

NEW LIFE IN CHRIST (Nicodemus and Salvation)

Text: John 3:1-12

Intro:

You'll recognize that this is a conversation between Jesus and a teacher of Israel— Nicodemus. In this conversation Jesus sets forth the necessity of regeneration as a necessary qualification for a subject of the spiritual Kingdom--the kingdom of God.

Our Lord had begun His earthly ministry, He, in company with His Galilean neighbors, had come, as was their yearly custom, to the Feast of the Passover, This was always a great annual event, just as the Annual Conference is in our own church. And so out of every hamlet, city and village, the people came and took to the road that lead the the Holy City--Jerusalem. Picture them.

Upon arriving in Jerusalem, they pitched their tents on the slopes of Olivet. During the night, Jesus slept. And in the daytime, He walked the city streets, where His shadow fell on the heavy-laden, the poor, the blind, the halt, the sick. Soon, however, His activities reached the ears of the authorities--the Jewish Sanhedrin. This was a group of 70 men that sought to guide the spiritual destinies of the people of Israel. Although it was a mischievous and bigoted party in some respects, still in some untold fashion, it could rear such cultural and high-toned men as Paul, Gamaliel and Nicodemus.

But the thinking of these men was material. They thought of the kingdom of God as an earth order. But the heart of Nicodemus began to vibrate: like an aeolian harp when touched with the fingers of the wind. He resolved to judge of Jesus. When any man says, "I will see for myself who this Jesus is," the result is certain to be good,

Body of Sermon:

We see in this man, sincerity and timidity struggling. Did he fear the sneers and scorns of his associates, should he be caught talking with this young Nazarene? Or was he so sincere that while others were sleeping, he was seeking. These are debatable questions.

At any rate, when darkness had covered the city, Nicodemus left home, wound his way through the quiet streets, passed out through the city gate, crossed quickly over the brook Kidron and climbed the slope to the camp of the Galileans.

There, under the stars, with the wind sighing through the olive branches, Jesus and Nicodemus talked. Perhaps they talked through the night, but we know only a part of it. Notice these two characters, first of all:

Nicodemus was an old man; Jesus was barely turned 30.

Nicodemus was schooled in the finest traditions of his race. Jesus had no credentials. He came from the carpenter's shop. He knew men and God. He was possessed with unselfishness, with freshness and wonder of soul.

Nicodemus was the questioning heart; Jesus was the Great Answering Spirit.

Nicodemus' voice was the first to break upon the still night. He had been impressed by the signs which Jesus had wrought in the city, and had made a true deduction from them. Himself a teacher, he desired what this messenger from God had to say. He realized that here was winsome personality that he couldn't evade.

So he said to Jesus--See John 3:2. He felt he had gone a long way and complemented Jesus. Many people today are perfectly willing to acknowledge Jesus as a leader in religious affairs. But such long-range compliments will never warm a man's heart to the thrill of adventuring up the sorry way of Calvary. The answer of Jesus to this man was His first and fundamental word to humanity as a whole. See John 3:3. That is Christianity as to human necessity.

The Roman world said that men enter into life fully, under a government of authority and force. The Greek outlook sought for self-expression through culture. Hebrews expressed themselves in rituals. Here's where Nicodemus was. He knew the Jewish law. He fasted, he prayed, he washed his hands. But Jesus said to him: "There must be a fundamental and permanent revolution take place; your thinking, feeling, acting, character and nature must be changed,"

Now if Jesus had said all Gentiles must do all this, it would have been intelligible. But he, an orthodox, pious Jew--this staggered him. Nicodemus didn't challenge the statement, but he questioned the possibility of the thing taking place. He illustrated the difficulty, as he saw it, in the realm of the physical. See John 3:4.

How is it possible for a man to begin life over again?

Jesus readily admitted the impossibility of new birth physically, but implicated its possibility spiritually. See John 3:5-8.

Only a spiritual nature can see and enter the kingdom of God, The words of Jesus were beginning to grip the heart and mind of Nicodemus. There was nothing his legal mind could do with this free spirit of the man who stood before him. By this time all he could gasp was: "How can these things be?"(John 3:9)

Then Jesus answered him--See John 3:10-12. Now some practical applications from this conversation!

1. Jesus makes it possible for us to walk in the path He shows.

At the beginning of this conversation, Jesus was only a teacher who could show men the path in which to walk, but before morning broke, he learned that he was in the presence of One who made it possible for Him to walk in it.

Nicodemus is a type of many people today. They take a long, conventional look at Jesus. They acknowledge Him as Teacher, as a Great Idealist. But when His teachings, His laws demand a change, a revolution, then people chafe.

Oh yes, we're polite to Jesus as long as we can be comfortable, as long as He doesn't interfere with our sins. But when He begins to rebuke them, we question His authority. As long as we can live life as we please, then we don't have much pain, you know.

But Jesus comes and says, "I need you in My vineyard; will you go to Africa, to India? Will you serve Me here at home? Will you surrender your will, and let Me be your Lord? Jesus is an Idealist, but He is more; He's a Realist. Jesus is a Teacher, but more. He's Savior and Lord.

2 Only a spiritual nature can see and enter the kingdom of heaven.

This is whether in its beginnings here, or its consummation hereafter. You talk to an irreligious person about the things of the Spirit and they can't understand. They don't have the capacity to understand the true nature of that kingdom because they have their old nature.

There's something of finality here: "Ye must." I wish I could drive that truth home. Oh the many who are trying to get into heaven some other way! Their religion is only mechanical. I know some folks who are riding on the laurels of a good father and mother; others give of their means, which is good, but not sufficient.

Others try to earn salvation by good works. Good works will follow the changed life, but is never a substitute for it. You can't earn this nature by "good works." What is wrong with us, causing all our long continued struggle for better conditions, and our seeming inability to produce them?

What would you think of a farmer who tries to paint his pump because the well went bad? You'd say, "What foolishness." We've tried to do that too long spiritually. We've painted the outward veneer and looked respectable, but our inward nature, our hearts are corrupt. We've tried through our own efforts to bring about a certain order, thinking that then we would be what we desired to be.

We must be, before we can become. The stream will be bad, as long as the fountain (its source) is bad. "Make the fountain good and the stream will be good." If we're transformed by the mighty power of God, then our outward works will glorify Him.

3. How can these things be?

How do we get this spiritual nature? How are we born again? Such a nature involves two parties--man and God, Each has a definite part in it. Man fell in Eden and inherited a corrupt nature, which needs to be redeemed. See Romans 3:23.

The only way is through the bleed of Jesus. To be "born anew" means: repentance, confession, forsaking sin, making restitution, believing God forgives, accepting Christ and living accordingly. It's a painful way, but the only way.

God's part is: He forgives, wipes the slate clean, removes desire of sin, gives us a desire for right, transforms us and gives us power to live life chosen.

4. We can't explain this, but we can experience it.

Jesus said "it's like the wind. You can hear it, feel it, see its results, but not the wind actually. So in the new life. It reveals itself in operations, and can be known only by experience. We may not have the same experience as others. It may be sudden or gradual.

5. The evidence will be clear.

How do you know? How do you know a cherry tree from an apple tree? By its fruits. Jesus said the same of Christian: "You shall know them by their fruits."

He who does righteousness is righteous as God. We've tried legislating the masses. Let's try transforming the individual by the grace of God. We'll have a better world only by having better people in it.