

- I. The Story of Jesus and Nicodemus
- A. John 3:1-3 . . . Now there was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews; [2] this man came to Jesus by night and said to Him, "Rabbi, we know that You have come from God as a teacher; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him." [3] Jesus answered and said to him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God."
- B. Just by way of reminder, John is using stories to confirm that Jesus is both human and divine – that He is Immanuel, God with us.
1. In this first story of this third chapter, John is using Nicodemus' encounter with Jesus to show the divinity of Jesus. And though that is the foundational purpose for this story, there are lessons within the story that we are wise to learn.
 2. Today, our first lesson will deal with the problem of treating our assumptions as facts, and the second lesson will deal with the need to be born again to comprehend the word and ways of God – and especially in relation to living a God-pleasing Christian life.
- C. Prayer
- II. The story
- A. John 3:1 . . . Now there was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews . . .
1. Nicodemus is only spoken of in the gospel of John, yet he is mentioned three times – here in John 3, in John 7:50, and in John 19:39.
 2. John identifies Nicodemus as both a Pharisee and a ruler of the Jews, which means he was a member of the Sanhedrin.
 3. At the time of Christ, the Sanhedrin was a Jewish governing body that ruled with the support and under the authority of Rome.
 4. The two main functions of the Sanhedrin was to act as a Jewish Supreme Court – primarily over religious matters, and to act as a legislative body who crafted laws in keeping with the Mosaic Law.
 5. Typically, the Sanhedrin was made up of the High Priest and seventy other members drawn from the ranks of the Pharisees and Sadducees.
- B. John 3:2a . . . this man came to Jesus by night

1. Though John tells us that Nicodemus came to Jesus by night, he does not tell us why, which means the best we can do is speculate why.
 - a. It could be that, being a member of the Sanhedrin, Nicodemus was too busy during the day to find time to talk to Jesus.
 - b. It is possible that getting a private conversation with Jesus was too hard during the day, so Nicodemus waited until the crowds went home for the night.
 - c. A third possibility comes from John 12:42-43 and John 19:38, which speak of many Jews, and especially high ranking Jews, hiding their belief in and support of Jesus because they were afraid of being publicly ridiculed or ostracized by the religious leaders.
2. However, in spite of what we might speculate, the truth is, we do not know Nicodemus' true motive for coming at night. Now I am pointing this out because we humans share three common weaknesses in relation to people's motives or intentions.
 - a. First, too often too many of us assume we know someone's intentions or motives for what they have done or are doing. But we rarely stop there. We go a step further and decide their intentions are representative of their character. Therefore, once we decide their intentions or motives are evil, we decide their character is evil, or at the very least, seriously flawed.
 - b. Second, without verifying the accuracy of our assumptions about their intention or motive, we too often treat our assumption as fact and proceed to deal with them.
 - (1) For example, when they have done something to offend or hurt us, or when they have done something obviously wrong, we treat them as if they are inherently evil.
 - (2) In other words, we treat them as if they are pre-meditated, intentional sinners rather than unthinking, careless sinners.
 - c. Our third weakness has to do with how we judge ourselves in comparison to how we judge others. When we do something wrong, we think and speak of ourselves as having made a mistake rather than being an intentional sinner with bad motives and an evil character. We often support our belief that we made a mistake by explaining why we didn't really mean to do what we did, or we explain that our intentions were good but the results turned out bad, or we explain that our wrong-doing was the result of extenuating circumstances, which if they had not existed, we would never have done the wrong we did.

