

Questions for Lent
#2 Are You A Teacher...and Yet Do Not Understand?

John 3: 1-21

There are two actors in this scene of John's gospel: Jesus and Nicodemus. Nicodemus is not a very well known figure in the gospels. He appears only two other times in John's record. The last picture of him is in John 19. He and Joseph of Aramathea asked for the body of Jesus after He was crucified in order that He might have a decent burial.

Jesus questions Nicodemus, "***Are you the teacher of Israel, and do not know these things?***" It's a question relevant to us -- because it's the question of grace.

Let's look at Nicodemus for a moment. John doesn't dwell on him, doesn't tell us much about him. Yet, I doubt if there is more intriguing person in the gospels. He was an important man, obviously a well-thought-of member of the Pharisees. The Gospel tells us that he came to see Jesus at night. He was a prudent man. He had a reputation to maintain. This was a questionable pursuit, because Jesus was a questionable personality, so he didn't want to go public with his interests.

The fact that Nicodemus was a Pharisee is an important point, especially when we are talking about how a person is saved -- what salvation is all about -- the meaning of grace. In many ways, the Pharisees were the best people in the whole country. There were never more than 6,000 of them. They were what were known as *chaburah*, or brotherhood. They entered into this brotherhood by taking a pledge in front of three witnesses, that they would spend all of their lives observing all of the scribal law. What exactly did that mean? The Law was the first five books of the Old Testament. To the Jews, the Law was the most sacred thing in the world. They believed the Law to be the perfect word of God. To add one word to it, or to take one word away from it, was a deadly sin – blasphemy!

William Barclay tells us in *The Gospel of John* Vol. 1, The Daily Study Bible, "**The name Pharisee literally means 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**".

It was this good man, committed to the Law, committed to doing what God would have him do

-- who came to Jesus inquiring about salvation.

To such a person Jesus' words were most shocking: ***"You must be born again"***. We'll come back to that phrase in a moment, because it deserves our attention. What I want us to get clearly in our mind now is the fact that Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus raises the question: **"What is life all about? How can one be saved? What is at the heart of Christianity?"**

Despite the witness of scripture and our experience, we continue to question grace. Maybe it has something to do with our pride and perverted self-sufficiency. So, let's think about it.

I. Focus first on that phrase that shocked Nicodemus. "You must be born again."

I was talking to a person recently, and he referred to a mutual acquaintance in a kind of derogatory way. This was his sentence. "He says he's a born-again Christian." Well, the tone of his voice, the slight hint of a sneer when he said "born-again Christian", got to me. I asked him, "Is there any other kind of Christian than a born-again one"?

Now, I know how that term is commonly used, and that to me is unfortunate. The phrase is used to distinguish between people who -- usually as adults -- have had some sort of dramatic experience that confirmed for them their Christian faith versus what some would call a "normal" kind of way. (and I put that word normal in quotation marks).. those who may have grown into the Christian life. The distinction is unfortunate. How we come into the Christian faith is not the issue -- that we have come into the Christian faith, and that we know we are Christian is the issue.

Two more times Jesus hammered home the point: ***"You must be born again"***.

Nicodemus' problem was not whether he desired to change or not -- that's the reason he came to Jesus -- wanting to know how he could receive eternal life. It was not desirability, but possibility, that was the question when he asked, ***"But how can it be -- how can one be born again?"*** The truth is Nicodemus would have been very pleased if Jesus had given him a punch list -- things to do, ways to act, laws to keep. That's what he was about -- that's the way the Pharisees understood a proper relationship with God. Nicodemus didn't understand grace. So, he asked, ***"How can it happen?"*** And Jesus responded, ***"The wind blows where it wills, and you can't see it, but you***

feel it and you see the sign of it, so is the person who is born of the Spirit”.

The new birth is not something that we orchestrate. It has nothing to do with rules or commandments, or worthiness, or works. It comes like a birth that we have no control over; like water that cleanses us, like wind that refreshes us -- wind that's felt but not seen.

It is grace, Jesus is saying, and that's what we all have a problem with.

Rodney Wilmoth tells the story about a man who died and went to Heaven. When he showed up at the pearly gates, St. Peter was waiting. **"I want to enter Heaven,"** said the man.

"You may enter," replied Peter, **"if you have accumulated 100 points on earth."**

"Well," said the man, **"I was baptized in the church and scarcely missed a Sunday in my entire life."**

"That's good," said Peter. **"That's one point!"**

"One point? -- only one point? Well, I did serve on the Administrative Board for 20 years, and I taught Sunday School for 25 years."

