

JESUS' PRINCIPLES IN WITNESSING

PLEASE do not read these comments until you have read the Scripture for this lesson. First let the Holy Spirit teach you directly from His Word.

Summary and Historical Background

The Gospel of John presents a unique feature of Jesus Christ's ministry, that is, private interviews with individuals or small groups of people. The meeting He had with Nicodemus, and the conversation He had with the Samaritan woman at the well, are two of the most enlightening and profound examples of witnessing in the Bible. This lesson will examine the principles Jesus used in His meeting with Nicodemus. They will be useful in witnessing to sinners that are religious.

Nicodemus came to Jesus at night, maybe for the purpose of privacy to escape the interference of the crowds, to speak to Jesus by himself. Their conversation proceeded on three levels: face-to-face, mind-to-mind, and heart-to-heart. Nicodemus, the teacher (3:10 - "master") met face-to-face with Jesus, the teacher (3:2 - "Rabbi"), and he learned from Jesus that a new birth must occur before one can enter the Kingdom of God (3:1-3). Then, mind-to mind (3:4-8), Nicodemus asked, "How can this be?" and he received the answer that this is not physical birth, but spiritual. God is spirit and sinners must be born spiritually by an operation of the Holy Spirit. Finally, heart-to-heart (3:9-21), Nicodemus asked in effect, "What is the process by which these things occur?" The answer from Jesus was that in loving the world of sinners (3:16), God sent His Son to be lifted upon the cross to die for them (3:14) so that those who believe in His Son have eternal life (3:15). Then they can come to the light to show that their salvation is done by the work of God (3:21). Simply, salvation is by faith in the work of God through Jesus Christ.

I. The Interview with Nicodemus — 3:1-21

A. The Circumstances Preceding this Interview — 3:1-2

3:1 — "A man" - Many men believed on Jesus, but the belief of most of them was not strong and sincere (cf. 2:23-25). However, one of these men, who saw Jesus' miracles, was more deeply impressed with Jesus than the rest. He was Nicodemus. John the Baptist's testimony and Jesus' miracles, as well as His cleansing of the temple, forced him to personally investigate Jesus' Messianic claim.

"Pharisees" — Nicodemus was a member of a very strict religious group among the Jewish people. They were quite popular with the people, but had lost favor with God because they replaced the Word of God with their own traditions.

"A ruler" — Nicodemus was a member of the Sanhedrin, the ruling body in the Jewish community, composed of seventy men.

3:2 — "Came to Jesus by night" - This does not necessarily indicate timidity on the part of Nicodemus, but simply his desire to speak to Jesus alone without interruptions. He wanted to interview Jesus personally and meditate on His answers.

"Rabbi" — Nicodemus respectfully addressed Jesus as "Teacher." He knew that Jesus was "a teacher come from God" because of His miracles, but he did not know that he was speaking to the eternal Son of God. As impressive as miracles are, they do not create faith (Jn 12:37; Acts 4:15-17); they only confirm faith. Faith comes by receiving God's Word (Rom 10:17). Jesus would give Nicodemus new truths from the Scriptures that would eventually produce in him saving faith.

"God be with Him" — Peter said the same thing about Jesus when he preached to Cornelius' household (Acts 10:38).

B. The Conversation about the New Birth — 3:3-9

3:3 — Jesus told Nicodemus that he needed to be "born again" to see the Kingdom of God. The term, "born again," also means "born from above." Both meanings are true for seeing the Kingdom of God. Nicodemus took the term to mean "born again," which captured his attention. This is the first principle that Jesus used in witnessing to Nicodemus. Getting the person's attention is the first task of a teacher.

"Verily, verily" — These words along with "cannot see" (v. 3) "except" and "cannot enter" (v.5) showed the necessity of being born again. These words and the repetition of a spiritual birth (3:3, 5-8) attracted and held Nicodemus' interest, which is the second principle Jesus used. A teacher that does not hold the interest of a student cannot teach that person. This is absolutely true in witnessing.

