

AN EVENING GUEST - JOHN 3:1-21

Interviews of Jesus #4

Samuel was an excellent writer but a lousy businessman. The first American ever to receive a doctorate of letters from Oxford University, he was a poor businessman because he could not discern good advice from bad advice. Sam made more money than anybody else in history had made in his day just from writing and speaking, but he seemed to always be not only penniless, but deeply in debt. It was because he was an easy touch. He would go along with any counsel that he felt to be good at the moment.

Like the time someone approached the bushy haired author with a steam pulley guaranteed to revolutionize the construction industry. It turned out to be no good. Neither was the guarantee. This poor counsel cost Sam 32 thousand dollars.

Or the other time that someone talked Sam into investing into his marine telegraph. He convinced the gullible author that this was the coming thing. It cost Samuel another 25 thousand dollars.

Another inventor had a blueprint for a typesetting machine. Not only could the machine cut printing time to a fraction but there would be no more typesetting by hand. It was foolproof; no mistakes. But Samuel turned out to be the fool and lost 190 thousand dollars this time.

It really was too bad that Samuel Clemens could not seem to discern wise business advice. For this man who wrote many bestselling novels under the pen name of Mark Twain was beloved by so many. He was a very popular and humorous speaker, in great demand all over the world. His characters Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn remain popular to this day. But he lived a penniless life because he just couldn't discern wise counsel. Sam was a great talker, but he listened to the wrong people.

And it wasn't just that he said *yes* to those to whom he should have said *no*. Sam also missed out on some great opportunities because he couldn't spot good advice. Like the time that the timid little inventor asked Sam to loan him some money. This inventor offered Sam all the shares he wanted for only 500 dollars. *Certainly you mean 500 dollars a share*, Samuel responded surprised. *No, you can have all the shares you want for a total of 500 dollars*. This sounded too good to be true. And this inventor's idea sounded preposterous. So Sam who had invested 200 thousand dollars in single projects in the past, passed up this opportunity to give Alexander Graham Bell 500 dollars for all the shares that he wanted for this crazy idea about an invention called a telephone.

The longer I live, the more I realize how important it is to discern wise counsel from poor counsel. The world is full of advice. The world is filled with people who are always ready to point us in a certain direction. And every one of us is in need of counsel. There isn't one of us who is an expert in every area of life. We need to know the right paths to take in life. Yes, discerning wise from foolish counsel often determines how successful a person will be in life.

Nicodemus was a man who knew the value of wise counsel. He had heard of the reputation of a young Jewish rabbi named Jesus. He had listened to some of the teachings that Jesus had given. Nicodemus knew that

this man had some wise counsel about the spiritual direction that should be taking in life. So Nicodemus risked everything he had - his reputation and position in the community - to come to Jesus under the cloak of darkness so that he might get some advice from him.

We have been looking at various interviews that Jesus conducted during these past Sunday mornings. The next 2 that we are scheduled to look at are found in back to back chapters in the gospel of John and represent 2 of the clearest presentations of the gospel message in all of the Bible. If we truly want to know God's truth concerning the good news of salvation, we can find it in these interviews of Jesus.

On the surface, these interviews could not have been more different.

<u>Nicodemus – John 3</u>	<u>Samaritan – John 4</u>
*man	*woman
*Jew	*Samaritan
*Pharisee – highest moral standards	*adulterous – 5 husbands, low moral standards
*highly educated - teacher	*uneducated – water bearer
*most respected in society – name and rank given	*lowest of society – low self image
*came to Christ for advice	*Christ went to her as she was going about her work

And as we would expect from the differing circumstances of the interviews, the course that Jesus took was far different in each case - as we will see. But in these 2 interviews, we find God's truth clearly presented - both on an intellectual level to a well-educated man who was seeking God's truth, and on a very practical level to a working woman who needed to know God's truth and wasn't even aware of it at the time.

Now in the course of his interview with Nicodemus, Jesus uses 4 illustrations. It was a common practice for Jesus to go from what was known to what was unknown in teaching people truth. In the parables that Jesus gave, he often spoke of a sower planting seed or a fisherman casting out his net or a shepherd leading his sheep - pictures that would be clearly known to people. The Lord would then bridge from the common picture to abstract truth that was harder to understand. The sower planting the seed was like someone teaching God's word to somebody, the fisherman casting out his net was like someone witnessing of God's truth to his friend, the shepherd leading his sheep was like God giving direction to his people.

In order to give Nicodemus a clearer understanding in answering his questions, Jesus uses 4 illustrations that would lead Nicodemus from what he already knew and experienced to a clearer understanding of God's truth.

