

## THE RADICAL RABBI: "A RADICAL RELATIONSHIP" (John 3:1-21)

7.5.20

### INTRODUCTION

So far in this journey with our Radical Rabbi, we have seen Jesus of Nazareth show Himself in a couple of very vivid ways. First, we saw His power as He miraculously changed water to wine at a wedding feast in Cana. And last week, we saw His passion as He cleansed His Father's house from anything that distracted from God's awesome glory.

Today, in a message called "A Radical Relationship," we are going to listen in on perhaps the most famous and consequential interview in the history of interviews: a late-night conversation between Jesus of Nazareth and a Pharisee named Nicodemus. But first, let's prepare ourselves with a **moment of prayer**.

### TEXT AND ANALYSIS (John 3:1-21)

OK, when last we left Jesus, He had cleansed the Temple area, likely the Court of the Gentiles, from all the merchants and their buying and selling that had been allowed to establish itself in that area. He had declared with the fiery passion of a son taking care of his father's house: **"Get these out of here! Stop turning My Father's house into a market!" - Jesus Christ, John 2:16b**. Now this action of Christ's accomplished a couple of things:

- 1) Coming as it did during the largest festival celebration on the Jewish calendar, it certainly made Jesus much better known than He had been before, and
- 2) He certainly brought Himself to the attention of the ruling Jewish authorities - the scribes, the Pharisees, the Sadducees and, collectively, the Sanhedrin - all of whom would provide significant and ongoing opposition during the course of His ministry.

Now as we transition to today's story, we find that Jesus is still in Jerusalem as the Passover celebration was the first of three feasts - followed by the Feast of Unleavened Bread and the Feast of First fruits - which took place over an eight day time frame. And while He was there, He was ministering and, as a result according to John, **many people saw the signs He was performing and believed in His name - John 2:23b**. But then John balanced that seemingly positive outcome with a sobering reality check: **Jesus would not entrust Himself to them, for He knew all people. He did not need any testimony about mankind, for He knew what was in each person - John 2:24-25**. In other words, as Jesus was performing these outward signs, He was at the same time looking inwardly, to each person's heart. Was their believing a passion that would give up all - even their lives - to follow Him, or merely the impression of seeing something really cool and thinking, "Wow; I wonder how He did that" - and then simply walking away to return unimpacted to the lives they had before. Jesus desperately wanted to change that outcome; He came into the world to change that outcome - and, at least for one guy, it would start with the conversation we will look at today.

**Now there was a Pharisee, a man named Nicodemus who was a member of the Jewish**

***ruling council (the Sanhedrin) - John 3:1.***

Now as Jesus had remained in Jerusalem, it is very likely that Nicodemus began to hear about this "Radical Rabbi" from Nazareth of Galilee - possibly not in very favorable terms as a result of His downright bodacious temple cleansing (hard to keep a story like that quiet) - but he'd likely heard about Him nonetheless. And as Jesus was, according to John, performing "signs" as an indication of who He truly was, it is at least possible, especially in light of his introductory comments, that he had maybe seen some of those miracles for himself.

***He came to Jesus at night and said, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with Him" - John 3:2.***

Remember when John the Baptist was ministering in the wilderness by the Jordan River? The Bible tells us: ***[T]he Jewish leaders in Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to ask him who he was. ... [T]hey said, "... Give us an answer to take back to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?" - John 1:19b, 22.*** All very formal, very proper. But we sure don't get the same idea here. This is much more the picture of an individual who has seen and/or heard some amazing things - things that have raised many questions for him, questions troubling enough that he finds that he needs to investigate further. This is Nicodemus asking for himself, not for anybody else. Part of why we can come to that conclusion is that the Bible tells us that Nicodemus ***came to Jesus at night.*** He came under the cover of darkness, suggesting that he really didn't want anybody else, especially anybody in the leadership of which he was a part, knowing what he was up to - at least not yet. Now at this point in His ministry Jesus had no reason to be in hiding. It was Nicodemus who needed the darkness.

