because 
the numbing effect of manmade religion had closed 
his mind to it, preventing him from seeing God and 
His righteousness clearly (instead of revealing God to 
him). 
It wasn’t that he didn’t have the mental capacity to 
understand regeneration by the Spirit thru faith in X. 
Nor that he was ignorant of the OT, where it is 
revealed.
He was extremely intelligent and extremely well-versed in 
OT Scripture and the Law 
It was that he simply refused to accept any truth that didn’t 
fit into his system, & discarded it for manmade ideas 
and worldly wisdom.
Jesus had clearly stated the principle that, in order to enter God’s Kingdom, a person must become born again through a miraculous work of the H.S.

* He had then alluded to the spiritual cleansing described in Ezek 36, calling it being born by “water & the Spirit,” ideas Nicodemus must have been familiar with.

* He had gone on, to show Nicodemus that natural man can never bring about his spiritual rebirth by his own moral/religious efforts—that only the H.S. can accomplish this.

* And He had illustrated the Spirit’s work in regeneration by comparing it with the wind (pneuma w/ pneuma).

By all rights, Nicodemus should have been saying=>

“All I get it! And that pulls together all the fragments of OT knowledge that I have long been wondering about.”

But instead, he let his old faulty preconceptions rule his mind, and said w/ amazement=> “How can these things be?”

Being as knowledgeable of OT Scripture as he was, he should have understood what Jesus had said.

His self-imposed/self-chosen ignorance earned him a mild rebuke from our Lord in verse 10=>

[Verse 10]=> “Jesus answered and said to him, ‘Are you the teacher of Israel and do not understand these things?’”
Notice that Jesus didn’t call him “a teacher of Israel,”
but “the teacher of Israel,” and this is emphasized.

He was the religious authority/expert on OT theology in Israel.

This is Jesus’ indictment of Nicodemus=> In spite of an expertise in biblical knowledge, beyond almost every other Jew;
And in spite of the fact that he was undoubtedly aware of what John the Baptist had declared about Jesus & had taught about repentance for sin;
He hadn’t submitted his mind/will to the truth of God;
And he hadn’t even recognized/acknowledged the truth when Jesus pointed it out to him.

X said=> “From everyone who has been given much, much will be required; and to whom they entrusted much, of him they will ask all the more” (Lk 12:48).

Nicodemus had been entrusted w/ much of God’s truth, but he hadn’t used it to arrive at a proper perception/understanding of that truth.

This was Jesus’ indictment of his failure.

* The Irreverence of Ignorance

Self-imposed ignorance like that of Nicodemus, is irreverent because it casts doubt on God’s Word.

It is man’s way of saying to God, “I understand what You’re saying, Lord, but I’m not going to accept-it/believe-it.”

This isn’t blameworthy simply because a person doesn’t understand.
It’s blameworthy because he can/should understand, but chooses not to do so, due to his entrenched unbelief.

It is stubborn intransigence against the truth in God’s Word.

And it is wrong.

In essence, it holds God’s truthfulness up to question/doubt.

Thus, it irreverently holds God’s character and righteousness up to doubt.

It is self-imposed ignorance that embraces some opinion it prefers, over God’s eternal, unchanging, authoritative truth.

Sometimes Xns make outlandish statements, & misquote or misapply particular Scripture verses in an attempt to support them.

If you mention that their interpretation of that verse is not what God meant when He inspired it, and that if they’d just read it in context, they’d see that, they take offense, because they value their opinion of what the verse should mean, over what God actually said/intended.
This too is irreverence, which boldly rejects God’s truth for what it is, when it contradicts one’s own views/preferences about what it should be.

And this is exactly what Nicodemus was doing.

[Verse 11] (Jesus) => “Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know and testify of what we have seen, and you do not accept our testimony.”

Commentators are not in settled agreement about who the “we” are, who speak/know/testify of what they’ve seen.

They do agree that it includes Jesus Himself, but they don’t agree who else is included in the word “we.”

