

Nicodemus-What Would You Do If You Could Be Born Again, John 3: 1-17 Sun. May 26, 2024

For years, the opening of "The Wide World of Sports" television program illustrated "*the agony of defeat*" with a painful ending to an attempted ski jump. The skier appeared in good form as he headed down the jump, but then, for no apparent reason, he tumbled head over heels off the side of the jump, bouncing off the supporting structure down to the snow below.

What viewers didn't know was that he chose to fall rather than finish the jump. Why? As he explained later, the jump surface had become too fast, and midway down the ramp, he realized if he completed the jump, he would land on the level ground, beyond the safe sloping landing area, **which could have been fatal**. Surprisingly, the skier suffered no more than a headache from the tumble.

To change one's course in life can be a dramatic and sometimes painful undertaking, *but change is better than a fatal landing at the end.*

Here is where we find Nicodemus today, struggling with DEFEAT, NOT WANTING TO CHANGE.

Jesus tells Nicodemus that he is facing a fatal landing if he does not change directions. **But Nicodemus knows only one way and that is the way of this earth.** It is the only way that any of us knows.

Suddenly Jesus appears on the scene and begins speaking of Heaven, of being Born Again. Nicodemus hears the words "*You must be born again,*" but he is confused. So, he asks, "*How can a person go back into his mother's womb and come out again?*"

HOW CAN NICODEMUS BE SO CONFUSED? He's a religious leader and should understand spiritual lessons but somehow, he feels he has missed some crucial truth. And, there is a reason he goes to Jesus. He has an inkling that Jesus might be able to provide that missing important detail. **Nicodemus has somehow been headed in the wrong direction and now he must change his course.** This he knows but Nicodemus seems hesitant. He seems uncertain about making such a drastic change. Why? *What makes this remarkable man slow to take Jesus at his word? What is confusing him?*

#1: First, Nicodemus was a religious man. He clearly knew the decalogue by heart and the Torah by memorization. In John's Gospel he is referred to not just as teacher but "the teacher", pointing to his religious distinction. *If anyone knew the truth about God and God's people, surely it would be this man.* Yet, for all of his grounding in God and God's Word, Nicodemus was not a fulfilled man. There was an emptiness within him that religion had not filled. "*Master, I know all of the commandments, but there is something missing...*"

You know, it is possible to be a religious person and still miss the thrust of God's Word. Many years ago all of America watched as Alex Haley's Roots came to the television screen. There was one particular character that to me was particularly memorable. Ed Asner played the role of the old captain on a slave ship. He was a religious man. Each night he would close his door and read his Bible. The first night on the return trip some of the crew sent him a young slave girl to his cabin to enjoy. He is doubtful and sends her away. On the following night they sent her again, and now he no longer yells how dare you, instead he allows her to stay and reads to her from the Bible. On another night, as he reads his Bible he hears the cries of the suffering CAPTURED on deck so he closes his door so he can continue reading his Bible.

THIS STORY SHOWS US THAT IT IS POSSIBLE TO BE A 'RELIGIOUS PERSON' AND BE UNFULFILLED.

And this is at the heart of Nicodemus' confusion. He is a person who believes in God but he is a person without a cause, a person without a heart. *"Master, I have kept all of the rules and forms and rituals of our faith, but something is missing. Tell me what else I must do to fill this void."*

#2: Secondly, Nicodemus was a powerful person. We are told that he was a ruler of the Jews. He was a member of the powerful Sanhedrin. I don't know how many of you have seen the robes that the chief justices of the Supreme Court—wear? They are black robe with four gold stripes on each sleeve. If you remember **Chief Rehnquist**, he died in 2005 from thyroid cancer. He was known as a chief of “justice” and was one of the longest running judges on the Supreme Court. **He was known as a man of “power” by that robe and the way that he carried himself.**

POWER CAN BE SEDUCTIVE. Power even tempted Jesus. We are told that when he was in the wilderness in the earthly part of his ministry, attempting to prepare himself for his ministry, Satan cast his hand over all of the kingdoms of the earth and said: *all of this will be yours.* Even Jesus was tempted by the sight. How do I know that? Because that is the nature of temptation. If you offer something to someone that they really do not want, then there is no temptation. **For something to be a genuine temptation, there must be something alluring about it. POWER IS ALLURING!!**

Even for the church, power is a great temptation. We see the big churches as the most successful churches. The taller the steeple the more powerful the congregation. We put up a cross and another puts up one twice as big. **Where is our focus? *Is it on POWER OR ON CHRIST AND HIS CALL TO SERVICE?***

AND LOOK AT Nicodemus...FOR ALL THE POWER HE DID HAVE---HE did not have peace of mind. Power had not given him contentment; it had confused him. Power promises meaning and purpose in life but it does not deliver. Master, I am a powerful person, but something is missing.

