

Sermon

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**IN A NUTSHELL**

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Can you picture in your mind Jerusalem in the year AD 30? In the days of Jesus, the walled portion of the city of Jerusalem encompassed some three hundred acres of houses and streets and markets and shops. . . . Historians believe it had a population of around 600,000. At the time of the Passover this number rose to between 1,000,000 and 2,000,000, with great numbers of Jews camped outside the city proper, but within the limits of a Sabbath day's journey. Think about that for a minute. **Jerusalem was .5 square miles; the Town of Hackettstown, proper, is 3.6 square miles with a population of 9800+/-.** **The regular population of Jerusalem was estimated at 600,000! One to Two Million during Passover!**

Our Gospel lesson introduces us to a man who came to Jesus during the Passover to ask him questions about his God and the road to the Kingdom of Heaven. **The man's name was Nicodemus.**

He was a leader of the Jewish people, a man of wealth, and, clearly, a seeker after truth. For the most part the people who surrounded Jesus were ordinary people - fishermen, farmers, laborers. But not Nicodemus. He was a man of privilege.

The meeting between Nicodemus and Jesus occurs at the very beginning of Christ's public ministry, at the first Passover of his ministry, when he was 30 years old.

Before this meeting, the scriptural record gives the account of Christ's birth, His visit to the temple at age twelve, His baptism, the Temptations, His turning water to wine at Cana and his first cleansing of the temple.

Certainly, Christ's actions at the temple had struck a nerve among members of the Sanhedrin, particularly the Sadducees, because of their intimate involvement in and their responsibility for the temple. The Sadducees consisted of old high-priestly families who came to the front during the Maccabean war. They formed the Jewish aristocracy and were powerful though quite small in numbers. This act was a direct frontal attack—if not challenging their authority, challenging at least their conduct in regard to their responsibilities for the temple. One would expect that the cleansing of the temple was most certainly a topic of discussion among members of the Sanhedrin headquartered in the heart of the temple complex.

Nicodemus, having either seen or heard of the miracles performed by this stranger, approached Jesus with a declaration: "We know that thou art a teacher come from God: for no man can do these miracles that thou doest, except God be with him" (John 3:2). Yet rather than discount the faith of Nicodemus as he had done with the many others who said they believed, Jesus entertained his faith and

patiently taught and bore strong personal witness of Himself as the Son of God and of His atoning mission. Apparently, Jesus's measure of this man was different from the masses who professed belief based on the same miracles.

Nicodemus was impelled by a genuine desire to learn more of the Galilean, whose works could not be ignored; though pride of office and fear of possible suspicion that he had become attached to the new Prophet led him to veil his undertaking with privacy.

Can you imagine the difficulties which he had to overcome? It must have been a mighty power of conviction, to break down prejudice so far as to lead this old Sanhedrist to acknowledge a Galilean, untrained in the schools, as a teacher come from God, and to seek from Him direction on perhaps the most delicate and important point in Jewish theology. It was a most compromising step for a Sanhedrist to take. With that first bold purgation of the Temple a deadly feud between Jesus and the Jewish authorities had begun. . . . Nevertheless, Nicodemus came.

Jesus said: No one can belong to the Kingdom of God without being born again, from above. **Nicodemus clearly misunderstands** Jesus and takes his words literally. **He asks how a person can enter his mother's womb a second time.** We must remember that being born again is not something that any of us can

accomplish; it is not an issue of intellectual achievement or personal attainment. It is something that God must affect in our lives.

Jesus is saying plainly that men must believe in him; that he is the Son of God, the Promised Messiah, the Only Begotten of the Father, the One of whom Moses and the prophets testified. . . . It is plain and clear beyond question. For a person in Nicodemus's position, that plain, open declaration by Jesus would change his life.

Jesus was not one to simply encourage people to add a few virtues to their lives, or subtract a few bad habits, or multiply their efforts to build a better world. He sought nothing less than a transformation in a person's life.

**It is said that the measure of a man should not be taken when he enters the door but rather when he leaves.**

We are left to assume that following his interview with Jesus, the processes of conversion continued to operate in the life of Nicodemus. It would be hard to imagine an individual having a personal face-to-face conversation with the Lord in which he hears Christ bear witness in unmistakable language that He was the Son of God without that testimony having some effect. Either this Jesus was the height of blasphemy, or **He was the Son of God, the Messiah.**

Belief in Jesus because of miracles is not enough to constitute the faith relationship which Jesus seeks.

The issue is not Nicodemus, the unbeliever, but Nicodemus, the believer, facing Christ. The issue is not really conversion from unfaith to faith, but conversion from one kind of faith in Jesus to another. It is a matter of getting the Christology right, or, in less technical terms, understanding who Jesus really is and the consequences for one's spirituality, one's lifestyle. If the primary evidence of God in Jesus is miracles, then miracles will form the focus of faith and religious experience. Sometimes it will lead to a theology which finds God only in the extraordinary and does not find God in the ordinary.

Nicodemus needed to take a completely different approach to faith. He needed to have a new kind of seeing and knowing if he was to see or enter the kingdom of God. The meaning is clear: only such a faith constitutes the relationship Jesus seeks to establish. **John sets us on the way towards the doctrine of the trinity by insisting on the fact that relating to the person of the Son is relating to the Father, without equating the two, and that living in that relationship is living by the Spirit.**

By basing faith and spirituality on a relationship and a person, rather than on momentous events or experiences, in places here or hereafter, John invites us to develop a spirituality which sees God in all of life.

