

"Lesser Known People of the New Testament: Nicodemus"

I am beginning a new series of messages entitled "Lesser Known People of the New Testament." In the coming weeks we'll be looking at some men and women that are part of the Biblical story, but not household names, even for Christians. We'll see how their lives can inspire us and instruct us today, even though they are often overlooked as we read the Scriptures. We begin today with Nicodemus. Nicodemus is mentioned only in the Gospel of John, 3 times.

We first meet him in John, chapter 3. "Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, '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'" (John 3:1-2). We learn from this that Nicodemus was a *Pharisee*. This indicates that he was devoted to keeping every detail of the Jewish law. The "Law" was the first 5 books of our Old Testament. Over time, the Jews added *more specific rules* to apply God's commands to every situation in life. As a Pharisee, Nicodemus devoted himself to applying these rules and laws to every decision he made.

He was also a *leader (or ruler) of the Jews*. This means that he was a member of the Sanhedrin, an elite group of 71 scholarly leaders. They were like the "Supreme Court" of the Jews. For example, they supervised certain holy days and religious rituals, tried anyone accused of being a false prophet, and had political clout.

So this scholarly, super religious man *comes to Jesus at night* (John 3:2). Why at night? Perhaps because that's when he could see Jesus in private, away from the crowds. Rabbis said the best time to study the law was at night, when one was undisturbed. Maybe he came at night because of his timidity. Religious leaders did not like Jesus. They were suspicious of Him. Maybe he didn't want to risk being seen with this renegade rabbi, this carpenter turned teacher-preacher!

Nicodemus says to Jesus, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God" (verse 2). Notice, he believed in God, and believed Jesus was sent from God. Yet Jesus stuns this super religious man by saying he has to be born again. "Jesus answered him, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.'" (John 3:3). Nicodemus questions Jesus: "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" (verse 4). Jesus answers that He is talking about a *spiritual* birth, not a *physical* birth. Nicodemus still doesn't get it. "How can these things be?" (verse 9). It's hard to grasp why Nicodemus didn't get it. Jews knew of the idea of a rebirth. When a person converted to Judaism, that person was regarded as being reborn.

Jesus responds again: "Are you the teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?" (verse 10). Notice Jesus says, "Are you *the teacher* of Israel?" – suggesting that Nicodemus was a teacher of some reputation and fame! Did Jesus see Nicodemus' spiritual blindness as a symbol of *Israel's* spiritual blindness?

Nicodemus couldn't grasp that he needed (and everyone needs) a spiritual rebirth if we are to enter God's kingdom. But there are a lot of people like that today. People *who don't come to*

church, but believe in God, live a fairly decent life, and assume being a "good person" is all that's needed to be acceptable to God. But also people *in our churches* who are religious, accept Christian teachings, and maybe even are leaders in their church, but haven't experienced a spiritual rebirth. When I was a youth at my home church we had a week of special evangelistic services. One of my Sunday School teachers went forward to the altar to accept Christ. I said something to him about it afterwards, and he just smiled and said he hadn't understood the need before.

The Bible says we have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. This evil in us separates us from God. There's an ugly ditch between us and our Creator. All our religion and good deeds can't bridge the chasm that our sin creates. But God has accomplished this through Christ – His death on the cross and resurrection from the dead. When we put our faith in Christ, not only does God forgive our sins, He also brings us back into a right relationship with Himself. We become a brand new person in Christ –it's like being born all over again.

The next time we meet Nicodemus is in John, chapter 7. By now Jesus is making fantastic claims about Himself and His special relationship with God. Many are beginning to believe He is the Messiah. But others are skeptical, even hostile, believing He is a *false prophet*, or guilty of *blasphemy* (making Himself equal with God). So the Pharisees and chief priests send temple police to arrest Jesus. But they come back without Him!

Let's pick up the story: "Finally the temple guards went back to the chief priests and the Pharisees, who asked them, 'Why didn't you bring him in?' 'No one ever spoke the way this man does,' the guards replied. 'You mean he has deceived you also?' the Pharisees retorted. 'Have any of the rulers or of the Pharisees believed in him? No! But this mob that knows nothing of the law—there is a curse on them'" (John 7:45-49). The religious leaders mock the temple guards - have you been suckered in too, like the ignorant crowd?

