

Legalism Meets Love!

John 3:1-15

Feast of the Holy Trinity

6/11/17

507:1-4 571:1-6 895/907/966 802:1-4

"There was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. This man came to Jesus by night..."

How would you like it if you gave your entire life in obedient service to God and then you were told none of it counted for anything in getting you saved?

This is what happened to a man named Nicodemus!

He was:

*A big shot in the church;

*A teacher and leader of Jewish thought,

*A Pharisee which is a sect of the Jews,

*Zealous for keeping the traditions of the elders,

*A member of the Sanhedrin, the highest council of the Jewish Church (John 7:50).

*A perfect keeper of the Ten Commandments and hundreds of other laws created by the Jews so he'd never even come close to violating the decalogue, or so he thought.

And yet when he comes to speak to Jesus at night and says, *"Rabbi, we know that You are a teacher come from God; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him."*, Jesus doesn't debate with him, doesn't discuss His miracles with him, doesn't tell him what to do, no! Rather, He goes right to the heart of the matter and says,

"Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the Kingdom of God."

Getting accepted by God now and especially after we die is the number #1 question and concern for people throughout the world no matter what the religion. Everyone wants to know, *"How can I get saved?"* And the answer most labor under is, *"One must be good!"*

For Nicodemus that meant obeying the Ten Commandments, keeping the traditions of the elders, following the Old Testament sacrificial laws, avoiding certain foods, keeping certain festivals, being circumcised, paying attention to new moons and Sabbaths, and on and on. These were all commanded by God and good but in no way were they supposed to be works people did in order to earn their way to heaven. Other religions throughout the world did other laws and traditions, but either way, they all, along with Nicodemus, believed, taught, and confessed they had to "DO SOMETHING" to be saved.

So when Jesus said, *"You must be born again!"* this was absolutely mind-blowing and did not compute! It meant something needed to be done to him by God, rather than him doing something for God. A self-righteous person can't fathom this. It takes "him" out of the equation. This is impossible to comprehend for a proud person. So Nicodemus, who was dead spiritually, took this to mean physical and not spiritual birth. He said,

"How can a man be born when he is old?"

And then he began to ask his foolish questions about entering his mother's womb a second time. But Jesus lovingly and patiently clarified by saying:

"Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit (baptism), he cannot enter the Kingdom of God."

Jesus is talking about spiritual realities not physical. He says,

"That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit."

Jesus is making it perfectly clear here, when His powerful Word of command is attached to a physical thing like water, that water becomes something quite extraordinary and powerful, a conduit or means of the Holy Spirit.

How can this be? Remember the Syrian general, Naaman, in the OT who had leprosy? When God told him through the prophet Elisha to wash himself in the Jordan River seven times he did so and was completely healed. The muddy, little Jordan River had no power in and of itself, but when comprehended in God's command and connected to God's Word...IT HAD GREAT POWER! HEALING POWER!

And so it is with God's Word when connected to water in Holy Baptism. It saves! Jesus said,

"He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned" (Mark 16:16).

"Oh but Pastor" some will say, *"you've got to believe first"* ...as though belief were some kind of "work" we must do before God can save us. But God says "faith" is not a work, but a pure "gift"! Paul makes this undeniable clear in Ephesians 2:8-9 when He says,

"For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast."

People in this day and age, as in ages past, will be bothered by this Divine truth that faith is a pure gift and not a work. They'll be even more bothered when you tell them the Holy Spirit actually gives them this faith by His powerful Word connected to water in Holy Baptism as a means of grace. It so goes against our human nature that insists we are in control and not God when it comes to faith. But you simply point them to the Word and show them how faith is a gift (Eph. 2:8-9), and how Jesus gives it by His Spirit who works through Word-empowered water. Peter said in 1 Peter 3:21,

"Baptism now saves you!"

Paul said in Titus 3:5-6,

"...according to His mercy He saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit."

Jesus said in the last chapter of Matthew,

“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations.” How? By... “Baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” (Matt. 28:19)

And of course, our Lord said in our text today,

“Unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the Kingdom of God.” (John 3:5)

And to really blow Nicodemus’ mind and show him how utterly out-of-control he was in regard to spiritual birth in baptism, Jesus pictures the Spirit’s saving work to be like that of the wind. He says,

“The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear the sound of it, but cannot tell where it comes from and where it goes. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit.” (John 3:8)

This proud and self-righteous Pharisee is rendered speechless. All he can say is,

“How can these things be?”

