

The Grace Question: Are You a Teacher and Yet Do Not Understand?

Series: The Questions of Easter

John 3:1-21

February 21, 2016

Today, we are continuing our series “Questions of Easter.” We are looking through the Gospel of John at the questions Jesus asked as He was making His way on the road towards Easter and the empty tomb.

Last week, we tackled the Life question: What Are You Looking For? Some seek power; some seek material blessings; some seek eternal life; some seek to love Jesus. Today, we are going to answer the Grace question.

After listening restlessly to a long and tedious sermon, a 6-year-old boy asked his father what the preacher did the rest of the week. “Oh, he’s a very busy man,” the father replied. “He takes care of church business, visits the sick, ministers to the poor...and then he has to have time to rest up. Talking in public isn’t an easy job, you know.” The boy thought about that, then said, “Well, listening ain’t easy, either.”

Today, we are looking at a famous encounter in John 3. We are introduced to a man by the name of Nicodemus. We read that he arranged to meet with Jesus, but not during the day in a public place, but at night and a secret meeting. Even at this time, Nicodemus deems it could be dangerous to be seen talking with Jesus on a personal level. Eventually, the Gospels will record the religious leaders tried to catch Jesus saying something they might use against Him. Even the people were afraid. The Bible says, “But no one had the courage to speak favorably about [Jesus] in public, for they were afraid of getting in trouble with the Jewish leaders.”¹

So, it is in this secret meeting that we have recorded two of the most familiar passages of Scripture. Of course, #1 is John 3:16: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.”² The second passage from this chapter, well, just hold that thought.

Who is this Nicodemus? What can we learn about him?

First, it may well be that Nicodemus belonged to a distinguished Jewish family. Archeological discoveries and ancient writings have references of individuals by the name of Nicodemus, long after Jesus’ death, who served as ambassador and another a chief negotiator. It may well be that both these men belonged to the same family as our Nicodemus, and that it was one of the most distinguished families in Jerusalem. If that is true, it is amazing that this Jewish aristocrat should come to this homeless prophet who had been the carpenter of Nazareth that he might talk to him about his soul.

Second, Nicodemus must have been wealthy. We’ll find out later that when Jesus died, Nicodemus brought for his body “75 pounds of perfumed ointment made from myrrh and aloes”³, and only a wealthy man could have done that.

Third, Nicodemus was a Pharisee. In many ways, the Pharisees were the best people in the whole country. There were never more than 6,000 of them. They promised to spend all their lives observing every detail of the Law. The name Pharisee means

¹ John 7:13 (New Living Translation, Second Edition)

² John 3:16 (Revised Standard Version)

³ John 19:39 (New Living Translation, Second Edition)

“the Separated One”; and the Pharisees were those who had separated themselves from all ordinary life in order to keep every detail of the Law. You know, wash your hands properly, never work on the Sabbath or walk too far. Be ceremonially clean at all times. Nicodemus was a Pharisee, and it is astonishing that a man who regarded goodness in that light and who had given himself to that kind of life in the conviction that he was pleasing God should wish to talk to Jesus at all.

Finally, Nicodemus was a ruler of the Jews, a member of the Sanhedrin. The Sanhedrin was a court of 70 members and was the supreme court of the Jews. Under the Romans, its powers were more limited than once they had been, but they were still extensive. In particular, the Sanhedrin had religious jurisdiction over every Jew in the world; and one of its duties was to examine and deal with anyone suspected of being a false prophet.

So this wealthy, prominent, and leading religious leader cautiously comes to Jesus. He quite frankly may not have wished to commit himself by coming to Jesus by day. It's a wonder that with his background, he came to Jesus at all. It is a miracle of grace that Nicodemus overcame his prejudices and his upbringing and his whole view of life enough to come to Jesus. Also, by waiting until dark, he found a more available Jesus. Throughout the day Jesus was surrounded by crowds of people all the time. It may well be that Nicodemus came to Jesus by night because he wanted an absolutely private and completely undisturbed time with Jesus. Nicodemus was a puzzled man, a man with many honors, and yet with something lacking in his life. He came to Jesus for a talk so that somehow in the darkness of the night he might find light.

I read about some children who have come to pastors to ask them something:

- Arnold. Age 8, Nashville. Dear Pastor, I know God loves everybody but He never met my sister.
- Dear Pastor, Please say in your sermon that Peter Peterson has been a good boy all week. I am Peter Peterson. Age 9, Phoenix
- Patty. Age 10, New Haven. Dear Pastor, I'm sorry I can't leave more money in the plate, but my father didn't give me a raise in my allowance. Could you have a sermon about a raise in my allowance?
- Stephen. Age 8, Chicago. Dear Pastor, I would like to go to heaven someday because I know my brother won't be there.
- Loreen. Age 9. Tacoma. Dear Pastor, I think a lot more people would come to your church if you moved it to Disneyland.
- Laurie. Age 10, New York City. Dear Pastor, Please pray for all the airline pilots. I am flying to California tomorrow.
- Alexander. Age 10, Raleigh. Dear Pastor, Please say a prayer for our Little League team. We need God's help or a new pitcher.
- Ralph, Age 11, Akron. Dear Pastor, I liked your sermon on Sunday. Especially when it was finished.

