

John 3:1-17

Have you ever been in the position that you thought you should choose to change the course of your life but you weren't ready for the change just yet? You find yourself researching other options, but changing would mean you have to give up what you have now, and you're pretty darn comfortable with what you have, so you choose to stay where you're at. At least for now.

That was the situation Nicodemus found himself to be in. He wanted to believe in Jesus as the Messiah. He wanted to. But he couldn't let go of his position as a member of the Sanhedrin just yet. He was in a powerful religious ruling position, and he wasn't ready to let go of his beliefs or his power just yet. He came to Jesus under the cover of darkness so his companions wouldn't know he had made the visit. Jesus spoke to him of things he couldn't quite grasp.

Jesus said, "You must be born again from above." What on earth was he talking about? It isn't possible to be physically born again, once you've been born, you're born. There's no going back and doing it over. It just isn't possible. But of course, Jesus wasn't speaking of anything physical, but spiritual. Nicodemus, being an earthly creature didn't understand. It was as if Jesus was speaking to him in riddles.

Nicodemus believes in God, but he knows he's missing something. Otherwise he never would have made that under cover visit to Jesus. And I'm sure when he leaves his meeting he is feeling confused, and just as empty as he felt before his visit. Yet it is this clandestine meeting that gives us some of the most important words in all of Christian history. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only son so that whoever believes in him shall live for eternity." That's the way God loves the world, by giving the world his son. His son came not to condemn the world but so that the world can be saved through him.

When Jesus speaks to Nicodemus of being lifted up, we think of his crucifixion where he is lifted on the cross. We also think of his resurrection where he is lifted out of the grave, and his ascension where he is lifted into heaven. What he is referring to is something Nicodemus would have easily been able to relate to and understand. It recalls a strange time when the Hebrew people were being bitten by poisonous snakes, and God instructed Moses to craft a bronze snake and put it on a pole. Any one who had been bitten was to look at the bronze snake and they would be cured. Looking directly at what had caused them harm cured them.

We can take this to heart. When we examine our lives for where we are turning away from God we see what it is that is keeping us from God and we can change. Are we getting a bit too attached to a piece of jewelry so that we are spending more emotional time, a better quality emotional time, admiring it than we are caring about being Jesus to the world? Or maybe it's our new car. Or our house. Like Nicodemus we know there is more to life.

How do we get where we want to be without losing what we have? By letting go of our emotional attachment to objects. By becoming more involved with the people around us. The ones we are close to, and the ones who are different from us. The thing about Nicodemus was that he saw Jesus was very educated, he knew the scriptures and lived by them. Nicodemus may have thought that by conversing with Jesus he could understand more about living a life that was closer to fulfilling what was written in the scriptures. Jesus told him, but I'm not sure he understood, that he needed to examine his life and determine what was keeping him from feeling as though he were in a close relationship with God. To look upon his sin, which may have been exploiting the poor, and to change. Nicodemus couldn't accept what Jesus was telling him. Part of which was he was condemning people based on religious principles.

The Daily Encourager relates a story Dr. Ken A. Ramsey tells about a friend of his named Joel. He says he met Joel while attending seminary at Emory University in Atlanta. Joel was working on his Master of Divinity degree, and they were in the same ministry assessment group. Joel was a big guy. He

did his undergraduate work at Dartmouth, where he played football. Their mutual athletic interests were a common bond, and the friendship grew from there. They enjoyed jogging together at a local park.

One day they were running around the small lake located there, and Ken noticed that Joel was smiling. "What are you smiling at?" Ken asked. Joel pointed to a little girl fishing with her dad. She was imitating every move the dad made. If he cast, she cast. If he fixed his hat, she fixed hers. If he sat down, she sat down. "Just something about a child imitating her father that makes my heart smile," Joel replied.

There was a guy in their ministry assessment group, Ken says, that for some reason, seemed to always be out to get Joel. No matter what Joel said, this guy would contradict him and take pains to point out how shortsighted Joel's comments were. The ministry assessment group was intense and was an environment where they were to evaluate one another in many different areas. This person was continually negative, demeaning and rude to Joel

One day it reached a boiling point, and some really harsh words were exchanged. They left the group and Joel angrily said, "That guy has pushed me too far. He makes me want to run him over like I used to do on the football field!" Remember that Joel was a big guy. "The veins in his thick neck were bulging," says Ken, "and it was enough to even make me shake in my shoes. I would not want to be on the receiving end of anything from him," Ken admits.

A few days passed, and it was almost time for another group meeting. The entire group could not wait to see what fireworks might occur between Joel and his enemy. The day before the group meeting, Joel and Ken were jogging in the park together. They were circling the lake, and Ken asked Joel, "So have you decided how you are going to deal with that guy?"

"Yes, I sure have," Joel replied. Ken waited for Joel to continue. "I have decided (and then he paused) . . . to forgive him." "Say again?" Ken said. "I have decided to forgive him," Joel stated rather emphatically. Ken smiled.

"What are you smiling at?" Joel asked.

"There's just something about a child imitating his father that makes my heart smile," Ken said.

Be careful when you condemn anyone, since the Bible teaches we will be dealt with the same judgment with which we judge another. It makes God smile when we imitate Christ. And who are we hardest on? Those whose dominant traits are the ones that we dislike the most about ourselves. That is why it is so important that we learn to love and forgive ourselves. When we have forgiven what we dislike about our self we can forgive those who reflect that same quality. We can have empathy towards them. Change is difficult but with God's help it can be accomplished.

Did Nicodemus change? The next time we hear of Nicodemus, it was after Jesus had been lifted up on the cross. According to the 19th chapter of John's gospel he provided the spices to help Joseph of Arimathea ready Jesus' body for the tomb in which he was placed. Had Nicodemus accepted Jesus for whom he was, the one who's death gave life? Did he finally accept that Jesus is the one to be followed, no matter what the cost? I can't say because we don't hear him mentioned again after Jesus is buried. It seems as though his public actions at that time proved he thought a great deal of Jesus, that he held him in high esteem.

Change is difficult. The only person we are can change is our self. The first step to change is forgiveness. Jesus taught us to forgive. It is through him we are able to forgive, to change and to find acceptance.

All glory be to God.