He starts out by using the word "rabbi" - denoting not only the meaning of teacher but a term of respect. Using this term is actually saying something quite significant in the context of these two. Nicodemus is probably very aware that this Nazarene has likely had no formal rabbinic training, at least not that he's heard of, and yet He teaches and preaches with an amazing amount of authority - authority that seems in His case to somehow be very appropriate - and certainly the crowds Nicodemus has observed react this way.

So he begins by pointing out that there might be, at least among some of his colleagues, a similar consensus of who Jesus might be - ***"a teacher who has come from God"*** - by using the plural pronoun "we." Now whether this is the genuine viewpoint of a number of his fellow Pharisees or just a smokescreen to hide the fact that Nicodemus is actually asking for himself, we do not know. Coming at night suggests some level of either risk or embarrassment - or both - if this little venture is found out.

But then he gives the basis for why he believes that Jesus has indeed ***"come from God"*** - ***"[N]o one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with Him" - Nicodemus, John 3:2b.*** Now this is not necessarily implying faith on Nicodemus' part, but rather that he can think of no other explanation for the amazing things he has seen Jesus do - ***the signs.*** But it also implies that he is searching for an answer to the same question that was asked of John the Baptist: "Who are you?"

***Jesus replied, "Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are***

***born again"-John 3:3.***

The Greek gives us some terrific insight into Jesus' initial response to Nicodemus' opening statement. John reports that Jesus says: ***"Very truly I tell you."*** The Greek for this sentiment is a very familiar word for us today, a word carried forward into the Greek and English from the Hebrew: "Amen" (am-ane"). Now the normal use of this word would have come at the end of a prayer, which would be appropriate as the word literally means "so be it." When used that way, it is a profoundly simple yet very clear statement of faith and trust as it accepts, agrees and endorses everything that was said prior to the use of that word.

However, Jesus, like with so many other things, uses this word in a radically different way. He uses it at the beginning of His statement, not the end. Jesus is saying a couple of things that make this single word both incredibly appropriate and incredibly revealing as to just who it is who's doing the talking here. Saying "amen" on the front end of His comment tells Nicodemus that what he is about to hear is absolutely true, beyond reproach in any way. But (and here's the cool part), in addition to that, using "amen" in this way also is telling Nicodemus that Jesus has firsthand knowledge and authority to be making this statement.

Now think about what's happening here: Jesus is talking to Nicodemus about a spiritual truth. But by leading off with "amen," He is telling Nicodemus that He has firsthand knowledge of this spiritual truth. The only way that is valid is if Jesus is in fact God. He is - and constructing this sentence in this way is a way of declaring that divinity. He knows this statement is spiritual truth because He, as God, originated, He created, this spiritual truth! These words are not merely Jesus' opinion, His view of a truth claim. This is a truth of which He is declaring personal, firsthand knowledge and authority. How cool is that?

Now, all that said, we still have Jesus telling something as radical as being "born again" to somebody who has dedicated his entire life to pleasing God. The problem? Nicodemus thought he could please God in his own strength, with his own behaviors. Despite David saying: ***[T]here is no one who does good, not even one - David, Psalm 14:3b***, despite the prophet Isaiah telling his audience: ***"All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags - Isaiah 64:6a***, Pharisees such as Nicodemus had come to believe that the impossible was possible - that somebody born into sin, a sinner from the moment of conception, could somehow within their own strength and efforts make themselves pleasing to God. But now Jesus is telling him that no, if pleasing God is the outcome he is aiming for, he's going to have to start his life all over - by being "born again."

And there is additional meaning to that phrase "born again." The idea in the Greek of being born "again" also carries the meaning of being born "from above." So essentially what Jesus, with His firsthand knowledge and authority, is telling Nicodemus, "My friend, if you want to experience the kingdom of heaven, your life must start in the kingdom of heaven. If you want to experience that life, you must come from that life - just like me!"