Nicodemus went to Jesus and said “Rabbi, we all know that God has sent you to teach us. Your miraculous signs are evidence that God is with you.”⁴ A nice, complimentary introduction. “Hi, how are you? I've heard a great deal about you. Good things. Very impressive things.” But Jesus is not distracted by Nicodemus' flattery. He

⁴ John 3:2 (New Living Translation, Second Edition)

knows Who He is, and He knows what is on His enquirer's mind, so He just jumps to; no beating around the bush, and answers Nicodemus with that 2nd notable phrase in this chapter: "I tell you the truth, unless you are born again, you cannot see the Kingdom of God."⁵

Born again. Things wear out of common use – slang words, phrases. Because they become used too much until they are not special words anymore. "Rad." "Oh, snap." "Cool, man cool." "He's so hip." Slang words; they just grow old.

Same could be said for the term "born again." Jimmy Carter used it. Jimmy Swaggert used it. Jimmy Baker used it. Lots of people have used it to the place you wander if it means anything any more. But simply because someone has given a bad connotation to a word or belief doesn't mean we should stop looking at it, believing it, or find it a part of our everyday life. Just because the phrase "born again" seems so passé doesn't mean our need for to be born again diminishes in any way.

To be born again is to undergo such a radical change that it is like a new birth; it is to have something happen to the soul which can only be described as being born all over again; and the whole process is not a human achievement, because it comes from the grace of God.

Grace – that thing which enables us to come to God. Grace is God's Riches At Christ's Expense. There was no way we could achieve or reach or climb to or buy or earn our way into heaven. "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God."⁶

Pope John 13th was Pope in the late 1950's and early 1960's. On Christmas Day 1958, he became the first pope since 1870 to make pastoral visits in his diocese of Rome by visiting two hospitals, including visiting children infected with polio. The following day, he visited the Regina Coeli prison, one of the worst prisons in Rome. It was the first time in 90 years that a pope had gone to a prison, and in greeting the prisoners, the Pope said, "You could not come to me, so I have come to you." And that is the same thing Christ did for us. We could not go to Him, so He came to us. He came to rescue us because he loved us, and his love never ends.⁷

Although Nicodemus was a "teacher of Israel," he lacks the imagination that is necessary to sense the authentic truth that must be "sensed" or "grasped" rather than "understood," calling for the faculty of faith more than intellect. Jesus tells Nicodemus that he must be "born again," and Nicodemus argues that no one can re-enter the womb and come out again. Even after Jesus elaborates on the meaning of spiritual birth, Nicodemus is unable to "understand" it and unwilling to shift into the more of spiritual knowledge or experience.⁸ Maybe, he was like many people who know they need a new life, but are unwilling.

The re-birth is not outward but inward, it is not of the body but of the soul.

COMMENT.

You may be thinking, "I've always gone to church." So had Nicodemus. He was far more devout and far more knowledgeable than probably anyone here, but Jesus said he needed to be born again. You may be thinking, "I've always believe in God." So

⁵ John 3:2-3 (New Living Translation, Second Edition)

⁶ Ephesians 2:8 (New International Version)

⁷ W. Frank Harrington, "The Love That Brought Him," Preaching Today, Tape No. 51.

⁸ (Robert Wingard, Portraits of Christ in Scripture, p 30-31)

did Nicodemus, but Jesus said he needed to be born again. You may be thinking, “I’ve never done really bad things.” Same with Nicodemus, yet Jesus said he needed to be born again.

Folks, you can become a Christian by going to church just about as easily as you can become an automobile by sleeping in a garage. Jesus said, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.”⁹ The entire gospel comes to a focus in this verse. Here God sets the pattern of true love. God paid dearly with the life of his Son, the highest price he could pay. Jesus accepted our punishment, paid the price for our sins, and then offered us the new life that he had bought for us.¹⁰

The founder of Methodism, John Wesley’s personal testimony has always made a profound impact on all who have read of it. He went to Oxford Seminary for five years in England and then became a minister of the Church of England where he served for about ten years. In approximately 1735, he became a missionary from England to Georgia. All of his life, he had been quite a failure in his ministry though he was, as people could see, very pious. He got up at 4 o’clock in the morning and prayed for two hours. He would then read the Bible for an hour before going to the jails, prison, and hospitals to minister to all kinds of people. He would teach, and pray for, and help others until late at night. He did this for years.

On the way back from America, there was a great storm at sea. The little ship upon which they were sailing was about to sink. Huge waves broke over the ship and the wind roared in the sails. Wesley feared he was going to die that night and he was terrified. He had no assurance of what would happen to him when he died. Despite all of his efforts to be good, death now for him was just a big black question mark. On one side of the ship was a group of people who were singing hymns. He asked them, “How can you sing when this very night you are going to die?” They replied, “If this ship goes down we will go up to be with the Lord forever.” Wesley went away shaking his head, thinking to himself, “How can they know that? What have they done that I have not done?” Then he added, “I came to convert the heathen, but who shall convert me?”

By the grace of God, the ship made it back to England. Wesley went to London and found his way to Aldersgate Street and a small chapel. There he heard a man reading a sermon which had been written two centuries before by Martin Luther, entitled “Luther’s Preface to the Book of Romans.” This sermon described what real faith was. It is trusting Jesus Christ only for salvation – and not in our own good works. Wesley suddenly realized that he had been on the wrong road all his life. That night he wrote these words in his journal: “About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, for salvation; and an assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.”

COMMENT

Trust in the grace of Christ and to commit your life to Jesus Christ.

⁹ John 3:16 (Revised Standard Version)

¹⁰ Life Application Bible Notes, John 3:16