

THE GOSPEL OF JOHN - COMMENTARY

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Lesson 3 - John 3:1-36

**God so Loved the World, That He Sent His Son
Dialogue With Nicodemus (John 3:1-21)**

Following is an imaginary conversation based on the text.

Nicodemus: I realize this is a late hour at night to meet with you. I frankly admit that I am reluctant to be seen in public with you. My colleagues at the Sanhedrin would not approve my positive attitude toward you.

Jesus: I don't have the credentials?

Nicodemus: Well, you have achieved the status of a rabbi without going through the formal, approved stages of discipleship like the rest of us.

Jesus: I'm not properly certified.

Nicodemus: You know what I mean. We are a jealous lot. We guard our positions and are possessive about our ranks.

Jesus: Do you really think your membership would be more comfortable with me if I had their rabbinic training?

Nicodemus: You're not making this easy for me.

Jesus: Perhaps I want you to be more honest about yourself.

Nicodemus: Is this secret night appointment bothering you?

Jesus: You seem to be the one who is uneasy.

Nicodemus: I have a family to care for and a position to maintain. I could be very useful to you.

Jesus: You are more in need of inner courage. You are too fearful.

Nicodemus: Believe me, I am a better man than I sound.

Jesus: Why have you come?

Nicodemus: You and I know that our religious tradition teaches us that God sometimes approves a rabbi's teachings by giving him the power to perform miracles.

Jesus: Yes.

Nicodemus: What I mean to say is....Well, I have heard about your astonishing Cana miracle. People have reported other miracles.

Jesus: Which brings you to me tonight.

Nicodemus: I believe that you are a teacher sent from God.

Jesus: Why have you reached this conclusion?

Nicodemus: No one could do that unless God were with him.

Jesus: So you see me as a teacher, missioned by God.

Nicodemus: Yes.

Jesus: Nothing more?

Nicodemus: I don't know what you mean. I see you as a privileged teacher. You know it is a rare gift. You haven't gone through the steps that lead to an official rank as teacher. God has blessed you.

Jesus: Dear friend, I'm afraid you have much more to learn about me. You are limited by your traditional view of a wonder worker. Yes, I am a teacher from God, but I am a lot more than that. I am not merely teaching about the kingdom of God. I am bringing you the kingdom. I have come from God.

Nicodemus: How could I be expected to know that? I am not even sure I know what you are saying.

Jesus: You need to be born again from above.

Nicodemus: You continue to puzzle me. Am I to return to my mother's womb for a second birth?

Jesus: I am talking about your spiritual birth. You should permit God's Spirit to remake your mind and transform your whole nature. This will happen when you look deeply within yourself and notice how much change you need.

Nicodemus: I'm losing you.

Jesus: I'm inviting you to discover your inner life, to listen to your hungers and your hopes.

Nicodemus: If I do that, what will I find?

Jesus: That you yearn for change and personal growth in love.

Nicodemus: Let's say that I do. Am I to change myself?

Jesus: When your inner desire has recognized that only a divine power can change you, then you will know what I mean.

Nicodemus: And that is your teaching about being born from above?

Jesus: No one can enter the kingdom of God's transforming love without being born of water and the Holy Spirit.

Nicodemus: Why water? Why Spirit?

Jesus: Water here symbolizes your life in need of change and conversion. The waters of the first chapter of Genesis were lifeless and chaotic. Something like your inner life right now. Only when God's creative breath-Spirit permeated those waters did creation begin. I am describing an intimate encounter between you and divine Love.

Nicodemus: I thought water was a positive, cleansing agent.

Jesus: In spiritual matters it becomes so when united with the power of the Spirit.

Nicodemus: Your Spirit language bewilders me.

Jesus: Think of the wind. You know it exists. You feel it. You hear it. Yet you can't see it. There is something mysterious about it. Think of it as an image of God's Spirit. You can experience God's presence, but the mystery of God remains.

Nicodemus: How can all this be?

Jesus: You are the trained teacher, yet you do not know. You are good at explaining words, texts and teachings. You can quote authors and experts with ease. But you have let the words control you. The whole point of your teaching should be growth in faith in divine realities. You pay too much attention to the words and not enough to the divine speaker.