3:4 — Nicodemus did not understand how he could be born again when he was old. He thought Jesus was saying that he needed to be born of his mother a second time. Such a thing would produce the same sinful results.

3:5-6 — Jesus quickly directed Nicodemus to the work of the Holy Spirit to produce the new birth. This is the third principle Jesus used in witnessing to him. He also repeats this truth in v. 8. The new birth cannot be produced by any other means than by the Spirit. It is a supernatural birth. The spiritual birth produces a holy life while the physical birth produces a sinful life. The two births are totally different.

"Water" — Water can refer to the Word of God (Eph 5:26), which is necessary for being regenerated (Jam 1:18; 1 Peter 1:23). Or, it can refer to the Holy Spirit (cf. Jn 4:10, 13; 7:38, 39). Those who believe "water" refers to the Word of God would read it as follows: "Except a man be born of the Word of God and the Spirit." Those who believe "water" refers to the Spirit understand that "and" between "water and of the Spirit" can also be translated "even," which would read as follows: "Except a man be born of water, even the Spirit." This would identify "water" as the Spirit. Since John recorded three instances where Jesus spoke of "water" and he interpreted Jesus teaching on "living water" as a reference to the Spirit - 7:38, 39, it seems best to think of "water" in John 3:5 as a symbol of the Holy Spirit.

"Spirit" — Regeneration is the work of the Holy Spirit. As the flesh can only bring forth physical children, only the Holy Spirit can bring forth spiritual children.

3:7 — "Must" - The new birth is mandatory. This is the first "must" of the chapter - cf. 3:14, 30; also 4:4.

3:8 — The Spirit's work is efficacious. Though no one can actually see the Holy Spirit as He works, the results He produces in the lives of sinners can be seen — cf. 2 Cor 5:17.

3:9 — Nicodemus expressed his ignorance and unbelief regarding the new birth.

C. The Rebuke by Jesus — 3:10-13

3:10-11 — "A master" - The Greek article is present and should be translated, "the master," or better yet, "the teacher." Evidently Nicodemus was the most popular teacher of Jewish religion in Jerusalem. Since he was so highly recognized, Jesus was surprised that he was so ignorant of the Spirit's ministry in regenerating a sinner. This was clearly taught in the Old Testament (Ezk 36: 25-27 and Isa 44:3) so Jesus rebuked him for his ignorance of such an important subject. The fourth principle Jesus used in witnessing to Nicodemus was to reprove his ignorance of spiritual truth that he should have known, especially when he questioned the truth that was given to him. In harmony with Jesus' words in 3:5, these verses in Ezekiel and Isaiah show a beautiful connection between water and the Spirit in regenerating a soul.

3:12-13 — "Earthly things . . . heavenly things" — If Nicodemus did not understand the simple spiritual truths about receiving salvation, which Jesus illustrated by earthly analogies, how could he understand and believe the more complex spiritual truths about the overall plan of salvation and the work of Jesus Christ? These truths could only be understood by the Spirit's enlightenment (1 Cor 2:14).

D. The Necessity of Christ's Death — 3:14-15

3:14 — "Must" - This is the second use of "must" in this chapter. Even as it was necessary for Moses to lift up the brass serpent on a pole in the wilderness so that the sick could look up at it and be healed (Num 21:8, 9), so must Christ be lifted upon the cross so that sinners could look to Him to be healed from the curse of sin. Jesus clearly presented Himself to Nicodemus as his personal Savior. This is the fifth principle in Jesus' witness to him.

3:15 — Jesus told Nicodemus that those who believe in Him would not perish, but would have eternal life. This was the only way he could be born again.

E. The Discourse on God's Son — 3:16-21.

Some take these verses as a continuation of Christ's conversation with Nicodemus, while others take it to be John's explanation about man's need to believe on Christ for salvation. Either approach is satisfactory and makes no real difference to the message. We will take it as Christ's words to Nicodemus.

3:16 — "God so loved" - The limits on God's love are twofold. First, in its expression it is limited to the giving of His only begotten ("unique") Son. God has no other plan for our salvation. Second, in its application it is limited to whoever believes on His Son.