The miracles, **which are never denied**, are to be seen as signs and symbols of who Jesus is and his significance. He brings the bread, the water of life, makes the blind to see, the dead to become alive - all in the sense that in opening ourselves to a relation of faith with him we open ourselves to God and in this relationship our deepest needs are met. This lifestyle is also the product of the Spirit. People who remain at the level of miracles fail to see what is really going on in Jesus and going on in believers who now live at this higher level of the Spirit. Being born of the Spirit is talking not about a new mystical height of experience but about a way of living out the life of God in the world. When you see like this, you see the connection between Jesus and God, and you see God in Jesus not trying to compete for adoration in the market of miracle workers but seeking to establish a relationship of love and community. **The focus is life. The means is relationship. The motive is love.**

Nicodemus had not even stated a question before Jesus addresses the heart of the issue which is how can a man enter into the kingdom of God? Jesus said to

him, *“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.”*

Jesus did not say or infer that repentance would bring a person into the kingdom of God and they would become like a newborn. What Jesus said was much more radical than that. Jesus said, ***“unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.”*** Jesus says directly that one must be “born again.” How could it be feasible that an old man could reenter his mother’s womb to be born a second time?

Jesus answered, ***“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.”*** “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.’ “The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going; so is everyone who is born of the Spirit.”

Man does not control the wind. It goes where it wants. He is only aware of its presence by what it does. He can hear it. He can feel it. He can see it moving things. Man does not control the Spirit. The Spirit moves as He desires. Man can only sense the result of the Spirit’s work.

This would have been a great shock for Nicodemus. He was brought up in a system that believed that a person could and should save himself by obedience to the Mosaic Law and all the traditions of the Elders. So many people today have the same fundamental belief that they can somehow earn their way to heaven and gain God's favor by keeping some set of laws, regulations and traditions that they have made up for themselves. That was not true in the Old Testament. It was not true for Nicodemus. It is not true now.

**Man cannot see the kingdom of God by his own efforts in any way, shape or form. It is humanly impossible. There must be the moving of the Spirit so that you are "born of the Spirit," and man's control over and influence of the Spirit is the same as his control and influence on the wind. There is none. It does not exist.**

Some might say that more conservative churches with their insistence that one must be born again have become, in effect, the Nursery for American Christianity. Indeed, their emphasis on evangelism and conversion is a significant contribution toward encouraging faith in Jesus Christ.

The mainline denominations, like Presbyterians, tend to be the Finishing School of American Christianity. Here faith is given an intellectual depth, a

liturgical richness, an historical tradition, and a degree of church order and structure. So, we have two quite different, but highly complementary expressions of the Christian faith: The Nursery and the Finishing School.

What is this Eternal life we speak of? Eternal life has nothing to do with how long we live or what happens when we die. Eternal life refers to a quality of life **we can know now** and, by God's grace, will continue to experience beyond this mortal existence. **But it starts now!** The world cannot destroy it. **You may be pitifully poor but have eternal life. You can be unemployed, terminally ill, crippled by broken relationships, but still have eternal life.**

**The critical thing Jesus told Nicodemus was that faith is a mystery.** Like the wind, faith comes but we cannot see it coming. It is neither a human achievement, nor an intellectual accomplishment. **It is a gift from God.** Faith is like healing. When a doctor treats a person, the patient does not have to understand human anatomy or medical technology in order to be cured. **Faith is like that. We do not have to understand, we only have to align ourselves with God in order to have our lives transformed.**

**If you look upon Jesus as the only means to be saved and forgiven of your sins, there will be given to you eternal life. It does not matter how vocal you are about your profession of faith in Jesus, if you do not**

**get up and follow Him, then your profession is a farce. You are only fooling yourself.**

The kingdom of God Jesus is telling Nicodemus about involves grace, justice, and abundant love, which is extended not just to those in the inner-religious circle. **For God does not only love the descendants of Abraham and those who are good rule-followers and meticulously obey the Mosaic law. Rather, God loves the *whole world*.**

**God so loved the world that he gave his only Son so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life. God so loved the world ...**

We need to remember these words at a time when so many want to sit in judgment on others or question the value of people whose faith and culture are a mystery to us. We need to remember that God did not send Jesus to condemn the world, but to save the world, so perhaps it is incumbent upon us to be a little less condemning and a little more loving.

This is the good news. Nicodemus the law-abiding and law-enforcing Nicodemus, later defends Jesus at a meeting with the Sanhedrin court and who – after Jesus' death – takes his body from the cross, lovingly wraps it with spices in linen cloths, and lays it in the tomb.

**For God so loved Nicodemus. For God so loves me. For God so loves you... that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in, trusts, and follows him, should not perish, but have eternal life.**

**Yes, this truly is the Gospel of Jesus Christ our Lord – in a Nutshell.**

**Have you accepted Jesus' offer? Are you born again? Is Christ your Savior?**

Please pray with me: *Come into my heart, Lord Jesus, come in today, come in to stay ... there is room in my heart for you.*

*Amen.*