

Joke: An elderly couple was celebrating their 60th wedding anniversary. The couple had married as childhood sweethearts and had moved back to their old neighborhood after they retired. Holding hands, they walked back to their old school. It was not locked, so they entered. They found the old desk they'd shared, where Jerry had carved 'I love you, Sally'.

On their way back home, a bag of money fell out of an armored car, practically landing at their feet. Sally quickly picked it up and, not sure what to do with it, they took it home. There, she counted the money - fifty thousand dollars!

Jerry said, "We've got to give it back."

Sally said, "Finders keepers."

She put the money back in the bag and hid it in their attic.

The next day, two police officers, who were canvassing the neighborhood looking for the money, knocked on their door. "Pardon me, did either of you find a bag that fell out of an armored car yesterday?"

Sally said, "No."

Jerry said, "She's lying. She hid it up in the attic."

Sally said, "Don't believe him, he's getting senile."

The agents turned to Jerry and began to question him.

One said: "Tell us the story from the beginning."

Jerry said, "Well, when Sally and I were walking home from school yesterday. . ."

The first police officer turned to his partner and said, "Let's go."

Easter 2024 - Week 4 Nicodemus: It Feels Too Good To Be True

Let's begin today with a test. . .

Your spouse and for those of you not married someone that you love it be your mother, father, son, daughter, anybody close to you that's a loved one. Got one in kind? They call you on a Sunday morning and say, "I'm broken down by the side of the road you have to come and get me."

You have two choices...

A.) Sorry, it's Sunday and I have to keep this day holy. I'm going to church.

Or. . .

B.) I'll be right there.

Which are you going to choose?

So, are you going to honor the 4th commandment and break the 5th or break the fifth and honor the 4th?

Now imagine there are 613 commandments. You have to know all of them. You spend your days arguing and settling disputes based

on those commandments and how you interpret them and then argue with someone else who would leave you by the side of the road.

In the days of Jesus people would follow the rabbi whom they most agreed with. If one rabbi thought certain commandments were more important and you agreed you followed that rabbi.

The commandments were often classified as light and heavy. You followed the rabbi with the lightest commandments.

Rabbi's gained respect by their ability to sum up the others.

Commandments could be combined and filed together under one heading. The easier you could make it, the better.

Now let me point out two things for us in the New Covenant. This New Covenant is what Jesus brought in by His death and resurrection. Here's what Scripture tells us. . .

Hebrews 8:6 (NIV): But in fact the ministry Jesus has received is as superior to theirs as the covenant of which he is mediator is superior to the old one, since the new covenant is established on better promises.

Now as far as the law was concerned. . .remember that test I opened up with? James tells us. . .

James 2:10 (NIV): For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it.

So in either choice you might have been breaking the law and what you need to understand was that the law was an all or nothing thing. You kept it all or broke it.

But here's the good news as we read in Hebrews. We are no longer under the law we now live in the new covenant of grace because of what Jesus did.

One more thing for you that I'll throw in for free. . .who was the law given too? Moses (the Israelites). So, we as non-Jewish folks were never even under the law.

Let's go back to the rabbi thought. . .

A rabbi would then choose which commandments were important. These commandments were called his "yoke."

When Jesus said "My yoke is easy and my burden is light." He was trying to explain it wasn't about the rules. It was about God.

The Pharisees had a lot of power. And power is not something most people want to give up once they have it.

And if you spent your day arguing about commandments, you learned to be very good at arguing.

So, when the Pharisees went to Jesus and said "Which is the greatest commandment?" They weren't interested in his opinion.

All they were doing was attempting to set a verbal trap.

There was a group of them, loaded and ready for a fight. Because no matter what Jesus said they could argue with him and discredit him and ultimately just ignore him.

But Jesus took not only the top ten commandments but all of them All 613 and summed them up in 2.

Love God. Love others.

Oh and maybe you never noticed or gave much thought to this before but when you look at those big ten what are the first four?

No other Gods
No graven images
No taking God's name in vain.
Keep the sabbath day holy.

And the next 6?

Honor mom & dad
Do not kill
Do not commit adultery
Do not steal
No lying against your neighbor
No coveting

The first four are all about what? Loving God. The last six are all about what? . . .loving each other.

Love God. Love others.

Oh and by the way you don't need to use those ten to help you live morally right. Remember we are no longer under the law. And law keeping isn't what pleases God. What pleases God is when Jesus is expressed through us.

And what the attempts of the Pharisees to trap Jesus resulted in. . . Was that He was gaining more followers. Because His yoke was easy.

Show video

In the video Nicodemus says something very profound. He says "My life. . ." and then he pauses a moment. . . "No. . . my religion was in the details."

How often do we get so caught up in being religious, that we forget to be followers?

Now before you dismiss that, how many of us sit in "our chairs?"

How many of us say or at least think, "Well I just can't seem to worship with that music."

Kneel when you supposed to.

If you are going to raise your hands you have to do it like this and not like that.

Raise your hands.

Don't raise your hands.

Use the hymnal.

Project the words on the screen.

Pick better songs.

We have heard the excuses as to why. . .

Jesus is saying, “This. . .right-here, right-now. . .this is the church. These are God’s people. This group of messed up folks who can’t make decisions, leave dirty Kleenex in the seats, complain about the taste of the communion wine, those Christmas & Easter only attending people. . .this is the church. This rag tag group of people. Not your rules.”

Jesus tells Nicodemus of the kingdom of God as if it were already here. Heaven is here. Right here. Right now.