***"How can someone be born when they are old?" Nicodemus asked. "Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother's womb to be born!" - John 3:4.***

Nicodemus simply does not understand what Jesus is saying, so his initial response is to look at the idea of being "born again" in completely earthly, physical and natural terms. He simply has no other point of reference. But Jesus is clearly speaking of a birth in a very different context - a spiritual one.

***Jesus answered, "Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.' The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit" - John 3:5-8***

Now Jesus starts to unwrap what He initially had said. To be born again, which is his qualifier for entering the kingdom of heaven, is to be born of water and the Spirit. This is a completely spiritual birth totally disconnected from the material world. Besides that, human birth only provides more humans who from the moment of birth are spiritually dead. Jesus would amplify this idea in John 6 when talking with His followers: ***"The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing"- Jesus Christ, John 6:63a.*** Only God through His transforming spirit can author a new life, a spiritual life, that pleases Him. And the results of that are like the wind: We cannot see where it comes or where it goes, but we can see its effects; we can see where it's been.

Significantly, Jesus also changes the idea of who precisely He is referring to when He tells Nicodemus, ***"You must be born again."*** Here the "you" changes from singular to plural. In other words, Jesus is not simply talking to Nicodemus, but to a far wider audience - his colleagues in the Sanhedrin, all the pilgrims in Jerusalem for Passover, all the citizens of Judea and Galilee and, in fact, all the citizens of the world. Everybody needs new birth. This by itself would have been a radical concept for Nicodemus to grasp. Jewish understanding had always assumed that such concepts as paradise and God's blessing were reserved for His chosen people. But here, in unmistakable terms, Jesus is declaring these concepts are for the world, for everybody. "You (plural) must be born again." These are no concepts related to any one single country. This is about all the people in all the countries of the world.

As a scriptural scholar, Nicodemus should not have been caught unaware by Jesus talking about either a new birth itself or its absolute necessity (marked by Jesus saying that new birth is a must). Several scriptures with which he would have been familiar point this out:

- 1) ***"The Lord your God will circumcise your hearts and the hearts of your descendants, so that you may love Him with all your heart and with all your soul, and live" -Moses, Deuteronomy 30:6.***
- 2) ***"I will put My law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be My people" - God speaking, Jeremiah 31:33b.***
- 3) ***"I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put My Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be***

*careful to keep my laws"- God speaking, Ezekiel 36:25-27.* Water in the OT often meant a renewal or cleansing. As God pointed out to Ezekiel, His water would be used to cleanse from impurity while His Spirit would be transforming the heart by completely removing the old (the heart of stone) and creating a new (a heart of flesh), beating to the rhythm of God's spirit within.

***"How can this be?" Nicodemus asked. "You are Israel's teacher," said Jesus, "and do you not understand these things?" - John 3:9-10.***

Nicodemus is lost and confused, essentially telling Jesus, "I don't get it. What in the world are you talking about?" Jesus' disappointment with Nicodemus tells him (and us) that the Scriptures he already had access to (our OT) give ample information and support to what Jesus is saying. And, as one of Israel's most respected and well-known teachers, in Jesus' view, Nicodemus should have already grasped the truth behind those verses.

***"Very truly I tell you, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony. I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things? No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven - the Son of Man" - Jesus Christ, John 3:11-14.***

While Nicodemus certainly had impressive education and credentials as one of Israel's leading teachers, he had no spiritual wisdom with which to "connect the dots" between what he had learned in the Scriptures and how Jesus was actually the fulfillment of those Scriptures. Simply put, scriptural knowledge was not enough. The Scriptures were never intended to be a purely academic venture. And if he couldn't even understand the spiritual truths that Jesus was attempting to teach him using earthly examples (such as the concepts of the birth of new life and the dynamics of the wind), how could he be expected to process Christ's teachings on heavenly, more spiritual subjects?