* Some say it’s God the Father; but how does the Father “speak” except through Jesus Himself and through His Word?
* Others believe it is John the Baptist, but there’s no other mention of John in the immediate context.
* Some believe Jesus was just using the plural to refer to Himself, giving added weight to His own words. But why would God ever need to add weight to His own words?
  His word is the word of God!
* At least 1 commentator thinks Jesus was just using “we” sarcastically because Nicodemus had used it when he first came to X, saying, “Rabbi, we know that You have come
from God as a teacher” (Jn 3:2).

But it’s difficult to imagine Jesus ever being sarcastic.

For lack of a better alternative, “we” seems to refer to Jesus & His disciples, who had personally known/experienced the truth of regeneration by the Spirit.

The disciples themselves had become regenerated, and Jesus had witnessed first-hand the effects it had had on them.

They had personal/absolute knowledge of the wonders to which they testified, but Nicodemus and the Sanhedrin did not believe their testimony.

The crux of Nicodemus’ failure was that he did not accept the testimony of Jesus & His disciples.

If he’d recognized Jesus for who He was (the Messiah, God’s Son), he would undoubtedly have believed what X had said. But in his view, Jesus was just a good teacher sent by God, and authenticated through His miracles.

For that reason, Nicodemus felt free to reject X’s testimony when it went beyond his own closed system of thought/theology.

His essential failure was a refusal to believe in Jesus.
X spoke w/ heaven’s own authority, but Nicodemus wasn’t willing to recognize/acknowledge that fact. Not only Nicodemus, but the whole Sanhedrin was indictable for this failure since the statement “you do not accept” uses a plural pronoun (you a/w/a the members of the Sanhedrin you represent). They didn’t accept either Jesus or His testimony. Not only on this occasion, but whenever/whatever Jesus had taught there in Jerusalem. They didn’t accept what Jesus had taught, because they couldn’t, being unregenerate nonbelievers—“natural men,” incapable of appraising/accepting/understanding the things of God. Not only was their refusal to accept Jesus’ testimony indictable, it was irreverent because His word was the very word of God. Until Nicodemus’ attitude changed, what was the point of Jesus’ sharing w/ him additional—even deeper—truths?

**[Verse 12]** (Jesus)⇒ “If I told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things?”

“Earthly things” refer to spiritual truths experienced on earth—e.g. the new birth (which Jesus had already talked about).

“Heavenly things” are truths of a higher order which are well known in heaven, but which we on earth would not know, if God didn’t reveal them to us.
E.g. Jesus’ deity as God’s Son, the redemption of the world thru X’s death, God’s loving plan to reconcile man to Himself & save him from hell, thru faith in Jesus.
And how God’s justice was going to be preserved and vindicated through the fulfillment of the Law, even as God’s love saved His people from the Law’s demand for their death, as sinners.

**Jesus had declared earthly truth, & Nicodemus hadn’t believed it, so how was he going to believe Jesus if He declared these even more remote (heavenly) truths to him?**

How was he going to be able to handle the heavenly truths Jesus was about to teach him?=> God’s plan to redeem man thru the atoning sacrifice of His own Son on the cross.

He would never be able to deal w/ the truth in John 3:16=>

“For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.”

There is an implied warning in Jesus’ words here in our own text=> Do not lightly regard My words or discount them as unbelievable.

Beyond that, don’t impugn My character by disregarding as untrue, what I say to you.

Nicodemus’ main sin, & his main error, were his failure/refusal to believe what Jesus said, and thus not to believe in Jesus Himself.
He didn’t want to believe, because he didn’t want to admit that he was a helpless sinner, headed for hell apart from the H.S.’s gracious intervention to save him; That Jesus could save him, but he couldn’t save himself. This was the irreverence of his self-chosen ignorance.

* The Incarnation of Truth

Jesus now revealed to Nicodemus that He knew/had full spiritual truth, because He had come from heaven.

He Himself was truth—the incarnation of truth.