Nicodemus: How can you help me?

Jesus: Put some love into your life and some life into your love. Then you will awaken to the grandeur of God's plan. God has so loved you and everyone that he has sent his Son here so that everyone who believes in him might not perish, but have eternal life.

Nicodemus: I need time to take in all you have shared with me. You have touched me in a way I did not expect. Be assured I shall never forget this night.

Three Applications of This Dialogue

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1. *Put conversion first on the religious agenda.* Nicodemus sought a theological discussion. Jesus invited him to conversion. Nicodemus liked teacher talk. Jesus insisted on personal commitment. Nicodemus wanted a meeting of minds. Jesus demanded a meeting of hearts. Nicodemus expected a lively rabbinic dissection of Scripture texts from someone who seemed to be an accomplished interpreter. Jesus upset his plans by involving him in a personal encounter. The Pharisee delighted in mental combat. The Master enjoyed explorations of the spirit. The Pharisee searched for answers. The Master confronted him with questions.

This does not imply that Jesus had no interest in religious doctrine about the action of the Spirit to open up the soul of his visitor. But a discussion of religious doctrine as a mental exercise does little good unless the persons involved are already operating at a faith level. The implication here is that Nicodemus had put too much stock in the mental gymnastics associated with scriptural teachings.

Nicodemus was theologizing.

Jesus was evangelizing.

The lesson for ourselves is self evident. Even as we study the Scriptures, we can make study substitute for faith growth. We can tend to treat Scripture as a detective story in which we probe for solutions to fascinating literary and historical problems. Valuable as that is, it is not the primary purpose for approaching Scripture. We take up the word of God to meet the Word of God. We read the Bible to experience divine love. First we take the text into our hearts and only after that into our heads. Jesus was basically saying to Nicodemus, "I am not a book. I am a person." Please relate to me in my total personhood and you will find a love and fulfillment that is the real key to understanding the sacred Scripture.

When we have discovered this secret of entering into a lifelong conversion process, then we will find Scripture to be full of light for our lives. Our second consideration is about a way to do this.

2. *Permit the Spirit's transforming influence.* The Spirit of Jesus is always ready to meet us and influence our awareness and desires. But the Spirit will not affect us unless we freely choose to receive that influence. Scripture says that God is like a potter and we are the clay. The image of clay implies malleability, the capacity for being shaped. We must acquire a sense of inwardness where we experience the dynamism of our whole inner life, spiritual, psychic and mental.

Our culture favors us getting in touch with the psychological side of our inner life. We are nudged to examine our feelings—even to "feel our feelings." After that we are asked to analyze these emotions. That is all well and good and such an endeavor has its well known positive results.

In pre-psychological cultures, people tended to put greater stock in getting in touch with the intellect. Educated people spoke of the cultivation of the mind, of having a well-furnished mind. That culture prized a liberal arts education, believed that truth could be known and that ideas have consequences. That goal has not disappeared today, but it must compete with the intense preoccupation with inner emotions that attract so many now.

But there is a third component to our inner life and that is the spirit. Its action is something akin to intuition and the act of wonder. The human spirit is the inner faculty that is capable of having a personal relationship with God. Some people call this the stillpoint, the innermost side of our lives where the transformation of our whole personhood begins to take place.

God did not intend that mind, emotions and spirit be in conflict or be in competition. God wants our inner lives to be a harmony of thoughts, feelings, and spiritual encounters. But busy heads and turbulent emotions have a way of causing a spiritual blackout. Inner battles for emotional or intellectual supremacy thoroughly distract us from realizing the most precious of our inner treasures, our spirits.

Stillness, quiet, and meditation are the classical methods for sinking deep within ourselves to the stillpoint. The fact that Nicodemus came to Jesus in the stillness of the night favored an invitation to try the exercise of inwardness. Jesus tried a direct approach to open Nicodemus to the absorbing arena of his inner life. That is where Nicodemus would meet the Spirit and permit himself to become the moldable clay. Then he would be born again from above.