Let's look at these 4 illustrations that Jesus uses together this morning.

1. The first illustration is birth. READ 3:1-7

JN 3:1 Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council. ² He came to Jesus at night and said, "Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him."

³ In reply Jesus declared, "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again."

⁴ "How can a man be born when he is old?" Nicodemus asked. "Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born!"

⁵ Jesus answered, "I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. ⁶ Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. ⁷ You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.'"

*Now birth is something that everyone experiences. If we are alive, we have been born. And as we grow older we learn more about the birth process. So when Jesus spoke about being born, Nicodemus was right with him - on his wave length.

*But Jesus then begins to speak of being born again - or very literally being born from above. And this was confusing to Nicodemus because he was thinking only in terms of a physical birth at this time. What was this being born from above all about? He asks Jesus about it - how can a person be born twice physically. Well, Jesus makes it clear that he wasn't speaking of 2 physical births. A person had to be born of water (which was a Hebrew expression for physical birth) and of the spirit (which was this birth from above that he was talking about) in order to enter the kingdom of God. Obviously, a person who is going to enter the kingdom of God has to be born physically because only human beings enter the kingdom of God - a person has to have a physical birth in order to become a human being. But then a person also needs to be born of the spirit - he has to be born from above - he has to be born again in order to enter the kingdom of God.

*Now Nicodemus at this point didn't fully understand what Jesus was talking about - but he was beginning to get the concept. So Jesus moves on to a second illustration.

2. The second illustration was wind. READ John 3:8

⁸ 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."

Perhaps the evening wind was blowing outside as often occurs in the land of Israel during night. The days are very hot and dry. So many enjoy the evenings after a hard day's work, sitting in the cooling breezes. It was a very common sight to see families sitting out on the flat roofs of their houses, enjoying the breezes of the evening. Nicodemus and the Lord might well have been sitting on a roof together talking. Jesus uses this very common picture to illustrate how the spirit works in the life of a person.

We must never forget that Nicodemus was a Pharisee - well schooled and grounded in the Old Testament. It is likely that Ezekiel's prophecy came to his mind as Jesus began to speak of the spirit moving like the wind. In that famous prophecy, Ezekiel saw a valley of dry bones. But when he prophesied to the wind, the spirit came

and gave the bones life so that they got up and began to move about.

So it is in the deadness of the human heart. Every person is born physically in a spiritually dead state. The Spirit of God must move over those dry bones and breathe spiritual life into them. And the Spirit of God works in a different way with every person. Some are lead to new life in revival meetings as they walk down an aisle. Others are lead to new life all by themselves as they read the Bible. Still others are lead to new life through the testimony of a friend. Others might read a tract. But whatever the method, a spiritual birth from above can only come as a result of the Holy Spirit working in a person's heart.

3. The third illustration is a serpent on a pole - an obvious reference to an Old Testament story that Nicodemus would be very familiar with. READ John 3:14-16

¹⁴ Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, ¹⁵ that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.

¹⁶ "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

Now we won't take time to read this story from Numbers 21 this morning. God had just given to the Israelites a great deliverance from the King of Arad. This Canaanite ruler had attacked some of the Israelites as they were travelling across the wilderness causing hardship and heartache. So the Israelites had made a vow to the Lord if He would deliver this King into their hands. And God honored this vow and gave the Israelites a great military victory.

It was right after this great victory that the Israelites began to complain against the Lord. *The people grew impatient in the way; they spoke against God and against Moses, and said, why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the desert? There is no bread! There is no water! and we detest this miserable food! 21:5*

Now remember, every morning God was supplying manna to them. But instead of appreciating God's provision and protection, they were ungrateful and constantly grumbling against Him.

So God allowed venomous snakes to come into the camp. People bit by these snakes would quickly die. It didn't take long for the people to put 2 and 2 together - and they ran up to Moses and plead for mercy from God. *Pray that the Lord will take away these snakes from us. 21:7* Moses did pray to the Lord, and he gave to him the direction of making a snake out of bronze and putting it up on a pole. Everyone who would then look at the snake would be healed from their snake bite. This must have seemed like a strange directive from God. People were dying. Something needed to be done fast. It would take time to form a bronze snake. A hot fire would have to be made in the forge to heat the metal. Craftsmen would have the mold and design the snake. The metal would have to cool. We know that they did a beautiful job of making the snake because the Israelites would keep it long after this event - in fact, by the time of the Kings, they were worshiping it as an idol. But it would take a lot of time to make this snake. It must have been a strange order to them.

