

“Nicodemus Seeks Truth”

St. John 3:3

June 7, 2020

SERMON 1919

by Michael David Henson

Our sermon text is from John 3:3, “Jesus answered and said to him, ‘Amen, Amen, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.’”

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

It is amazing that Nicodemus comes to Jesus at all.

First of all, Jesus’ forerunner John the Baptist rebuked the Pharisees who came to him, saying, “Brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? ⁸Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance...” (Matthew 3:7-8). Jesus, Himself, said, “Even so you also outwardly appear righteous to men, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!” Later Jesus calls them, “Serpents, brood of vipers! How can you escape the condemnation of hell?” (Matthew 23:28-29, 33). Jesus had harsh words for the works hardened Pharisees.

Second, Nicodemus was not an immoral man at all. He was not a tax collector or adulterer. Nicodemus was not playing church or just using his position to acquire power and wealth. Nicodemus was working hard to keep the law in every part of his life. Nicodemus would be considered an outwardly upright man in every sense of the term. You wouldn’t expect Nicodemus to even consider coming to Jesus when Jesus had said, “For I say to you, that unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:20).

Third, Nicodemus was a ruler of the Pharisees. He had been recognized by the religious community and had been given a place on the Sanhedrin, the highest religious council. Nicodemus was in the office of ecclesiastical ruling. Today we might call him a bishop or cardinal. Why would Nicodemus who had been given the office to make rulings concerning the church care about the words of a Galilean lay preacher?

If we take Nicodemus’ words at face value, we see that it was Jesus’ miracles that had gotten his attention. The Scriptures say that the Messiah would do miracles. Nicodemus is willing to give Jesus a hearing. Still somewhat guarded, Nicodemus comes at night. It is amazing to hear this ruler give Jesus the title, Rabbi and say that Jesus is “a teacher come from God.”

At this point everything falls apart from Nicodemus’ point of view. Now Jesus does exactly what a Rabbi and a teacher from God is supposed to do. Jesus preaches the truth to expose the false teaching that was keeping Nicodemus from being saved. Jesus preaches the truth of salvation through the water of Holy Baptism and the new birth of the Holy Spirit in the Word. Jesus proclaims salvation through faith in God’s Son.

So why do I say that everything falls apart from Nicodemus' point of view. Well, Jesus considers the doctrine of the pharisees to be incapable of salvation. Jesus tells Nicodemus that every external moral good work which he had done was worthless as regards the kingdom of God. Finally, Jesus acknowledges that Nicodemus is a teacher of Israel, but tells him that He is incompetent because he doesn't know the basic truths of how to be saved.

You can imagine that Nicodemus expected to have a teacher-to-teacher talk. He expected to have a little give and take on theological points. He was probably even prepared to be told by Jesus a few more things that he should do, some laws Nicodemus may have overlooked. What he got was way more than he expected.

On this day, we celebrate Trinity Sunday. We profess the rather complete Athanasian Creed. We believe that there is one God, but that one God has three persons, the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. The Father is God and the Son is God and the Holy Spirit is God, but there are not three gods, but one God. Human nature knows nothing of this. The creation of the world teaches that someone must have created this all. The conscience of man teaches that the Creator is moral distinguishing between right and wrong. Nevertheless, human reason cannot determine anything about the one God in three persons. Human reason considers the doctrine to be the height of foolishness.

So why do we confess the holy Trinity? We confess that the Father is made of none neither created nor begotten. We teach that the Son is of the Father, not made nor created but begotten. We believe that the Holy Spirit is of the Father and of the Son, neither made nor created nor begotten but proceeding. Why do we confess this? Because the Word of God clearly and emphatically teaches it! Though we cannot understand it anymore than a heather could, we profess it is true because God teaches us it is true. The Triune God instructs us in His Word to believe it.

When we look at the exchange between Nicodemus and Jesus **we see the conflict between the religious opinion of human reason and the truth of God's holy Word.** Human reason is perfectly capable to decide in the matters of this world, but it is utterly incapable when it comes to spiritual truths. Human reason is designed to be used for those things which the human senses can perceive. When it comes to the knowledge of God and religious truth, the Word of God is the only means which God has provided to teach us.

This battle is not new. It has been going on from the beginning. God gave His Word to Adam and Eve. The serpent directed them away from the Word of God to human reason. The Word said, "On the day you eat of it you will surely die." Human reason gathered up some research from the senses. Genesis 3:6 says, "So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree desirable to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate. She also gave to her husband with her, and he ate." **Human reason is incapable of making judgments in spiritual matters.** Human reason doesn't know the Triune nature of God and it doesn't know the difference between damnable sin and salvation. It doesn't even know how man is saved.

The very first thing Jesus tells Nicodemus is, “Amen, Amen, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God” (John 3:3). Human reason determines that salvation is to be achieved by the law. It thinks that man becomes righteous by doing righteous things. **Jesus completely rejects this works-righteousness and says that salvation comes by becoming someone completely different.** Nothing which is done by the first birth is of any use in acquiring salvation. Man must be given a new birth. He must become a completely different person, with a different understanding, thoughts, mind, and heart.

