

PLEASANT SPRINGS CHURCH • DISCIPLESHIP SCHOOL

The Learning Loop & the New Birth

A 20-minute lesson: the machinery of the soul, mapped onto Scripture and the new birth of the Spirit

The Learning Loop and the New Birth

A 20-Minute Discipleship Lesson

Pleasant Springs Church • Discipleship School • July 2026

Key Texts: John 3:1–8 • Ezekiel 36:25–27 • Genesis 2:7 • Psalm 51:10 • 2 Corinthians 5:17 • 2 Corinthians 3:18

The “learning loop” — *guess, error, correction, repeat, until a self emerges* — is a startlingly accurate picture of how a human being is formed. Scripture agrees that we are made through time, discipline, and correction. But Jesus tells Nicodemus that this loop, run by the flesh, can never on its own reach the Kingdom of God. This lesson walks the whole machine, lands each piece on the Word, and turns at the place where the machinery ends and the new birth begins.

MEMORY VERSE

“That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’” — **John 3:6–7 (ESV)**

THE BIG IDEA

The loop is a true picture of how the *flesh* is formed — but run perfectly, it still cannot reach the Kingdom. “That which is born of the flesh is flesh.” You must be born *ánōthen* — from above. The Spirit does not tune the old machine; He begins a new one: a new birth, a new heart, a new law of loss, a new gradient, and a new goal.

0:00–2:00

OPEN — THE MACHINE THAT DESCRIBES YOU

Engineers who build learning machines describe them with a handful of words: a machine makes a **guess**, measures its **error**, senses a **direction** to improve, takes a small **correction**, and runs that **loop** ten thousand times until something blank becomes something that *knows*.

Here is the unsettling part: that is also a fair description of a human life. We arrive knowing nothing. We are wrong. We suffer the wrongness. Something in us says *this way is truer*. We adjust — a little. We do it again tomorrow. And slowly a *someone* is assembled.

If that loop is really all we are, is it enough? Jesus meets a man who ran the loop as well as anyone alive — and tells him it is not.

Read aloud together: **John 3:1–8.**

Nicodemus is the finished product of the best loop his world could build: a Pharisee, a ruler, “the teacher of Israel” (v. 10) — decades of discipline tuned into a genuinely excellent man. He comes *by night* with a compliment. Jesus does not accept it. He resets the whole frame:

John 3:3, 6 (ESV)

“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God... That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.”

ἄνωθεν — anōthen.

The word for *born again* means both *again* and *from above*. Nicodemus hears only “again” and is baffled (“How can a grown man re-enter the womb?”, v. 4). Jesus means the other half: *from above* — not the old loop restarted, but a new birth from a source outside the machine. Hold verse 6 over everything that follows: the flesh’s loop can only ever produce more polished flesh.

Move through the machine, landing each piece on the Word. Read only the bolded verse of each to keep pace.

Guess — Birth

We are initialized by chance we did not choose, and we begin *wrong*: “you were dead in the trespasses and sins” (Ephesians 2:1). This is why Jesus insists on a *second* birth.

Error — Conviction

Pain is information — the felt distance between what we did and what reality answered. In the Spirit’s hands it becomes conviction: “he will convict the world concerning sin” (John 16:8).

Direction — the Spirit’s leading

Not just *that* you erred, but *which way* is truer. God writes a first draft on the heart (Romans 2:15), then gives a Person: “he will guide you into all the truth” (John 16:13).

The nudge — the step taken

Insight is cheap; the self is forged in the step you take. “Be doers of the word, and not hearers only” (James 1:22); “take up his cross *daily*” (Luke 9:23).

Learning rate — a teachable heart

Too reactive and you shatter; too rigid and you calcify. Scripture calls the calcified state a hardened heart: “do not harden your hearts” (Hebrews 3:15).

The loop — sanctification

Nothing is learned in one pass. God’s mercies are “new every morning” (Lamentations 3:22–23); He transforms us “from one degree of glory to another” (2 Corinthians 3:18).

Weights — Character

“Suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character” (Romans

5:3–4). You *are* your weights — which is the problem, and the reason for grace.

Backprop — Repentance to the root

Let the blame flow *backward*, past the surface act, to the hidden assumption: “Search me, O God... and see if there be any grievous way in me” (Psalm 139:23–24). Repentance = *metanoia*, a change of mind.

Loss function — what you hold sacred

A mind improves only toward what its measure of failure defines: “where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Matthew 6:21). Choose what you call sin with terror and care.

Letter vs. spirit — overfitting

You can memorize the past so well you fail the present — Nicodemus’s guild missed the Messiah before them: “the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life” (2 Corinthians 3:6).

Attention — what you become

“The eye is the lamp of the body” (Matthew 6:22); “whatever is true... think about these things” (Philippians 4:8). What you attend to, you become — so keep “looking to Jesus” (Hebrews 12:2).