Jesus invites us to the same adventure. By the grace of the Sacrament of Baptism we have been born again from above by water and the Holy Spirit. What happened sacramentally, must now be lived existentially. The Spirit is the personal power of the sacrament. But we will not be forced. We must make a free decision to be changed. Even there the Spirit helps us by a gentle love that makes this possible. Our third consideration looks at the easiest way to do this, though for many it proves to be the most difficult.

3. *Love Lifted Me.* The words of an old gospel song fit very well here: “Love lifted me, love lifted me. When I was down and out, love lifted me.”

The most quoted line from Christ’s dialogue with Nicodemus is the one about God so loving the world that he sent his Son to save us. Those who believe in Jesus will have eternal life. The statement about God’s love is what makes the quote so appealing. Here as in so many parts of John’s gospel, love and faith are intimately connected. Why so?

When this gospel talks about faith, it is frequently in terms of believing in Jesus, believing in a person. This is faith as an act of relating to a person. This is faith as loving and being loved. Put in another way, this is love expressed through faith. For many people faith is usually associated with believing a doctrine, a divine truth. That is a legitimate understanding of faith. But this must never be separated from faith as a loving union with Jesus.

A loving faith in the person of Jesus will lead to a loving faith in his teachings, doctrines and commands. A loving faith in his personhood will involve a faith in the standards and principles that will govern our behavior. If we concentrate only on the doctrines without an affectionate relation with Jesus, our spiritual life will be dry, harsh, and arid. If we look only at the person of Jesus and pay no attention to his doctrine, then we risk a spirituality that is sentimental, vacuous, and weak.

Nicodemus appeared to be one whose faith was too closely tied to doctrine without a vital and warm relationship to God. Jesus offered him the corrections. His talk about the Spirit—whose essence and behavior is Love—was meant to turn Nicodemus around. His teaching about divine love and salvation crowned his appeal to Nicodemus.

Obviously, this is neither simple nor easy. It embraces the cross. Jesus explained that truth to Nicodemus when he spoke of Moses raising up the bronze serpent in the desert. All who looked on it were healed. Jesus would be lifted up on the cross.

Those who looked on him and believed would be saved. Just as love sent Jesus to earth, so love lifts him up both to the cross and to the glory that is revealed by the redemption.

Love lifts us up to our own crosses. Love also lifts us up to experience the revelation of God's glory which is the most authentic response to our desire for happiness. Love as an act of faith must encircle our whole existence. If we bore deeply into our inner world, past the noises of our minds and the turmoil of our emotions, we will find the stillpoint of our spirit. There we discover the ability to receive divine love and to return this love to Jesus, to others, and to our very selves.

The Baptist's Magnificent Spiritual Principle (John 3:22-36)

The ministry of Jesus and his disciples was now active, public, and attracting wide attention and praise. In the minds of the disciples of the Baptist, they were being upstaged by this new and dynamic community. The crowds that once streamed to the Jordan had diminished. The person and ministry of their beloved John the Baptist was moving into the shadows. Jesus was now the center of interest. The followers of the Baptist considered this a competitive situation. Their more exciting rival was winning the hearts of people. They complained about this to their spiritual master.

The Baptist replied with his magnificent spiritual principle, "He must increase. I must decrease" (John 3:30). He compared himself to the best man at a wedding. The best man does not marry the bride, the bridegroom does. He reminded them that he was not the messiah. The messiah was Jesus, the lamb of God. There is nothing humiliating about this. The honest acknowledgment of another's true greatness is a sign of one's own character and capacity for truthfulness.

The Baptist's magnificent spiritual principle will work very well for us. Jesus must increase. We must decrease. Individually, each of our egos with their sinfulness, pride and self-absorption must decrease. Our identity with love as incarnated by Jesus must increase. Naturally, we fear that losing this aspect of our egos will destroy us. "I fear losing me. I dread the loss of my identity."

But Jesus does not love us to blot us out. He is not a vain master feeding on human egos. Jesus does not inflate himself at our expense. His love recreates our egos—our sense of personhood—with his affection. He makes us new men and women with strong egos informed by grace. Our act of decrease, loss of self, leads to increase, the regaining of self shaped by Christ. We will fear and hate the process. We will exult in the product. This is pure Gospel. Lose the self to gain the self. Decrease in order to increase.