The story continues: "Nicodemus, who had gone to Jesus earlier and who was one of their own number, asked, 'Does our law condemn a man without first hearing him to find out what he has been doing?' They replied, 'Are you from Galilee, too? Look into it, and you will find that a prophet does not come out of Galilee' (John 7:50-52). Nicodemus is a voice of reason, restraint, fairness. However, the other religious leaders quickly cut him off. Sometimes religious people just aren't very nice!

Maybe Nicodemus thought of his private conversation with Jesus, and that kept him from rushing to judgment and wanting to condemn Jesus. Was it Jesus' incisive wisdom? Did Nicodemus sense that Jesus really cared about him? Isn't it true that sometimes we form opinions about people from afar, but once we meet them, get to know them a bit, our attitudes change?

The last time Nicodemus is mentioned in the Bible is in John, chapter 19, following the crucifixion of Jesus. "Later, Joseph of Arimathea asked Pilate for the body of Jesus. Now Joseph was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly because he feared the Jewish leaders. With Pilate's

permission, he came and took the body away. He was accompanied by Nicodemus, the man who earlier had visited Jesus at night. Nicodemus brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds. Taking Jesus' body, the two of them wrapped it, with the spices, in strips of linen. This was in accordance with Jewish burial customs. At the place where Jesus was crucified, there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb, in which no one had ever been laid. Because it was the Jewish day of Preparation and since the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there" (John 19:38-42).

Here we're introduced to Joseph of Arimathea. According to Matthew and Luke, Joseph also was a member of the Sanhedrin. He asks Pilate for permission to take the body of Jesus. John mentions that Joseph was a disciple of Jesus, "but secretly because he feared the Jewish leaders" (John 19:38). Nicodemus was with him when Joseph took Jesus' body from the cross. Maybe Nicodemus even helped lift the Lord's brutalized body off the cross. Together, they wrapped the body with cloths and carried the Lord to His resting place in the tomb. Jesus' body is also anointed with spices brought there by Nicodemus. *75 pounds worth of spices (could he even carry it without help?)*. As someone has said, 75 pounds is enough for the burial of a king!

So, that's what Scripture tells us about Nicodemus. We get some information about him, but it leaves a lot of blanks to fill in!

However, I think we can say with some certainty that Nicodemus is a poster boy for those of us on the edge of following Jesus - tentative, cautious in our discipleship. He was drawn to Jesus, interested, curious, but it doesn't seem like he was openly sold out for Christ – at least not yet.

Jesus made it clear that if we want to be one of His followers, it will take all we've got. We've got to be "all in". Jesus' call to discipleship is a radical kind of commitment – not just a mild brush with Jesus, or a casual interest in church or religion.

Check out some of His requirements if we're going to follow Him: Luke 14:25-27 says, "A large crowd was following Jesus. He turned around and said to them, 'If you want to be my disciple, you must hate everyone else by comparison – your father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters – yes, even your own life. Otherwise, you cannot be my disciple. And if you do not carry your own cross and follow me, you cannot be my disciple.'"

Luke 5:27-28 tells us: "After this, (Jesus) went out and saw a tax collector by the name of Levi sitting at his tax booth. 'Follow me,' Jesus said to him, and Levi got up, left everything and followed him."

This kind of all-out commitment Jesus required is also seen in these encounters Jesus had with some would-be followers: "As they were walking along the road, a man said to him, 'I will follow you wherever you go.' Jesus replied, 'Foxes have dens and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head.' He said to another man, 'Follow me.' But he replied, 'Lord, first let me go and bury my father.' Jesus said to him, 'Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and proclaim the kingdom of God.' Still another said, 'I will follow you, Lord; but first let me

go back and say goodbye to my family.' Jesus replied, 'No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God'" (Luke 9:57-62). We want to be a follower of Jesus? We've got to be "all-in"! *We can't really sense that with Nicodemus.*

Nicodemus is the model for some of us who are on the edge of following Jesus – tentative, half-committed. A lot of people fall into this category!