#3: The third thing I think that we can say of Nicodemus is that he was a man of pedigree. He came from the right family. You don't become a powerful Jewish lawyer unless you are from some form of pedigree. It is not something that you work up from the ranks to attain. It is not like our country. *There is only one way to get it. You are born into it.* The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible says of Nicodemus: *"He was a very rich man."*

There is a reason that Nicodemus comes to Jesus by night. He skulks in the darkness because he does not want to be seen with the Nazarene. Nicodemus is drawn to him, he is curious. Yet, for all of his interest in Jesus, he is still a pedigree. He must maintain his dignity. It is easy to become preoccupied with preserving privilege.

#4: The Forth point about Nicodemus we must never forget is was an educated man. I am proud of my education. My education has opened countless doors for me that would otherwise have been closed. The apostle Paul was proud of his education. He writes that he studied under the great Gamliel, one of the premier scholars of his day. *Nicodemus was an educated man, yet his education had NOT brought him ultimate fulfillment.*

Master, something is wrong. I have been to the very best church affiliated schools, yet my heart is heavy. I need a sense of direction. I am confused. Which way do I turn? There are educated people out there today that are not looking for more theories--**they are looking for what John Wesley called the RELIGION OF THE “WARMED HEART.”**

Jesus said: “Nicodemus, you must be born again.” You see friends, it is easy to get caught up in the form of religion and lose touch with the reality of God.

We can get so caught up in doing church work, that we fail to be the church.

- *Our intellectual understanding of the creeds can take priority over our living the creeds.*
- *We can learn about the Bible and fail to be shaped by the Bible.*

Do you know the problem with Nicodemus? I know his problem because I have seen it in far too many of my colleagues. **His ministry had become a profession rather than a calling.**

Nicodemus had built his profession upon his education, his power, his pedigree, and not upon God. I know his problem because I have seen it far too many times in myself. Every time I visit the hospital, the nursing home, a member. Every time I walk in that door [the church door]-I ask myself are you going because you have to or are you going cause you're called to?

Did Nicodemus ever come to a saving faith in Christ? Tradition says that he did, but we do not know for sure. It is certainly possible that he remained on the fringe. Millions do. **But I like to think that once a person has truly looked into the eyes of Jesus nothing can ever really be the same.** (REPEAT)

One of the best photographs from the WWII era is a photo of King George the VI inspecting a bombed out section of London. He stops to talk with a little boy, who is sloppily dressed and has his cap on crooked. The King is bending on one knee and looking directly into the face of the child, *and even though it is a profile shot of the king you can see that his is a look of compassionate.* Tell me that that child's life was not changed. Tell me that if he lived to be a hundred he ever forgot that day? *I would suggest that once one truly looks into the eyes of Jesus, it is difficult to turn away.*

If you don't believe that then ask a long parade of witnesses. Ask Mary Magdalene. *Yes, it is true. I looked into his face and I became a pure woman.* Ask Matthew. *I too looked into his face, and I became an honest man.* Ask Paul. *When I met Jesus, I changed. My zeal for the law became a zeal for love.* Ask Peter. *Change, you ask? Oh yes, I changed. After I met Jesus I had to wrestle with my prejudices against the gentiles.*

We are all broken men and women and our need is to be healed, changed, repaired, forgiven. **The true question for this morning is not, "What was Nicodemus searching for?"**

THE QUESTION IS.... "What are we searching for?"

Remember, NICODEMUS SAID...Rabbi, please tell me. I am a ruler. I am an educated man. I am a religious man. But Rabbi, I have this void in my heart and I am a broken man. I need to have something in my life that will transform my evil to good, darkness to light, haste to love, ugliness to beauty, stinginess to generosity, sin to salvation. ***Rabbi, please tell me----What is it that I need?***

Jesus says to Nicodemus . . . Whether educated or uneducated, Jew or Gentile, black or white, rich or poor, powerful or weak, religious or a sinner – ***YOU MUST BE BORN AGAIN—TO OVERCOME YOUR EMPTINESS... TO OVERCOME YOUR AGONY OF DEFEAT!!! Amen.***