***"Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes may have eternal life in Him" - Jesus Christ, John 3:15.***

Now Jesus moves into their national history to remind him of a very famous moment: Numbers 21 tells us that, during the Israelites' time in the wilderness, due to their constant sin and rebellion, God had sent poisonous vipers into the camp to attack the people. But Moses had also been instructed by God to fashion a bronze snake and raised it up on a pole, the idea being that all the people who had been bitten by those snakes would find healing (literally, new life) if they gazed upon the bronze snake, believing that God would graciously respond to that gesture of faith with healing them from the murderous venom they had received. In the same way, the "lifting up" of the Son of Man - Jesus - would accomplish the same thing except that, instead of healing a physical issue, believing in the Son of Man would accomplish healing from sin - strictly a spiritual issue.

And the "eternal" life promised is a matter of destination, not duration. All people everywhere are going to live eternally. It is a matter of where that eternal life is going to be lived. And the contrast between eternity in the presence of God in heaven and an eternity of separation from God in hell is so incredibly stark (beyond our imagination)

that the only way the biblical writers had to describe it was to contrast the difference between life and death, between living and perishing. And no less an OT personality than Daniel had some 600 years before this written this truth into the Scriptures: ***"Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt" - an angel, Daniel 12:2.*** And now Jesus begins bringing Daniel's words to life.

***For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only (Greek: MONOGENES (mah-nah-gehn-ayssa) - the only one of its kind) Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through Him. Whoever believes in Him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God's one and only Son - John 3:16-18.***

What wonderful words John shares with us here! Essentially it is telling us that God loves the world so much so that, as a proof, as a sign, as the measure, of His love for the world, He gave us His only begotten, one of a kind, one and only Son. The Latin translation for this sentiment is *unicus*, from which we get our English word "unique" - an understated but accurate description of how different Jesus was from anybody else who has ever walked the planet. God's desire by way of this loving gift? That anybody who believes in who Jesus is would be rescued, from sin and eternal separation from God in hell, to eternal fellowship in the everlasting love of God in heaven.

The Hebrew sentiment for God sending Jesus into the world is the imagery created by the word *shaliach* (messenger). This picture tells us that the messenger, the sent one, is like the sender himself and faithfully pursues the sender's interests. In this context, being sent implies that the message is issued and originates with the sender, not the messenger. The messenger's job is to fulfill their role according to the sender's wishes. This Jesus did to an infinitely excellent degree, declaring His mission as God's messenger like this: ***"I have come down from heaven not to do My will but to do the will of Him who sent Me" - Jesus Christ, John 6:38.***

As a consequence of His loving the world that much, it allows those who place their spiritual reliance on God's Son to cover their sins to be blessed with the future of living eternally in the presence of God. In other words, this isn't mere creed that enunciates what somebody believes, but rather a life lived based on trusting in the saving work of Jesus Christ. That was Christ's purpose in coming - not just to save us but to provide the Person we could trust to save us - and also an amazing picture of God's compassion and patience for the world. Jesus would have been completely within His rights to condemn the world based on their unrepentant sinfulness - but that would have totally cancelled God's gracious plan of salvation. So, Jesus denied Himself that right, and instead went quietly and obediently to the cross to give the world the opportunity to be saved.

And we cannot forget that Jesus did not come into a neutral world. Due to sin, our whole, entire world was already condemned. Jesus stepped in to provide a salvation that otherwise would never be experienced by anybody - ever! So, as a result of being

saved, we are rescued from the rightful judgment of eternal condemnation that would otherwise await us. Those who refuse Christ's sacrifice remain sin-stained in the eyes of God - with no other means by which they can be saved. And more than that: First-century Judaism saw a person's name as reflecting their character. So, in this instance, to not believe in the "name" of Jesus would be to essentially deny His character, to deny His holy, perfect, loving, gracious nature. That would similarly lead to judgment.

***This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed. But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done in the sight of God - John 3:19-21.***

This is literally God pronouncing sentence - the "verdict." This is His conclusion of judgment following His perfect examination of all the particulars - including the entrance of the light of Jesus Christ to give the opportunity for spiritual illumination and understanding. It becomes a matter of love - loving the evil being done and therefore loving the dark that is thought to keep those deeds in the shadows, or loving the light and celebrating that, by faith in Jesus Christ, we can now know a life pleasing to God and live fearlessly in His light.