3. In relation to Nicodemus, these three common weaknesses are what motivate us to speak as if we know that he came to Jesus at night out of fear or for some other selfish reason, and then to look down on him for doing so. Therefore, I will give you four reasons why we shouldn't treat our assumptions as facts and why we shouldn't judge others more harshly than we judge ourselves.
 - a. First, it is arrogant to think we know for certain what is driving the behavior of another person. And it is arrogant to think of ourselves as being less evil or as having better intentions, and therefore a better character, than those we are condemning as evil intentioned.
 - (1) It may be true that we have grown to a level of spiritual maturity whereby we rarely sin, but who of us has not done what we knew is wrong – and not just once, but many times?
 - (2) So yes, we may be in a much more godly place, but we didn't start there, we slowly and progressively grew there. And so to expect others to get there immediately is arrogant.
 - b. Second, we are being dishonest when we treat our assumptions about others as if they are facts rather than just our best guess.
 - (1) The reality is, we cannot know for certain why others have done what they've done until they honestly confess what their motives or intentions were.
 - (2) Now it may be that some will never confess the truth because they don't want to admit they are that evil. And there are some who will never get honest enough with themselves to identify their true motive or intention. Yet regardless, it is still wrong on our part to treat our assumptions as fact and then treat others according to our assumptions.
 - c. Third, judging others more harshly than we judge ourselves is like shooting ourselves in the foot. Why? Because God will judge us in the same way we judge others (Matthew 7:1-5), and God will show us mercy according to the mercy we show others (Matthew 5:7). Think carefully about this – if I judge you more harshly than I judge myself, God will then judge me with the same harshness with which I have judged you – and in that way I have made things worse for myself. And who of us needs that?
 - d. Fourth, treating our assumptions as fact and judging others more harshly than we judge ourselves is the opposite of love, that is, love for God and love for others. The standard of love dictates that we treat others the way we want to be treated (Matthew

7:12). And we read in 1 John 4:20, that if we do not love those we can see, we cannot love God whom we have not seen.

(1) It is my conviction that every one of us wants to be loved and treated with love by those around us.

(2) To do anything less for others than what we want for ourselves is a denial of love, and a denial of the God we claim to love and worship.

4. Therefore, if you have been treating your assumptions about other people's motives and intentions as facts, and if you have judged and condemned them based on your assumptions, I am urging you to stop that and begin treating your assumptions as just that, assumptions that have yet to be proved true.

C. John 3:2b . . . and [Nicodemus] said to [Jesus], "Rabbi, we know that You have come from God as a teacher; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him."

1. Rabbi – in calling Jesus, "Rabbi," Nicodemus was showing respect for Jesus as a teacher and spiritual leader.

2. we know that You have come from God as a teacher – when Nicodemus says, "we know," he appears to be referring to a larger group than just himself.

a. It is possible Nicodemus personally knew other religious or political leaders who believed Jesus was sent by God.

b. There are two other statements in John that can be used to add credence to this possibility.

(1) John 9:16 . . . Therefore some of the Pharisees were saying, "This man is not from God, because He does not keep the Sabbath." But others were saying, "How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?" And there was a division among them.

(2) John 12:42 . . . Nevertheless many even of the rulers believed in Him, but because of the Pharisees they were not confessing Him, for fear that they would be put out of the synagogue.

3. for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him

a. In other words, Nicodemus and those who agreed with him, were convinced Jesus had been sent from God because of the signs and wonders Jesus was performing.

b. Jesus himself affirmed that His signs verified He was sent by God in John 5:36, where He says, "But the testimony which I have is greater than the testimony of John; for the works which the

Father has given Me to accomplish—the very works that I do—testify about Me, that the Father has sent Me.”

- c. And in his evangelistic talk with Cornelius, Peter said, “You know of Jesus of Nazareth, how God anointed Him with the Holy Spirit and with power, and how He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with Him” (Acts 10:38).
 - d. The point here is that the right perspective of Jesus’ signs was that He could do them because God had sent Him and because God was with Him.
- D. John 3:3 . . . Jesus answered and said to him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God."
1. For a number of years, the Protestant church has used the words “born again” in relation to evangelism, and the intended meaning is that we must be “born again” to go to heaven when we die.
 - a. In addition, the Protestant church has reinforced the teaching that we must be “born again” in order to go to heaven by using the label “Born again Christian” to identify those who are truly saved.
 - b. And by truly saved, the Protestant church means those who have put their faith in Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins and, through faith by grace, have received the gift of eternal life.
 - c. My purpose for telling you this is because the use of the words “born again” by the Protestant church influences the way we understand this response by Jesus to Nicodemus. And to reinforce my point, it is probable most of think Jesus is telling Nicodemus what he must to do go to heaven when he dies.
 2. Now I want to be clear that there is nothing inherently wrong with how the Protestant church has used the words “born again.”
 - a. Yet at the same time, I believe it is unwise to use the words “born again” as the most commonly used phrase to describe what God requires of us in order to be given the gift of eternal life.
 - b. And I believe it is unwise because in using “born again” as a stand-alone summary term without further explanation or conditions, we make it too easy for those who have little interest or time investment in living the Christ-like life to think they are born again because they have fulfilled the evangelistic ritual of praying the sinners prayer and trusting in Christ for eternal life.

