

## Teaching Nicodemus

John 3:1-21

In order to set the scene for this encounter between Jesus and Nicodemus we should note several factors. The first chapters of John are some of the earliest chronologically of Jesus' ministry. The other three gospels find Jesus exclusively in Galilee after His baptism and before the passion week. John has Jesus going back and forth between Galilee and Jerusalem throughout His gospel. The story of Nicodemus follows Jesus' attendance of a Passover in Jerusalem. John 2:24 says, "during the feast, many believed in His name when they saw the signs which He did..." Nicodemus' first words to Jesus were, "Rabbi, we know that You are a teacher come from God; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with Him." In John's gospel, Jesus had done just one miracle to this point, the turning of water into wine in Cana of Galilee. Yet, many believed at the feast having seen the signs which He did. These were some of the unrecorded signs or miracles of Jesus. Nicodemus also found them convincing and they moved him to come and interview Jesus at night.

Night is a time for secrecy. Nicodemus came at night and clearly wanted to speak with Jesus privately. The conflict between Jesus and the "rulers of the Jews" was already apparent as Jesus had driven the money changers out of the temple during the Passover that had just been celebrated. Honest questions about the meaning of Jesus' ministry were already unwelcome among the powerful in Jerusalem. Nicodemus came at night... he wanted answers but he did not want to put himself at risk in order to get those answers. Nicodemus' degree of self awareness is open to debate. In this conversation it will become clear that Jesus intended to challenge Nicodemus to be honest with himself.

So what did Nicodemus intend with his first statement? Did he represent anyone beside himself? Did he want it to appear that he did? Was he asking Jesus to declare that He was the Messiah? This would have been a logical conclusion given the premise that Nicodemus stated. When the first disciples came to this

conclusion, Jesus did not discourage them. But they expressed immediate acceptance and commitment. They told their friends about Him. They became His disciples. Nicodemus came to Jesus secretly and his agenda was also hidden. Nicodemus had more information than Nathanael but he was unwilling to act on what he knew. Jesus embraced Nathanael and revealed Himself to him. Jesus was cautious with Nicodemus. He did not trust him.

Jesus' answer challenged Nicodemus in a most unexpected way. He had implied that in spite of the evidence there was something suspect about Jesus and He was giving Jesus a chance to prove Himself. It was as if Jesus said, Well if we are going to talk about whether God is with Me, lets level the playing field, How can you know that God is with you? Here's one thing for sure, If you haven't been born again, or born from above, then you can have no idea about what God is doing or any connection to His work.

Nicodemus at this point lost any vestige of control of the conversation. He had an agenda but now it was lost. He asked, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" In this response there was no attempt to understand but instead, an attempt to discredit. Instead of trying to make sense of what Jesus said, Nicodemus attempted to declare that Jesus made no sense.

We live in a time when cynicism has been confused with critical thinking. Critical thinking is positive and is a means by which the truth can be known. Cynicism is an attitude that blinds a person so that no truth outside of what is already known can be accepted. A critical thinker will want to explore both sides of an argument. A cynic already knows and is offended by any challenge to their views.

In seminary, I took a class on the Book of Matthew. The professor had a semester long project that we were to do and as part of the first stage of the project we were to provide several outlines of Matthew from outside sources. I received a poor grade when I included outlines from popular rather than academic sources. This was an example of cynicism. A critical thinker might have looked at the content of the outlines in order to determine their relative value. The cynic

knows that any material that is not from academia is inferior and would consider any argument to the contrary to be an insult to his own intelligence.

On Friday night I was briefly with some young adults and overheard a conversation about our new president. They were on an internet site that was claiming that Donald Trump had excluded certain countries from his list of extreme vetting before people would be issued a visa because he had properties in those countries. The suggestion was accepted by them as "truth" and angered them as it was clearly, for them, one more reason to hate Donald Trump. I suggest that their emotional response to what was clearly speculation was cynical. Critical thinking questions a premise with an openness to opposing views all in a quest for truth. In the case of the Donald Trump properties being the motive for a decision about extreme vetting, how could anyone outside the decision making process possibly know? Could there be anything about the countries that they have in common and that might be cause for

caution? With the exception of Iran which is considered by the new administration to clearly be an adversary, all of the countries listed on the extreme vetting list are unstable and are experiencing some degree of civil war. We are all capable of cynicism. Cynicism blinds but critical thinking will open your eyes.

Jesus answered Nicodemus, "Most assuredly I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, He cannot enter the kingdom of God." Born of water is a reference to physical birth, born of the Spirit - spiritual birth. Nicodemus thought that he knew or was familiar with everything that had anything to do with God. Jesus was talking about knowing God in language that he had never heard of nor thought about. He had come to Jesus with the presumption that there must be something wrong with Him. Now he faced the assertion that there was something lacking in himself. This lack in Nicodemus was clear to both men as they conversed. Jesus' description of being born of the Spirit and of receiving from God something that was real but that could not be seen relied on a consciousness that Jesus was blessed with such an experience where Nicodemus was not. The cynic would have walked away, the critical thinker stayed to ask another question.

Nicodemus asked, "How can these things be?"

Jesus chided him, "Are you the teacher of Israel and do not know these things?"

But then, Jesus opened up to Nicodemus. He trusted him with truth. He had reached his heart and now it was about the fate of his soul.

"...As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up..." the people had rebelled against the Lord again and this time He sent poisonous serpents among the people. The bite was deadly and the people cried out to God for mercy. God told Moses to make a serpent of brass and put it on a stake high above the people. They were to look at the stake if they were bitten and when they did they would be healed. The man or woman who did not look to the stake would perish.

"For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life."

Just as the people of Israel were to look to the stake for healing we are to look to Jesus, lifted up on the cross for our salvation.

Back to Nicodemus - He came to Jesus by night and Jesus said to him, "men loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil." Interest and belief in Jesus must be public. To receive salvation is to desire it for others as well. How can they be saved if they do not know about it and how can they know if we do not tell? "But he who does the truth comes to the light, that his deeds may be clearly seen, that they have been done in God."