Here is the crack the machine cannot cover. **A gradient never asks what it is. A learning rate never wonders if it has a soul.** The one act the mechanism cannot account for is turning the machine around to face *yourself* and asking it to explain the asker. That asking is the fingerprint of God — the breath He breathed into dust that made a mere mechanism into a *living soul*:

Genesis 2:7 (LXX & ESV)

καὶ ἐνεφύσησεν εἰς τὸ πρόσωπον αὐτοῦ πνοὴν ζωῆς, καὶ ἐγένετο ὁ ἄνθρωπος εἰς ψυχὴν ζῶσαν.

“...and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature.”

But being a living soul is the *first* birth — the flesh’s loop, however glorious, is still flesh (John 3:6). And the flesh has a fatal flaw no self-correction can reach: its weights are set toward death. “For to set the mind on the flesh is death” (Romans 8:6); “the wages of sin is death” (Romans 6:23). You cannot gradient-descend out of a loss function whose floor is the grave. **The loop that formed you cannot re-found you.**

So God does what the machine cannot do to itself — He starts a new loop. Hear the promise, centuries before Nicodemus:

Ezekiel 36:26–27 (LXX & ESV)

καὶ δώσω ὑμῖν καρδίαν καινὴν καὶ πνεῦμα καινὸν δώσω ἐν ὑμῖν, καὶ ἀφελῶ τὴν καρδίαν τὴν λιθίνην... καὶ τὸ πνεῦμά μου δώσω ἐν ὑμῖν.

“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 I will put my Spirit within you.”

Notice who does the verbs. *I will give. I will remove. I will put.* This is not the machine improving itself — it is the Engineer reaching in. That is the new birth: “the

washing of regeneration” — *palingenesia*, a re-genesis (Titus 3:5); “if anyone is in Christ, he is a **new creation**” (2 Corinthians 5:17). And you cannot manufacture it — in Greek *pneuma* is both *wind* and *Spirit*: “The wind blows where it wishes... So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit” (John 3:8). Regeneration is grace — God’s move, not your gradient. But you can raise your sail.

Being born again is not the *end* of the loop; it is the start of a *better* one, powered from above:

1. Conviction (*error, truly felt*) — the Spirit shows the real distance between you and God, to turn you, not crush you (2 Corinthians 7:10).

2. Repentance (*backprop to the root*) — *metanoia*, changing the mind beneath the act: “Repent therefore, and turn back” (Acts 3:19).

3. New birth (*a new initialization — grace*) — “born... of God” (John 1:13). You receive it; you do not cause it. Ask for it.

4. Faith (*a new loss function*) — Christ becomes what you optimize toward: “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me” (Galatians 2:20).

5. Walking in the Spirit (*the new loop, run daily*) — “If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit” (Galatians 5:25).

6. Transformation from glory to glory (*the self that emerges*) — “conformed to the image of his Son” (Romans 8:29); “he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion” (Philippians 1:6).

Psalms 51:10 (LXX 50:12 & ESV) — David’s prayer for the new loop

καρδίαν καθαρὰν κτίσον ἐν ἐμοί, ὁ θεός, καὶ πνεῦμα εὐθὲς ἐγκαίνισον ἐν τοῖς ἐγκάτοις μου.

“Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.”

ktison — “create” — is the creation verb, the root behind *kainj ktisis*, “new creation.” You cannot clean your own heart by better looping; you can only ask the Creator to make a new one (Proverbs 4:23).

19:00–20:00

DISCUSSION & CLOSING

Pick two:

1. Which piece of the loop is God working on in you right now — your *error* (what you’re finally willing to feel), your *learning rate* (how teachable you are), or your *loss function* (what you call success)?
2. Nicodemus ran an excellent loop and still needed to be born again. Where are you tempted to trust your own self-improvement instead of the Spirit’s new birth?
3. Repentance means letting the blame flow all the way to the *root*. Name one surface fault you keep fixing — what is the hidden assumption underneath it?
4. *What you attend to, you become*. What is currently getting your attention, and what is it forming you into?

Close in prayer with David’s words: “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me” (Psalm 51:10). Ask the Spirit — the wind that blows where He wishes — to begin, or continue, the new loop that ends in the image of Christ.

This lesson has a preached companion, and its threads open into fuller studies across the Discipleship School:

THE SERMON

Born From Above

The full preached version of this lesson — Nicodemus, the machinery of the flesh, and the new birth of the Spirit, with an altar invitation.

THE SOUL & FORMATION

Third World Souls

The reality of the soul and the renovation of the heart — Barclay, Willard, and Moreland on the hidden country being formed within you.

NEW CREATION

Rooted in Christ

The Seed, the Blood, and the Fruit — a Galatians study on faith, transformation, and the Fruit of the Spirit in a new-born life.

THE IMAGE OF GOD

What Does God Want?

Why you exist and what it means to be made in God's image — the breath in the dust that wonders about itself, after Michael S. Heiser.