As a pharisee Nicodemus had embraced this pagan philosophy of human reason. He collected the laws of God and went to great efforts to try and keep it. Nicodemus proudly thought that He was saved by his good works. By these first words, Jesus tells him that no matter how people are or live by nature, they are damned and under sin. The Pharisees often debated the laws of God. How many works were required? What did you do when one law required cleanliness, but another required loving your neighbor? If your son fell in a hole on the Sabbath day, do you pull him out or not?

In the secular legend of the Gordian knot, Alexander the Great was presented with a knot so tightly entangled that it was impossible to untie. The legend said that whoever could solve it would become ruler of all Asia. Rather than engage in the useless wrangling of many other unsuccessful competitors, Alexander steps back and slices through the knot with a single stroke of his sword. Situation solved.

With the stroke of one sentence, Jesus completely renders the basis for the entire pharisaical righteousness irrelevant. You must be born again. By His word, all works righteousness simply unravels and falls to the ground. Strike one.

Though Nicodemus came seeking the truth, he is appalled at Jesus’ answer. Still clinging to his human reason and his senses, he laughingly tries to show the ridiculous nature of Jesus’ statement. Can an old man be born again? Can you enter the womb a second time? From Nicodemus’ perspective Jesus’ words are illogical and contradictory.

Nevertheless, Jesus doesn’t back down in the least. Jesus restates His point. **Jesus clarifies that the new birth is a spiritual birth and the means of acquiring this birth comes from the Holy Spirit, who works through Holy Baptism.** John 3:5, “Jesus answered, ‘Amen, Amen, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.’” Nicodemus’ human reason is completely unaware of the spiritual birth which gives man a new heart and mind.

Once again, Jesus completely strips Nicodemus of his pride concerning his outward morality. Others may have praised Nicodemus for his righteous living. They may have thought that his life of good works was worthy of great honor before man and God. Yet, Jesus is speaking of a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Whatever the flesh of Nicodemus had accomplished, it is not good enough. The spirit gives birth to spirit.

We cannot trust in our works. We can never trust in our works. Whether the works were done by an ignorant human nature or even if they were performed by the new man after holy Baptism, we should not trust in them. Good works were never intended to be the object of our faith or trust. The object of faith is clearly revealed by the Word of God to be Jesus Christ and His work of salvation on our behalf.

John 3:14-17, “And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, 15that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life. 16“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. 17“For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved.

With the second slash of the Word of God, Jesus removes all human works from the realm of trust and presents the Spirit’s work in Holy Baptism, in which believers are united with the Christ, the Son of God. Holy Baptism is God’s work which places believers in the kingdom of God. Strike two.

Last of all, Jesus shows Nicodemus the source of his error. Jesus says, “Are you the teacher of Israel, and do not know these things?” Nicodemus has the office of being a spiritual teacher of spiritual things, but he is engaging in fleshly conclusions based only on human reason. Human reason is incompetent in the spiritual realm. Jesus directs Nicodemus to be taught by God and the pastoral office.

Jesus said, “Most assuredly, I say to you, We speak what We know and testify what We have seen, and you do not receive Our witness. 12“If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things? 13“No one has ascended to heaven but He who came down from heaven, that is, the Son of Man who is in heaven” (John 3:11-13).

Nicodemus has two authorities that agree and testify against Nicodemus. Jesus is God Himself come down from heaven. Human reason definitely is not qualified to contradict the witness of God’s Son who came down from heaven. The gall of human reason to think that it could teach God a few things.

Second, the true pastoral office of teaching clings to the Word of God as the final arbiter in spiritual matters, the conscience and the salvation of the soul. Nicodemus is in the office, but He is not using the tool of the office—the Word of God. Jesus directs Nicodemus the teacher of Israel to John the Baptist, who had wielded the Word of God and declared the truth to the people, even to scribes and pharisees. Jesus and John preached the same doctrine concerning Holy Baptism. They told the pharisees to repent of works-righteousness and bear fruits of worthy of repentance. Strike three.

Nicodemus brought everything that He had to the plate, but his human reason had blinded him. 1. He was a pharisee. 2. He was an outwardly moral man. And 3. he was ruler of the Sanhedrin. None of those things would admit him to the kingdom of God. Nevertheless, Nicodemus had one thing going for him. **He was seeking the truth.** In front of him was Jesus Christ, the way, the truth and the life! Jesus was the promised Teacher come from God and God was indeed with Him. Nicodemus and his reasonable works-righteousness was called out on three strikes.

Jesus told Nicodemus he would need to leave it all behind, and receive the free gift of salvation. Jesus was offering a new birth through water and the Word. This new birth would provide everything which Nicodemus sought. Though this teaching offended human reason, it was the truth. This treasure is as real and certain as the doctrine of the Holy Trinity, for it is founded on the testimony of God Himself in the Word. Jesus forgives sins and gives a new birth in water and the word. Whoever believes in Jesus will not perish but have everlasting life.