"That's good. Another point."

"What? only one more point? Well, I tried to live a good life. I tried to be a good father and husband."

"That's good," said Peter again. **"That's worth one more point."**

"Oh, my," said the man. **"The only way I will get into Heaven is by the Grace of God!"**

"That's right!" said St. Peter with a smile on his face. **"And that is worth 97 points. Come on in."**

Let's stay with that phrase, "born again", for a moment. The idea of rebirth, or being born again, runs throughout the New Testament.

Listen to Peter -- I Peter 1:3: ***"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to his abundant mercy has begotten us again to a living hope..."***

Again listen to Peter, I Peter 1: 23: ***"You have been born again, not of corruptible seed, but incorruptible, through the word of God which lives and abides forever..."***

James speaks of God begetting us with a word of truth (James 1:18). And the letter to Titus speaks of the washing of regeneration (Titus 3: 5).

This is some of Paul's favorite language. He speaks of new Christians as being "***babes in Christ***" -- I Cor. 3: 1, 2. One of his most signal words was recorded in II Corinthians 5: 17: "***If any person is in Christ, he is a new creation, the old has passed away; behold, the new is come***".

All through the New Testament, the notion of rebirth, being born again, re-creation occurs. Let's continue to think about it by coming at it from a little bit different direction

II. Isn't it true that the most important things are ours because of grace?

Life is grace

A little girl was angry with her younger brother. She pushed him down, called him a few names and then spit on him. Her mother walked into the room just as all of this took place. The mother said, "**Honey, that was surely not very nice. I think the devil made you do that.**"

The girl replied, "**The devil may have made me push him down, and the devil may have made me call him names; but I thought of the spittin' all by myself**".

I like that -- the honesty of it. And we need to be honest. We live as though we deserved life -- that we had something to do with getting it and keeping it. Think about it! What did you DO to receive life? What are you doing to DESERVE life? Life is grace. It's gift.

Love is grace, When we are serious, can we think for a single moment that we DESERVE the love that we receive? Is there any possible way we could EARN love -- the love of our parents -- the love of our spouse?

Love is a matter of grace. It's always gift.

We could go on and on: The most important things that are ours are ours because of grace.

III. Not only our salvation, but the Christian life -- the whole of the Christian life -- is grace.

That's what Jesus was telling Nicodemus. You must be born again, and that birth is from above. It's not something you do; it's something God does, and He does it through the Spirit. The wind blows where it wills; you see the sign of it and you feel it, but you don't know from where it

comes or where it goes. Will Willimon spoke a challenging word when he said, **"We are so preoccupied with the need to make a decision for Christ, that we forget that in Christ God has once and for all made a decision for us! We can do little to add or to improve upon God's acceptance of us in Christ, except to say "Yes!" to it and enjoy it."**

We can't rationalize that -- we have to just accept it -- say YES to it. So, rather than trying to rationalize any more, let me give it to you in a picture.

"A fifteen-year-old girl went to a youth conference in Oklahoma. She was short and a bit overweight. She was not too attractive, and she had been crippled from birth. When a dance was held one night at the conference, she simply put her crutches by a chair nearby, sat down in another chair and spent the evening watching the others dance. All the time smiling, but who knows the pain that was going on inside.

"The music was the kind that peels the skin off your face and overloads the auditory nerve, and the floor was full of teenagers moving with the rhythm. In the middle of the dance program that evening, a slow number was played by the band, and a tall 16-year-old boy went over to this girl, held out his hand and said to her, **"Please, would you dance with me?"** She looked up with unbelieving surprise, and with a smile quivering on her face, she said, **"Yes"**. The young man held her tightly, and she held on to him tightly, lest she stumble and fall. It was a beautiful sight to behold.

"Later that evening, one of the leaders went to the young man and told him how special he thought it was for him to do this, and how much he admired him. The leader said, **"As the two of you were dancing, I noticed that she whispered something in your ear. Do you mind if I ask what it was?"**

And the teenager replied, **"You're not going to believe this, but she said that this was the first time that anyone had ever asked her to dance in her whole life."** (Norman Neaves, quoted by Donald Shelby, "Eureka", July 29, 1990.)

That's a picture of it -- grace. Grace is God's invitation to us to dance with Him. What is your response?

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