Some hesitate to commit ourselves totally to Christ because of doubt or skepticism. We've been turned off by people who say they're Christians...or the slick showmanship of TV preachers...or we have trouble believing certain things in the Bible. And so we're gun shy of going "all in" as a follower of Jesus. Maybe Nicodemus had doubts about Jesus too. After all, he didn't have 2,000 years of history to verify that Jesus was all He said He was.

Here's the thing: Jesus never said, "Understand everything, then follow Me." "Be totally free of any questions or doubts, then sign on to be a follower." If we have to wait until we understand everything about Him or no longer have any questions about some of the mysteries and enigmas of life, we'll never follow Him. Jesus simply says, "Trust Me. Follow Me. And then I'll lead you into the Truth."

Some of us are like Nicodemus – timid, cautious half-followers – because we say yes to Jesus but no to the church. We want to be Christians (even consider ourselves Christians), but don't want to be involved with the Church. But the New Testament is clear that you can't be a follower of Jesus in isolation, without being connected to the rest of the Body of Christ. "Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it" (1 Corinthians 12:27).

Many churches during COVID have begun online services. You can watch us on your smart phone, or computer, or iPad, or on your TV. That's great! But church leaders are concerned that this becomes our "church" and our Christian experience. It takes more effort to get up Sunday morning, get dressed, and drive to church. But part of our wholehearted commitment to Christ means being committed to our sisters and brothers in Christ, the Church, and involved in the Church's mission to the world.

We're thinking of ways we can be like Nicodemus...cautious, tentative, not yet an openly committed follower of Jesus. *There are some of us who truly believe in Jesus and want to be a disciple, but we let fear of what other people may think limit us in our commitment to the Lord.*

John says Joseph was a disciple, but a secret one, because he feared the Jewish leaders. *I wonder if that was the case with Nicodemus too.* Remember, Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus were both members of the Sanhedrin.

The night of Jesus' trial, one of His stops was when He was brought before the Sanhedrin. Was Nicodemus there that night? And if so, did he speak up to defend Jesus? (Luke tells us Joseph of Arimathea did not agree with any decision to condemn Jesus. Was that true of Nicodemus? It doesn't say). Maybe, like Joseph, he too feared those who were against Jesus.

What about you and me? If I say I'm a follower of Jesus, do I hesitate to let that be known because of fear? Who am I afraid of? Other family members who aren't saved? People at work? The neighbors around my house who may not be Christians?

It's easy to say we're Christians here in church, but what about when we're out and about with people who aren't church people, or may not be keen on Christians and the church. I worked one summer at Armstrong, and I'll always remember one afternoon in the locker room as the shift ended some of the workers ridiculing and mocking one of the men who mentioned that he was going to go to the Rawlinsville Campmeeting service that night. But this Christian man held his ground.

Jesus once said, "If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of them when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels" (Mark 8:38). It's easy to be a "secret disciple", isn't it? Even the most committed Christians at times find it difficult to buck the crowd, and be different, because we are following Jesus. But do we want to remain timid, fearful disciples forever? Does it fill us with pride and joy when we chicken out and are ashamed of Christ, instead of letting it be known what we believe and to whom we belong?

It's now late afternoon. Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus are hurrying to take Jesus' body, put it in a tomb and anoint it before sundown, when the Sabbath begins. These "secret disciples" seem to be coming out in the open! Perhaps Nicodemus is on his way to being born again! And the cowardice, the hesitation, the lurking in the dark hopefully will be a thing of the past!

How about you and me? Are you and I "all in"? Fully committed to this One we call Jesus – Savior, Master, Lord! Or are we "half-a-follower", nominal Christian?

To be an "all in" follower of Jesus means He is becoming the central Figure in our life. Each day we are saying, "Here I am, Lord, I give myself completely to You. I am no longer mine, but Yours. Do with me what You want. Lead me where You will. Let my life bring honor and glory to You." And when we do that, God will use us for good and for the furthering of His kingdom on earth. And that's where the deep down joy of the Lord is found.

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