[Verse 13]=>

“No one has ascended into heaven, but He who descended from heaven: the Son of Man.”

To know the truth about “heavenly things,” a person would have to have been in the very presence of God Himself. No one has ever done that—with one exception=> Jesus X.

Not only has He been in heaven, He came from heaven to begin with.

No one has ever ascended into heaven in the sense the 2nd Person of the Godhead was there, before He descended to earth.

*Samuel was in heaven when Saul called for him through the witch of Endor, to reappear on earth.

But Samuel had never seen God directly and was never as close to God as X had been.

*Isaiah had gone to heaven in a vision.
But he hadn’t experienced it as Jesus had known it, having lived in the Father’s very presence from all eternity.

*Lazarus went to heaven after he died, before Jesus raised him back to life, but he didn’t go where X had been.

*Paul would enter into the third heaven, where he’d be told things he couldn’t even speak—but not as Jesus had eternally been, in the bosom of the Father.

This is why X could speak w/ such authority about “heavenly things”—not only had He had free access to God’s own presence there, that’s where He had come from. He is (w/i Himself) full of heavenly truth/knowledge, being, as Jn 1:14 says, “full of grace and truth.”

No other person has ever had such access to God and God’s truth.

* Jn 1=> “No one has seen God at any time; the only begotten God who is in the bosom of the Father, He has explained Him” (1:18).

* Jn 6=> “Not that anyone has seen the Father, except the One who is from God; He has seen the Father (6:46).

**Jesus revealed to Nicodemus that He knew heavenly truth because He’d come from heaven, at His incarnation.**

Now He’ll reveal that He came to be lifted-up/crucified, so that thru death He might give life to all who believe in Him. Nicodemus had wanted to ask how he could gain eternal life in the Kingdom of God—and this was the answer.
Jesus was the fulfillment of a prophetic type found in Num 21, in which Israelites who had been bitten by snakes were told to look at a bronze serpent that had been lifted up on a pole & they would be saved from death.

In the same way, Jesus was to be lifted up on a cross, so those who looked on Him could be saved from hell, and spiritual death.

[Verse 14]=> “As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up;”

Israel had repeatedly sinned against God w/ their murmuring during their sojourn in the wilderness.

Eventually, He punished them, by sending snakes into their camp. When they repented of their grumbling, Moses prayed for them and God provided for a cure, from death by snake-bite. He commanded Moses to have a bronze serpent fabricated and to attach it to the top of a pole. Anyone who merely looked at that bronze snake would be healed from the effects of the venom within him.

It was an act of faith in God’s provision for his healing.

Having reminded Nicodemus of that ancient episode, Jesus added that He, the Son of Man, must be lifted up in the same way, bring the same benefit—salvation from death.

But He would be lifted up on a cross through crucifixion, dying so that believers might have eternal life instead of spiritual death.
Moses’ bronze serpent had been an image of the very thing which had been killing Israelites—deadly snakes.

As we look to Jesus on the cross, we see the very thing that was once killing us spiritually—sin—because He took our sin on Himself, becoming an offering for sin.

II Cor 5:21=> “He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.”

Rom 8=> “[God] sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and as an offering for sin, He condemned sin in the flesh” (8:3).

How? By condemning X in our place.

As we look to Jesus’ death on the cross, we see the true ugliness of our sin, & its horrible result—X’s death, after He had been subjected to man’s vicious cruelty, and to God’s wrath. We see God’s wrath being poured out on our sin, but not on us personally, because X has died in our place, having taken our sin upon Himself.

Each of us is dying physically a little every day, because we have the death principle woven into our bodies, due to Adam’s sin.

But the unsaved man, the natural man also has the principle of spiritual death flowing through his veins, like the venom of Satan himself.

The Israelites were saved by just looking at the brass serpent.
Even if their eyes were so swollen because of the snake bite that they could only glance at the serpent, that was enough to save their lives.

Our souls are saved as we merely look by faith to X in His death by faith.