It also shows the profound deceptive powers of Satan, that he could impact people's thinking to such an extent that they would think that they could get away with anything, and never be found out. That is one of the greatest deceptions in the history of mankind, as the author of Hebrews makes so clear: ***Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of Him to whom we must give account - Hebrews 4:13.*** No hidden words, no hidden actions, no hidden attitudes - it's all going to be on display before the God of heaven and earth. This also shows the magnificent, breathtaking span of how much is completely covered by the blood of Jesus Christ. My sin, down to the smallest, most incremental misstep, is all forgiven if my life is surrendered and washed clean by the blood of Jesus Christ.

## **APPLICATION**

There are a few common responses that have made themselves known when reflecting on these amazing, radical words of Jesus:

**1)** One of the lines of attack against Christians often goes something like this: "How can you be so arrogant as to believe that, with all the faiths in the world, you think yours is the only right one? You think you have the only truth? You think there is only one way to God? All religions are saying the same thing; all religions are trying to get to the same place; they just have different ways of going about it." I think we've probably all heard some version of that. John 3 gives us one of the great verses in the Bible that tell us that, sorry folks, there truly is only one way - but it's not Christians who say that. Jesus said that: ***"Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again"*** - John 3:3. And it wasn't just this verse; Jesus spoke to the only "one way-

ness" of pleasing God when He told His disciples: "***I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me***" - ***Jesus Christ, John 14:6***. And when speaking before the Sanhedrin, the same council that condemned Jesus to death, one of His followers, the disciple Peter, affirmed that same point to that audience: "***Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved***" - ***Peter, Acts 4:12***. This is no more bigoted than to give the answer to the arithmetic problem of 2 + 2. There is only one answer: 4. That there is only one answer is neither narrow-minded nor bigoted. Truth should have only one answer. For the world, God gave His one answer; as John wrote in his first letter: ***Whoever does not believe God has made Him out to be a liar, because they have not believed the testimony God has given about His Son. And this is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son – I John 5:10b-11***. We didn't earn that. Only His grace provided it.

- 2) Another response is based on what most fundamentally is happening when a person, any person, surrenders to Jesus Christ: They are admitting that the life they have been living has been lived totally wrong. That can be an incredibly difficult hurdle. In the ego-driven, winner-take-all, "I'm a good person" world in which we live, the three most difficult words to say may in fact be: "I was wrong." Admitting that I am a helpless sinner, with no hope without God in my life, can be an extremely hard place to come to. Only by the spiritual grace of God can that hurdle be overcome, replacing a look at the moment with a look to an eternity with God in heaven.
- 3) Also, as in the case of Nicodemus, people may come from a long line of Bible study or knowledge, and a long line of church attendance and being faithful to many church activities. But none of that means anything ahead of knowing Jesus Christ by experiencing Him as our Lord and Savior. While human goodness may stand out in this world at times where it seems like human goodness is in way yonder short supply, human goodness means nothing in the face of the unchanging, unyielding purity and holiness of almighty God.

But the key to all that God has told us, that has been provided in the Scriptures, is coming to faith in Jesus Christ. Why? As Dr. Mark Strauss encapsulated so simply and yet so brilliantly in his book, *Layman's New Testament Commentary*, "Jesus is God explained" (page 358). If anybody wants to understand the Bible or God or anything to do with His plans and purposes, they need to begin by coming to grips with Jesus Christ.

## CONCLUSION

Some of the first Sunday School memory verses are found in John 3. But these words are not just for memorizing. They are for applying to our lives. They are for exercising a faith that says that the words and works of Jesus Christ on my behalf are so complete in making me clean before the eyes of God that I can place my entire life - every moment, every situation - into His sure hands.

That's what the world needs to hear. That's what we need to proclaim. Jesus provides all because Jesus did it all. Praise God. Let's pray!