

“Night School”

John 3:1-12

Preached by

Dr. Robert F. Browning, Pastor

First Baptist Church

Frankfort, Kentucky

June 10, 2012

Did you ever go to school at night? It is not that uncommon anymore, especially for those pursuing graduate degrees or preparing for a second career. I never was a fan of night school, but that’s understandable. I am a morning person and do my best work in the early hours of the day. My hat’s off to those who teach or go to school at night. Many of you put in some very long days and have to concentrate when I know you are tired.

I wonder if Jesus was tired the night Nicodemus knocked on his door. If he was, he probably never let Nicodemus know it. The opportunity to talk to a Pharisee and distinguished member of the Sanhedrin did not come every day, and he was not about to let it slip away.

John is the only writer to share this story. I am certainly glad he did, though, because there are few stories in scripture that teach us more about faith and life than this one. As a matter of fact, it is a model for faith development or spiritual formation.

This is one of the most familiar stories in scripture and is widely known because of a phrase Nicodemus used, “born again.” This concept has been the focus of many sermons, Bible studies and political campaigns. I find this interesting because, in all likelihood, Jesus told Nicodemus he needed to be “born from above,” yet Nicodemus interpreted what Jesus said as “being born again.” This discrepancy led to Nicodemus’ confusion and Jesus’ clarifying comments. I’ll get into this later, but let me give you an overview of the entire story.

Nicodemus, a Pharisee and member of the Jewish ruling council, the Sanhedrin, visited Jesus one night for the purpose of engaging him in a conversation. This was not unusual because rabbis often talked at night in the privacy of homes so they would not be distracted or interrupted.

I know much has been made of the fact that Nicodemus went to see Jesus at night, and some have wondered if he did so out of fear of being seen by his colleagues. While we can never know for sure what his motives were, I am not inclined to think this was the reason. In John’s gospel, Jesus is seen often with the Pharisees, and he openly dined with them on at least three occasions. John does not portray the Pharisees as adversaries of Jesus like the writers of the synoptic gospels. Instead, he treats them more sympathetically. It appears that Nicodemus came to Jesus after a day’s work as an inquirer with an open mind to have an in-depth conversation about life and faith.

It did not take long for Jesus to wade into deep water. He told Nicodemus that he could not see nor participate in the kingdom of God unless he was born from above. Nicodemus was terribly confused, thinking Jesus had said he must be born again from his mother's womb and asked how this was possible.

"Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.' " John 3:5-7.

"How can this be?" Nicodemus asked. "You are Israel's teacher, and you do not understand these things?" Jesus asked. "I tell you the truth, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony. I have spoken to you of earthly things, and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things?" John 3:9-12.

What lessons can we glean from this intriguing dialogue between Jesus and Nicodemus? Let me share a few for you to consider.

A healthy faith requires a personal encounter with God. As a Torah-observing Pharisee, Nicodemus believed he had a clear vision of the Kingdom of God and participated in it. By virtue of his Jewish heritage, he was uniquely related to God. Because of his leadership role on the Sanhedrin, he played a key role in ushering in the Kingdom of God.

Jesus challenged Nicodemus' assumptions when he told him that he, like everyone else, needed to have a personal encounter with God grounded in humility and a need for God's grace. Reflecting the heart of God would begin by opening his own heart to God.

The same is true for us. A vital relationship with God begins when we open our hearts to God as Jesus did and instructed Nicodemus to do.

A healthy religion provides equal access to God for all people. Religion is the expression of one's faith through worship and service. At no time should the practice of one's faith interfere with a person's access to God.

According to New Testament scholar, Dr. Alan Culpepper, one lesson Jesus wanted Nicodemus to take away from their conversation that night was that physical birth does not determine how close a person can get to God. God does not play favorites.

In that culture, birth decided how close you could get to God. The temple was even designed to keep people away from God, or at least at a proper distance. If you were a Jew, you could get closer to the Holy of Holies than a Gentile. If you were a male you could get closer than a female. If you were a Pharisee or priest, you could get closer. Nicodemus bought into this hierarchical mindset and probably never questioned it, until Jesus came along.

Jesus cut down their system and in essence said, "You don't have to stay in your place. You can be born from above and remove all those barriers."

This idea was radical and revolutionary. It threatened everyone who benefited from this position of power and control. No wonder Nicodemus was confused and asked questions. His mind was being stretched beyond his wildest imagination. To think that a commoner, a gentile or a woman could be as close to God as a Torah-observing Pharisee or a member of the Sanhedrin was inconceivable. It was true, nevertheless, and Nicodemus was the first of his peers to wrestle with the magnitude and results of God's immeasurable grace.

Does it encourage and inspire you to know that you can be as close to God as you want to be? No one can hold you back unless you let them.

Perhaps you have lived under the impression that others are more worthy of God's mercy. You have needed a close relationship with God but felt He was not accessible or this level of faith was for others. The words of Jesus to Nicodemus should dispel that myth. You can be born again, or from above, and enter into a new and fulfilling relationship with Him.

Furthermore, as you grow closer to Him and seek His will, each revelation will lead to new understandings and the birth of new ideas, which will result in changes in your attitude, relationships, values, priorities, beliefs, world view and behavior. It will be like being born again and again and again.

How many "aha" moments have I had in my lifetime? There are too many to count, but I have frequently said to myself, "Ah, now I understand what has been hidden so long."

In addition, a healthy spiritual life requires taking questions seriously. I truly believe faith begins with questions, even as a child. The dialogue between Nicodemus and Jesus strongly indicates this.

In reply to Jesus' assertion that one must be born from above to see the Kingdom of God, Nicodemus asked, "How can a man be born when he is old? Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born!"

When Jesus told Nicodemus that no one can enter the Kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit, Nicodemus asked, "How can this be?"

Even Jesus was puzzled because of Nicodemus' lack of understanding and asked, "You are Israel's teacher and do not understand these things?"

There is no shortage of questions in this narrative, which I see as beneficial to faith development. Questions can lead to deeper levels of understanding.

Do you ask a lot of questions, especially concerning religious matters? If you do, you are in good company, and I think on the right track.

My friend and teacher, Dr. Colin Harris writes, "Faithfulness has more to do with the questions we ask than answers we memorize."

The best teachers I had were the ones who were not afraid of questions. They valued curiosity, their own and mine. I always appreciated professors that began the semester by saying, "In this class, there are no dumb or silly questions." I believe this is the sign of a good teacher, especially when leading a discussion on spiritual matters.

For you see, faith involves more than we know. Life is bigger than we are, and so is God. Our quest to understand both should make us insatiably curious.

I know we look to our faith for answers and quite often find them. This is comforting and reassuring. However, the Christian faith also has a leavening influence and is meant to disturb and

disrupt. An authentic faith will lead to questions which result in a greater understanding of God, life and self. Ask Nicodemus.

Furthermore, these questions should also lead us to mentors who can help us sort through them as we develop our faith. Wasn't this the role that Jesus played in Nicodemus' life?

Do you think this was the last conversation Nicodemus had with Jesus? I don't think so. As a matter of fact, I would be willing to say they had many conversations after this one, which led Nicodemus to help Joseph of Arimathea bury the body of Jesus after the crucifixion. I believe Nicodemus and Jesus became friends and had a mutual respect for one another.

Who is your spiritual mentor? To whom do you turn when you have questions or struggle with your faith? Who has helped you develop a deeper understanding of faith?

Are you passing along to others what you have learned? Do you need to be a mentor for someone else? I cannot think of a better investment of your time. Ask Nicodemus and Jesus.