Brothers and sisters in Christ, we too are rendered intellectually speechless and, yet, full of praise for God when it comes to HOW He saves us. It is all Jesus and not us! Just as He once said, *“Let there be light!”* so now, by pure grace, He has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. (2Cor.4:6) As creation (1st article) was all His doing and not ours... so is salvation (2nd article) and sanctification (3rd Article) all His doing as well, and not ours. It’s all Him from beginning to end!

Which begs the question,

“Does He ask us Christians to participate in His work of sanctification?”

Answer...“Yes!” He says, *“Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.”* (Phil. 2:12) But even this working we do is to be understood as all His working, all His moving, all His prompting by the Spirit, for He goes on to say, *“For it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His Good pleasure.”* (Phil. 2:13).

Nicodemus is baffled by all of this! He hasn’t been broken yet. It is so necessary for man’s pride to be broken first, like a bucking bronco, before he can receive the life-giving Word of Salvation that creates faith and saves.

So Jesus attacks his greatest source of pride...his intellectual acumen! His academic ability! He says,

“Are you a teacher of Israel, and do not know these things?” That question must have cut Nicodemus to the core!

What’s your source of pride? If it’s beauty Jesus would say to you, *“Are you beautiful on the outside, yet, ugly on the inside?”* If it’s wealth Jesus would say, *“Are you wealthy on the outside but poor in the inside?”* If it’s popularity Jesus would say, *“Do you have lots of friends on the outside but you’re quite alone on the inside?”* Jesus has to touch all of us on our *“pride spot”* and show us how bankrupt we are before we can receive the soothing comfort of the Gospel of our forgiveness in Christ.

Jesus continues the humbling process by telling Nicodemus these incredibly deep words:

"Most assuredly I say to you, We (the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit) speak what we know and testify what We have seen, and you do not receive Our witness. If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things?" (vss 11-12) And now listen to this mind-blower:

"No one has ascended to heaven but He who came down from heaven, that is, the Son of Man who is in heaven." (vs 13)

Did you hear that? Jesus is saying that He is the only way to heaven because He is "Divine"...the only One who came down from heaven. Plus He is saying He is presently in heaven while He stands on earth before Nicodemus, which is another way of saying He is "omnipresent" (everywhere at one time), which is, in essence, a declaration that He is God!

Can you imagine standing before God the Son in the flesh? When this reality hit Peter one day, he said, *"Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord!"* (Luke 5:8). And what does Jesus do when we feel our sins and we are bowed down in heart and soul before Him? He doesn't give us any more law to crush us, no! He only gives us Gospel to raise us up!

So Jesus said to Nicodemus who was crushed at this point:

"As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life." (vss 14-15)

This OT event was merely a picture of what Jesus would do in the NT. Jesus uses Moses and the Serpent on the pole to speak the most famous passage in all the Scriptures. You know it well, the one sentence that summarizes the Gospel in a nutshell:

"For God so loved the world that He have His only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life." (John 3:16)

All legalism dies here as it meets unconditional love!

Who can fathom such love of God that would give His only Begotten Son in such a gruesome, torturous death, so that you and I, haters of God by nature, could live eternally?

*All of nature that sacrifices itself for its young;

*All fathers that sacrifice themselves for their wives and families;

*All mothers that sacrifice themselves for their husbands and children;

*All soldiers that sacrifice themselves for their country;

All these are mere analogies or pictures of the One Main Reality that stands out as the centerpiece of all history = God in heaven above, sending God His Son to earth below, to come and Sacrifice Himself for you and me and the entire world... so that we would be forgiven, atoned for, justified, reconciled, and unconditionally loved!

May the Holy Spirit of our Triune God come to us now, and fill us with joy knowing that our sins were forgiven long ago, so that we have life in Him forever, because of what God the Son has done for us in love, and applied to us in Holy Baptism.

Come to His table and receive Jesus and all of His grace and strength this Trinity Sunday, and go in His absolving peace...

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit! Amen.