And even if we only have faith the size of a mustard seed, & can look but little on Jesus, saying, “Lord, I believe; help my unbelief” (Mk 9:24), He will save our souls.

Proud people stubbornly refuse to look to X, knowing they’d see the horrible consequence of their own sin in His death for it. It’s too shocking, too repulsive, too humiliating, for them to look at, because it’s their fault that He’s there. Some feel their sin is so gross it would be too much even for God’s grace; Others believe they really have no sin at all.

But Jesus says to both “Look to Me by faith & I’ll forgive you and give you new life.”

The worldly-wise ask, “What’s the use of just looking, since looking cannot heal anyone? Send me a more effective remedy.”

An Israelite who said that died, refusing God’s only provision for healing, the only remedy for snake-bite. The complacent, say, “I’ll look to Jesus someday, but not now, because I’ve got other, more important things to do.”
When death comes unexpectedly, they have no time to look. 

**Jesus’ response to all these people is “Look to Me by faith even now, just as the snake-bitten Israelites looked to the serpent.”**

[Verse 15] => “so that whoever believes [looks to Him by faith] will in Him have eternal life.”

When Jesus says “**Whoever,**” He shuts no one out who is dying from his sin, if the H.S. has enabled him to look-at and believe-in X.

The same crucified X provides healing for the guilt-smitten soul of a prostitute, drug addict, embezzler—or a saint.

If he can say what Peter said as he was sinking in water and about to drown, **“Lord, save me”** (Mt 14:30), he will have eternal life.

If he can say with the publican, **“God, be merciful to me, the sinner,”** Jesus will take away his death, & give him life instead.

Jesus is the way and the truth and the life (Jn 14:6), and He is my Savior.

I hope you too can/will/do look to Him, so that He will be your Savior from sin.
Text: John 3:9-15

Why can’t the unregenerate understand spiritual truth?

1. They are spiritually blinded.  
* I Cor 2:14; 1:30
2. Sin has caused them to hate spiritual truth.  
* II Cor 4:3
3. They are spiritually dead in their trespasses and sins.  
* Jn 3:20

Eph 2:1; Rom 5:10; Eph 2:2; Col 1:21; Psa 14:1; 81:5; 5:10

4. The key to wisdom that opens up our minds to spiritual truth, is a relationship with Jesus.  
* Jn 14:6

5. In Jesus’ conversation with brilliant but spiritually ignorant Nicodemus, Christ will indict this Pharisee for his spiritual ignorance, declare the irreverent nature of his ignorance, and present Himself as the incarnation of truth…  
* The Indictment of Ignorance

[John 3:9]

6. Nicodemus is a prime example of a learned religious authority who is spiritually ignorant.  
* Rom 10:2-3

7. Being as knowledgeable of OT Scripture as he was, he should have understood what Jesus had said.  
[Verse 10]

[Verse 11]

* The Irreverence of Ignorance

8. Self-imposed ignorance like that of Nicodemus is irreverent because it casts doubt on God’s Word.  

9. Commentators are not in agreement about who “we” are who speak, know and testify; they do agree that it includes Jesus.  
* Jn 3:2
10. The crux of Nicodemus’ failure was that he did not accept the testimony of Jesus and His disciples.

[Verse 12]

11. “Heavenly things” are truths which are known in heaven but which we would not know if God did not reveal them to us.

*The Incarnation of Truth*

[Verse 13]  

Jn 1:18; 6:46

12. Jesus revealed to Nicodemus that He knew heavenly truth because He had come from heaven at His incarnation.

[Verse 14]

Jn 1:18; 6:46

13. As we look to Jesus on the cross, we see the very thing that was once killing us spiritually—sin—because He took our sin on Himself.

Rom 8:3

14. Our souls are saved as we merely look by faith to Christ in His death.

Mk 9:24

[Verse 15]

Mt 14:30

15. Jesus is the way and the truth and the life.

Jn 14:6