3. Now you may be wondering where all this is going. I am telling you this because it makes little to no sense for Jesus to respond to Nicodemus' observations that Jesus had been sent from God by telling Nicodemus that he cannot go to heaven when he dies unless he is born again.
 - a. As you can see from the context, Nicodemus said nothing about justification or eternal life or going to heaven after he dies.
 - b. But what he did say was that, based on the signs Jesus was doing, he could see that Jesus came from God and that God was with Jesus.
 4. Okay, so you may have read ahead and are aware Jesus said in vs 5 that unless you are born of water and the Spirit you cannot enter into the kingdom of God. We will get to those words and when we look at the larger statement, I think you will see the two words "enter into" do not change what Jesus is saying to Nicodemus here in vs 3.
- E. So what is Jesus saying when He says we must be born again to see the kingdom of God?
1. The first thing we ought to do in discerning what Jesus is saying is to consider the context.
 - a. According to the context, Jesus is responding to Nicodemus' statement that there are those who know that Jesus came from God as a teacher because no one could do the signs Jesus was doing unless God was with him.
 - b. In other words, Nicodemus was able to come to this conclusion about Jesus because he could see, that is, he could perceive or discern or comprehend or understand that Jesus came from God based on the signs Jesus was doing.
 - c. Therefore, according to the context, Nicodemus was claiming to have seen, that is, to have discerned this truth about Jesus.
 2. The second thing we ought to do in discerning what Jesus is saying is consider what the dictionary says about the word "see."
 - a. According to Webster's 1913 dictionary, the word see can mean: (1) To perceive by the eye; to have knowledge of the existence and apparent qualities of something by using the organs of sight; to behold; to view; (2) To perceive by mental vision; to form an idea or conception of; to observe; to discern; to distinguish; to understand; to comprehend; to ascertain.
 - b. Therefore, it is within the accepted boundaries of definition to understand Jesus as using the word "see" in relation to perceiving,

discerning, ascertaining, and understanding. And this means it is reasonable to conclude that Jesus is telling Nicodemus that only those who are born again have the ability to see, discern, ascertain, comprehend, and therefore understand the kingdom of God.

- F. But what does it mean to be born again?
1. The words “born again” can just as rightly be translated “born from above,” and in fact some Bible translate it that way.
 2. Yet either way, whether it is born again or born from above, it means beginning life anew in relation to God, in relation to how and what you think about God, in relation to how you trust God, how you understand and apply God’s truth and ways, and how you live out your allegiance to God – regardless of the cost – day in and day out.
 3. Therefore, what Jesus is saying to Nicodemus, and to us, is that we cannot grasp and make sense of the truths related to the kingdom of God without being born again, or born from above.
 4. Paul affirms this in 1 Corinthians 2:14, when he says that the natural man (unbeliever) does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised.
 5. And in 1 Corinthians 1:18-24, Paul makes it clear that the word of the cross that leads to salvation is foolishness and a stumbling block to those who are perishing and have no interest in being saved. But to those who are responding to the convicting work of the Holy Spirit and the drawing work of Jesus Christ, the word of the cross is the power of God and the wisdom of God unto salvation.

III. Conclusion

- A. We will end here due to the time. But we will pick this up next time and consider how this truth, this principle, applies to Nicodemus and to us.