But God had a purpose in His directive. He was making a picture for Nicodemus and others to learn

from. Just as the snake would be hung upon that pole, so the Messiah would be hung upon a cross. And just as those who looked to the snake would be healed from their physical wounds, so those who look to the Savior on the cross would be healed from their spiritual wounds. And, sadly, just as the Israelites would eventually end up worshipping that bronze snake, so many today hang a bronze cross in their homes like an idol, like a good luck charm. And this reveals the perversity of the human heart. But God didn't give the Israelites the bronze snake to be worshiped - he rather gave it to them as a Savior to their problem. So Jesus didn't hang upon the cross so that we could worship the instrument of his death - he rather gave himself as our Savior. So that all who believe upon Him and look to Him in faith might be saved from their sins and born again into the family of God.

4. And this brings us to the fourth and final illustration that Jesus used with Nicodemus - light and darkness. READ John 3:19-21

¹⁹This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. ²⁰Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. ²¹But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God."

The summer between my graduation from college and my beginning of Seminary, I took a position along with a friend at a day camp in the heart of downtown Philadelphia. We lived in the basement of an old gym at night on 2 cots - and basically opened the doors to the inner city kids of the area and tried our best to minister to them during the day. This old gym was infested with bugs. And I'll never forget one of the games that we used to play at night in that dark, damp gym basement. We would wait for a while until the darkness had really set in after turning off the lights, and then we would suddenly turn on the lights and see how many cock roaches we could step on as they scooted across the floor. I learned something about the nature of cock roaches that summer. Cock roaches love darkness. During the day, they would hide in the dark cracks of the basement floors and drains. They would only come out at night because they could come out under the cloak of darkness. If a light were turned on, they would scurry back to the security of their darkness - because they hated light and loved darkness.

Now it is difficult for us to compare ourselves in our natural spiritual state to cock roaches - but there is an apt analogy. Jesus came into the world as God's light. He came bringing God's truth. But when he gave forth God's truth, many would scurry back into the security of their darkness, because they loved their spiritual darkness more than God's light. They craved their sinful practices more than God's deliverance. So it is today that when the gospel is proclaimed, many reject it wanting to live in their darkness more than in God's light. In fact, we all would choose darkness over light if it were not for the Spirit of God who does His work of grace in our hearts.

This must have been a hard way for Nicodemus to end his interview with Jesus. Nicodemus was an intelligent man. He knew exactly what Christ was saying. And it is very likely that Nicodemus felt somewhat

offended when he left this interview with Christ. Here he had come to Jesus under the cloak of darkness to hide himself so that his fellow Pharisees wouldn't see him consorting with the enemy. Jesus had given to him a clear presentation of God's truth using 4 common illustrations so that Nicodemus could understand. And then Christ had concluded by accusing Nicodemus of wanting to live in the darkness because his deeds were evil. Didn't Jesus know he was a Pharisee - that his standards of righteousness and morality were the highest of all? Yes, Nicodemus very likely left Jesus that night a bit offended. But in his heart, he knew Jesus was right. He was living in spiritual darkness.

I'm glad the story of Nicodemus does not end with this account in John 3. For we have 2 other brief snapshots of Nicodemus that indicate that he eventually did believe in Jesus Christ as the Messiah, that he did look to the Savior and was born from above into the Kingdom of God. And both of these other snapshots are given to us by John in his gospel.

In John 7, we find the Sanhedrin discussing Jesus. And John tells us that Nicodemus came to Christ's defense to the point where some of the other members accused him of secretly being one of Christ's followers. John 7:50 says, *Nicodemus, who had gone to Jesus earlier and who was one of their own number, asked, Does our law condemn anyone without first hearing him to find out what he is doing?* They didn't know that Nicodemus had gone to Jesus privately - that he was a man of integrity and honesty. But as yet, Nicodemus was still a Pharisee and a member of the Sanhedrin.

But there is one last snapshot. This is found near the end of the book in John 19. The ruling council had condemned Jesus to death. The unruly crowds had demanded that he be crucified to Pilate. The Roman Governor had relented, and now Jesus was dead, crucified to the cross. It must have finally made sense to Nicodemus then. That picture of the snake on the pole finally made sense. For the son of man had been lifted up upon that pole. And now Nicodemus knew that all who looked in faith to him would be born again into the family of God. So John records that Nicodemus along with Joseph of Arimathea finally stepped out of the shadows of darkness and came to Pilate requesting the body of the Lord Jesus Christ so that they might identify with Him and give Him a proper burial. Nicodemus finally stepped out of the darkness into the light.