

Over the next four weeks, we're going to have a series of lengthy but spiritually rich Gospel lessons from John.

Over the next 4 Sundays we'll see a number of people who will have individual encounters Jesus. And they will respond to Jesus. And they will respond to Jesus in very different ways.

These people mirror us in many ways. The ways they approach Jesus, the ways they interact with Jesus reflect common spiritual patterns. Looking at them and at their reactions to Jesus can strengthen our own spiritual journeys.

Today, we begin with Jn ch3. We meet the most powerful of the people we will encounter: Nicodemus. And because his conversation with Jesus ends up with the famous statement of John 3:16, it's easy to overlook the ways that Nicodemus seeks to interact with Jesus. So I'll bracket the theology of John 3:16 off for another sermon some other time. Instead, I want to focus on the earlier parts of the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus.

In the first verse of ch3, we're told that Nicodemus is a leader of the Jews. He's a member the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling council, the ones who will eventually put Jesus on trial. This means Nicodemus is a man of VERY high status. In fact, his status is so high that he would be expected to summon Jesus to meet him.

But in Nicodemus doesn't do that. He comes to Jesus. But John adds an interesting detail. He comes to Jesus "by night."

John loves symbolism. Anytime in John that you see a reference to night, you should also think "in the dark." Spiritually in the dark. Nicodemus is in the dark, and he's seeking out Jesus, the light of the world.

But also, by coming at night, Nicodemus is sneaking around a bit. He won't have to worry about being seen. He won't risk his reputation with the rest of the ruling council. He'll make a stealth visit to Jesus so that no one will know.

That's Challenge #1 to us. How public are we about following Jesus? What are we willing to risk in order to follow Jesus? Sure the stakes are a bit different. We don't have to sneak into church in the middle of the night. We can park our cars outside and walk right in.

But how public are we in our daily lives? Are we willing to talk about our faith? Does what we believe carry over into the way we live? Does it make any difference in the way we act at school? At work? With our friends?

Because, let's face, Christianity is not as popular in our culture as it once was. A lot of this is due to the way we Christians have behaved in the world. We're not always the best at showing the love of Jesus to all whom we encounter.

So when one of our friends on Facebook asks us if we believe in God, what do we say? Do we deny it or make light of it? Or do we own it. "Yes I do believe in God. Guilty as charged."

Nicodemus sneaks over in the dark to see Jesus. Do we keep our faith in a little dark corner of ourselves? Or do we live it out publicly in the world? That's an important challenge to us.

We are also challenged by the way Nicodemus addresses Jesus. He arrives under cover of darkness. Then he opens his mouth. And the first three things he says tell us volumes about the way he's thinking. I'll begin with the first two.

First he says, "Rabbi." Okay. That seems a nice thing for him to say. Calling Jesus by the honorific title, "Teacher." The only problem is, Nicodemus would also carry that title. Nicodemus is also, "Rabbi." So he's not paying Jesus any great honor. He's putting Jesus at the same level as himself.

I sometimes do that with other priests. I'll start a phone conversation by saying, "Hello Father." And I'll hear back something like, "How are you Father?"

Calling each other by the same title is a way of putting us on the same level. We're saying, "I'm acknowledging that you and I both part of the same profession." It's an equalizer.

So Nicodemus's first word, 'Rabbi,' says, "Let's talk, Rabbi to Rabbi, teacher to teacher. Let's have nice little professional discussion as equals."

And the second thing Nicodemus also speaks volumes. He says, "We know..." What a telling statement: "We know." In other words, "I'm going to lay out my knowledge. I'm going to lay out a nice little thesis. And then we can debate it. And we'll have a nice little intellectual, professional discussion, rabbi to rabbi, teacher to teacher."

And that's Challenge #2 for us. How do we come before God? What's our attitude toward Jesus? Do we come before him thinking that we're equal? Do we swagger into his presence and say, let's have a nice little discussion? Do we come before God with all the answers? Do our prayers turn into nothing more than offering God advice about the way things should be?

Or do we acknowledge our true relationship? Do we say, "You're in charge of the universe, and I'm not"? Do we admit we don't have all the answers? Do we ask Jesus to be the Lord of our lives? Challenge #2.

Nicodemus begins the conversation by saying, "Rabbi," and "we know..." What does he know? Or what does he think he knows?

It's this: "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God." At one level it's not too bad of a statement. It gives some acknowledgement that Jesus is in God's

service. But on the other hand, it lumps Jesus in with a whole host of other human teachers in God's service. Again, it lumps Jesus in with Nicodemus himself. It's an equalizing statement.