3:17 — "God sent" - Christ's mission was to save sinners, not to condemn them.

3:18 — "Not condemned . . . condemned" - The sixth principle Jesus used with Nicodemus was to declare his condemnation for not believing in Him. This took boldness, but it was necessary to wake up the seriousness of his spiritual condition. Whether Nicodemus would not be condemned or be condemned would be left up to his faith in Christ or the lack of it.

3:19-20 — "Loved darkness . . . hates the light" - Jesus' exposition of the sinner's problem is the seventh principle that Jesus used with Nicodemus. He would be condemned if he loved darkness (loved his evil deeds) and hated the light (hated Jesus Christ). Sinners hate Christ because His light exposes their evil deeds.

3:21 — Finally, Jesus appealed to Nicodemus' will to be justified. He asked Nicodemus for a decision to receive Him as his Savior. This is the eighth principle of Jesus in witnessing to Nicodemus. The one who "does truth" comes to the light. Someone may argue that this is salvation by works, but Jesus clearly explained what it means in John 6:28, 29. Doing truth is responding to the light that God has given. When a person comes to the light, he or she is making a decision to receive Jesus Christ as Savior from sin.

II. Additional Testimony Concerning Jesus Christ — 3:22-36

A. The Occasion — 3:22-26

3:22-23 — Baptisms were being done simultaneously by Jesus' disciples and by John the Baptist, but they were not baptizing at the same place.

3:25-26 — This dual practice of baptism caused confusion for some Jews. They wondered about the merits of both baptisms. Was one greater than the other? They were also concerned about the waning popularity of John and the gain of Jesus' popularity.

B. John's Purpose — 3:27-30

3:27 — John acknowledged the sovereignty of God. He was just a servant in God's program.

3:28 — He understood the sense of his mission. He was not the Messiah, but was the forerunner of the Messiah.

3:29 — John recognized the superiority of Christ. He was not the Bridegroom, but the friend of the Bridegroom. He rejoiced in His presence. Notice, neither was he among those that composed the Bride of Christ. He was a citizen of Israel, not a member of the church. Jesus said, "I will build My church" and He began to build His church on Pentecost after He returned to Heaven. Therefore, it is certain that OT saints are not a part of the church, but they will have a prominent place in His Kingdom.

3:30 — John believed in submission to Christ. He knew that Christ "must" increase, but he was to decrease. This is the last use of "must" in this chapter.

C. Christ's Credentials — 3:31-36.

The words in these verses seem to be those of the Apostle John.

3:31 — "Is above all" - John the Baptist came from the earth, but Jesus Christ came from heaven. Therefore, Jesus Christ is above all, even above John.

3:32-33 — "His testimony" - Christ's testimony was based on what He actually saw and heard. That is the most reliable testimony. However, most people did not accept His testimony, but those that did

agreed that God is true.

3:34-35 — "He Whom God has sent" - This refers to Jesus Christ.

"Speaks the words of God" - Jesus spoke the very words that His Father would say. How could He do this? He was God in human flesh and knew the mind of His Father.

"Spirit by measure" — Moreover God did not restrict the ministry of the Spirit in Jesus' life, but was given the fullness of the Spirit throughout His life. That also enabled Him to speak and do what His Father would do so He was the exact image of His Father - Heb 1:3. No other person, not even John the Baptist, could say and do that.

"Father loves the Son" — God' loved His Son, who willingly obeyed Him. So He gave His Son all that He needed to fulfill His mission.

3:36 — Those who believe the words and work of God's Son will receive everlasting life, but those that do not believe Him will receive God's wrath. God's wrath is not an emotional outburst, but rather the natural result of God's holiness. His holy nature compels Him to send anyone that is unholy to Hell where they will not enjoy any of His goodness. Jesus' death on the cross was in the place of all sinners - 1 Jn 2:2. It is the only way that unholy people can be made holy and be delivered from the wrath of God.