

The Grace Question: Are You A Teacher...and Yet Do Not Understand?

John 3:1-21

it's nothing you do, Nicodemus, Jesus said. The Spirit does it -- it's all grace. That's the issue Jesus is questioning Nicodemus about in our scripture lesson today. "Are you the teacher of Israel, and do not know these things?"

It's a question relevant to us -- because it's the question of grace.

Let's look at Nicodemus for a moment. He was an important man, obviously a well-thought-of member of the Pharisees. The Gospel tells us that he came to see Jesus at night. He was a prudent man. He had a reputation to maintain. This was a questionable pursuit, because Jesus was a questionable personality, so he didn't want to go public with his interests.

That Nicodemus was a Pharisee is an important fact, especially when we are talking about what salvation is all about -- the meaning of grace. In many ways the Pharisees were the best people in the whole country. There were never more than 6,000 of them. They were known as a brotherhood. They entered into this brotherhood by taking a pledge in front of three witnesses, that they would spend all of their lives observing every detail of the scribal law. What exactly did that mean? The Law was the first five books of the Old Testament. To the Jews, the Law was the most sacred thing in the world. They believed the Law to be the perfect word of God. To add one word to it, or to take one word away from it, was a deadly sin....

"The name Pharisee means the separated one; and the Pharisees were those who had separated themselves from all ordinary life in order to keep every detail of the Law." It was this good man, who came to Jesus inquiring about salvation.

Jesus' words were shocking to Nicodemus: "You must be born again." Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus raises the grace question: "What is life all about? How can one be saved? What is at the heart of Christianity?" Despite the witness of scripture and our experience, we continue to question grace. Maybe it has something to do with our sinful nature. It certainly has a lot to do with our pride and perverted self-sufficiency. So, let's think about it. "You must be born again" is the phrase that shocked Nicodemus.

That term is normally used to distinguish between people who have had some sort of dramatic experience that confirmed for them their Christian faith. It's used to separate people. To separate those who may have grown into the Christian life from those who may have had a more dramatic, explicit kind of conversion experience. But the distinction is unfortunate. How we come into the Christian faith is not the issue -- that we come into the faith, and that we know we are the followers of Christ is the issue.

Nicodemus' problem was not whether he desired to change or not, that's the reason he came to Jesus. He wanted to know how he could receive eternal life. It was not desirability, but possibility, that was the question when he asked, "But how can it be, how can one be born again?" The truth is Nicodemus would have been pleased if Jesus had given him a list of things to do, ways to act, laws to keep. That's what he was about. Nicodemus didn't understand grace. So, he asked, "How can it happen?" And Jesus responded, "The wind blows where it wills, and you can't see it, but you feel it and you see the sign of it, so is the person who is born of the Spirit."

The new birth is not something that we orchestrate. It has nothing to do with rules or commandments, or worthiness, or works. It comes like a birth that we have no control over; like water that cleanses us, like the wind that refreshes us, that's felt but not seen.

Jesus is saying, it's grace and that's what we all have a problem with. The idea of rebirth, or being born again, runs throughout the New Testament.

Sometimes -- the idea is spoken of as a death followed by a resurrection or re-creation. That's some of Paul's favorite language -- he speaks of the Christian dying with Christ and rising to new life (Romans 6: 1-11).

In II Corinthians 5: 17 Paul says, "If any person is in Christ, they are a new creation, the old has passed away; behold, the new is come." So, all through the New Testament, the notion of rebirth, re-creation occurs.

But Nicodemus couldn't understand that. Jesus asked him, "Are you a teacher and don't understand?" The question is, do we understand?

"Dan Wakefield, the writer, understands. He went through a "season in hell", as he puts it, when he was destroying his life with drugs, depression, and alcohol. He finally called to God for help, and this is the way he tells it: God answered me in the cold, clear water that I drank out of a metal cup I found in a friend's kitchen. And in the fragment of a psalm I had learned as a boy, "Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of

death, I will fear no evil, for Thou art with me, Thy rod and thy staff they comfort me." I prayed those words continually as an incantation against the hell raging in me."

God rescued Dan Wakefield. He found his way back to sanity, health, and a renewed relationship with God that brought him joy and an exciting new life, it was all grace. How it happens isn't important. That it happens is the most important thing in the world. To know that Christ has given us new life...that our salvation is not our doing, but God's grace.

Isn't it true that the most important things are ours because of grace? Life is grace. It is a gift.

A little girl was angry with her younger brother. She pushed him down, called him a few names and then spit on him. Her mother walked into the room just as all of this took place. The mother said, "Honey, that was surely not very nice. I think the devil made you do that."

The girl replied, "The devil may have made me push him down, and the devil may have made me call him names; but I thought of the spitting' all by myself."

I like the honesty of it. And we need to be honest. We live as though we deserve life, as if we had something to do with getting it and keeping it. But think about it. What did you do to receive life? What are you doing to deserve life? Life is grace. It's a gift.

Love is grace. Can we think for a moment that we deserve the love that we receive? Is there any possible way we could earn love, the love of our parents, the love of our spouse? Love is a matter of grace. It's always a gift.

The most important things that are ours are ours because of grace. The whole of the Christian life is grace.

That's what Jesus was telling Nicodemus. You must be born again. It's not something you do; it's something God does, and God does it through the Spirit. The wind blows where it wills; you see the sign of it and you feel it, but you don't know from where it comes or where it goes. Rev. William Willimon said, "We are so preoccupied with the need to make a decision for Christ, that we forget that in Christ God has once and for all made a decision for us! We can do little to add or to improve upon God's acceptance of us in Christ, except to say "Yes!" to it and enjoy it."