But it completely misses who Jesus is. John has already told us. Jesus is not just a human being who serves God. He is God. He is the Word made flesh.¹ He is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart,² who makes God knowable and visible.

So Nicodemus is not sitting across from a fellow teacher, a fellow man of God, a fellow servant of God. Nicodemus is sitting across from God himself. God incarnate. God with us in Jesus.

So Nicodemus starts by addressing Jesus as an equal, and wants to have a nice discussion. But Jesus isn't going to play that game.

In fact, Jesus blows his mind.

Jesus makes a couple of statements that show that he's not going to engage in a nice little sterile debate. Instead he's going to push the envelope.

Jesus talks about being born again, or being born from above. He also talks about the Holy Spirit being like the wind, blowing where it wants to blow.

'Nicodemus, you think you've got God figured out? You think you've got God pigeon-holed into neat little categories? Well, think again. God is like the wind. You might feel the wind, but don't know where the wind comes from or where it goes. You can't control it.

It's so overwhelming to Nicodemus. All he can ask is, "How" and "How?" "How can anyone be born after having grown old?"³ And "How can these things be?"⁴ Nicodemus' envelope is really being pushed here.

Nicodemus thinks he's got God all figured out. He figures that, as a teacher in Israel, he's got the inside track. And he has to grapple with the fact that that might not be the case.

Nicodemus has been born well. He has a comfortable life. He is successful, economically and religiously.

But Jesus wants him to be born in a different way. Jesus isn't asking for a small tweak. Jesus is not asking Nicodemus to upgrade from version 1.0 to version 1.1, or even from version 1.0 to 2.0. Jesus is asking him to start again. To change to Christ.0. To go back to square 1. To ask Nicodemus to start over again and learn, really learn who God is, and who Nicodemus is in relationship to God: a child, an infant. Not someone with all the answers. But someone who needs to be taught.

¹ Jn 1:14

² Jn 1:18

³ Jn 3:4

⁴ Jn 3:9

Nicodemus is probably wanting a small spiritual bump. Jesus wants him to make a spiritual change as radical as being born again. This is not about self-help to make a slight improvement. This is about surrender, and beginning anew.

Make a deep change, Jesus is saying. Be reborn as my disciple, in my image. Let me raise you right. Let me teach you this time around.

This is spiritual challenge #3. And it's huge.

God's Spirit blows where it chooses. You can't control it. In fact, it may disturb things in your comfortable life. You might need to reboot, to be born anew. You might need to die to your old self, and start fresh asking Jesus to take you back to square 1, to take you through your first baby steps, to put you on a new and different path.

You can't be complacent when it comes to God. Don't think you have a lock on God. You probably need a fresh spiritual breeze to blow through you. You probably need God to blow away everything that keeps you from being who he created you to be. Be renewed. Be rededicated. Be reborn. And be reborn trusting in God's love. God loved the universe so much that he sent his son. Believe in Jesus. Follow his path. Challenge #3.

So the question remains, after meeting with Jesus, did Nicodemus change? Or was it business as usual after this night? We get two more clues from John.

The first is in John ch7. The council is discussing the thorny problem of Jesus. And Nicodemus speaks up. He's still hiding a little bit. He's not very public about specifically defending Jesus. It's rather timid, like a turtle slowly sticking his head out of his shell. But he does do something. He takes a baby step. He asks basically, 'Shouldn't we at least hear from Jesus before we make up our minds about him?' He gets shot down quickly and he retreats. Nevertheless, he shows that he is willing to go a few inches out on the limb for Jesus. It's a baby step. Perhaps it's indicative of Nicodemus being reborn and trying to begin to grow up in a new way.

But we also hear about Nicodemus again in Jn ch19. And this time Nicodemus is doing more than just taking a baby step. After the crucifixion, Nicodemus, along with another council member, Joseph of Arimathea, are the ones who bury Jesus. This is something VERY public. They have to get special permission from Pontius Pilate. They have to take Jesus down from the cross in a public execution area. And they have to bury him in broad daylight.

We don't know why Nicodemus does this. But it does show us that Nicodemus has moved out of his comfort zone. His encounter with Jesus has changed the way he lives.

We face the same challenges as Nicodemus.

1. Living out our faith in a public way.
2. Coming before God with the right perspective.
3. Opening ourselves up to the possibility of growth and change.

Nicodemus changed after his encounter with Jesus. May you let Jesus change your life as well.

Lord Jesus, send your cleansing wind through our lives. Help us be open to the changes and growth you bring. And let us live boldly as your people in this world.