Nicodemus, so afraid of what the others might say, meets Jesus at night. Nicodemus misses the point because he tries to take Jesus literally. “What am I supposed to crawl back inside my mother and be born again?”

Jesus wants Nicodemus. . .and us to see the world with new eyes, to listen with new ears.

Nicodemus was a Jewish Pharisee who was intrigued and fascinated by Jesus, his teaching, his actions, and his life. And the Pharisees were known for living their lives according to the strictest observance of both the traditional and written laws of the Jewish people.

The Pharisees were the rule keepers and law abiders. The commonly agreed upon total number of rules that had to be lived out if a person really was going to be living right was a whopping 613 laws. Of those 613 laws for life, 243 were things that a good Jewish person was supposed to do; 365 were negative rules and

made sure that there was enough things not to do that would cover every day of the year.

The Pharisees lived by the rule book and were the group that the rest of society looked to for interpretations of who was living right and who was living in the wrong. This group of religiously snooty men did all they could to be in power and keep their thumbs on the rest of society so they could have influence and status among the people of their religion.

Oh and by the way that's why I hate religion. Religion has the tendency to put the very people God has set free back in bondage thinking they need to perform to keep on God's good side.

The only places in the Bible we see and hear from a Pharisee named Nicodemus are found in the Gospel of John. We see him having a conversation with Jesus under the cover of darkness in chapter 3. He passively lobbies for Jesus to have a hearing before any arrest in John 7. And the final time we see Nicodemus in the Bible is after Jesus had been crucified and is being prepared for his burial in John 19.

Although it does not state how much Nicodemus witnessed the words and actions of Jesus first hand, the inference in his conversation with Jesus in John 3 leads us to believe that he had been observing Jesus from the sidelines.

Nicodemus likely was in the Temple in the previous chapter when Jesus cleansed the Temple and turned everything upside down.

And those actions likely caused Nicodemus' wheels to begin spinning inside his mind. Nicodemus possibly began to wonder if

Jesus' demonstrations coupled with his mighty miracles and mesmerizing teaching of the masses, were coming together to identify him as the long awaited Messiah.

It would take some time for Nicodemus to reach such conclusions, but what he heard from Jesus on that evening conversation captured in John 3 just seemed too good to be true.

Nicodemus had lived his life by the letter of the law; all 613 of them.

His whole life was devoted to such ritualistic purity. He thought this was how God would love and accept him, by keeping and wearing each one with meticulous precision.

Every "T" must be crossed and every "I" dotted in order to be in right standing before holy God.

At least that was what Nicodemus thought. For Nicodemus it must have felt like he had lived every day of his life striving for a perfect grade in God's eyes. It was as if he was trying to be the valedictorian every single moment and then Jesus comes in and offers something totally different and new.

Better yet, it was as if Jesus was conveying that all God was doing was taking a completion grade on this assignment and that Jesus had completed the grade for him already.

Surely what Jesus was telling him could not be right. How could it be that all that was required to be right before God was to believe?

That just felt like it was too good to be true. And if it was, should Nicodemus consider his life direction and pursuit to that point a

total waste of time? Was he on a religious adventure in missing the point?

After the conversation had gotten underway between an inquisitive Nicodemus and a patient Jesus, talk of needing to be born again had already taken place. Nicodemus was confused and seeking clarity on the things Jesus was telling him. So Jesus does what he so often is seen doing in the pages of the Gospels; he meets people where they are with an example that they could understand and relate to in their context of life.

For the Pharisee standing in his midst, Jesus went back to the Old Testament book of Numbers to relate a story of God's rescue and then would equate it to his own impending crucifixion on the horizon which would have the capability of all moving from out of the darkness of death and into the light of life in Christ.

We pick the conversation up in verse 14 and read up to verse 21. . .

John 3:14–21 (NIV): Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, 15 that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him.” 16 For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. 17 For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. 18 Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God's one and only Son. 19 This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. 20 Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed. 21 But whoever

lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done in the sight of God.

Jesus helps Nicodemus to understand that when it comes to being right before God, it all depends on the power of God rather than on the precision of man keeping a bunch of rules just right.

The issue that we humans have is a sin problem that poisons our hearts and lives. No amount of right living can suck the poison out and lead to salvation. It all depends on the provision of God and the grace of God to save us from what is killing us. There is nothing you can do to get God to love you more. God is love it's not just what He does it's who He is.

Ephesians 2:8–9 (TPT): For it was only through this wonderful grace that we believed in him. Nothing we did could ever earn this salvation, for it was the gracious gift from God that brought us to Christ! 9 So no one will ever be able to boast, for salvation is never a reward for good works or human striving.

And because of what Jesus did you are a new creation. Your sin nature is no longer. Now the only way you can honestly feel fulfilled is to allow Christ to be expressed through you. Sin doesn't satisfy because you have been given a new identity. It sinning goes against who you are.

And hear this church you are going to be prove that new identity in one of two ways. First by being miserable because of the sin you do because that's not who you are any longer or Second by living in dependency of Christ and ultimately being fulfilled.

Let me say it again just a little differently. When you sin you feel bad because your new identity in Christ has changed what it is you desire. And when you forget who you are and mess up it makes you uncomfortable.

Let's get back to Nicodemus. . .

To help make the connection that it is not about what we do, but rather, what God does, Jesus refers to how God provided through his servant Moses in a story found in Numbers 21.

Numbers 21 takes place in the context of the Israelites wandering in the wilderness. Moses had led them out of slavery in Egypt. God had been providing their every need along the way. . .Every need, manna from Heaven, their shoes never wore out, everything they needed God provided. Regardless of that, the people of God continued to grumble against the servant of God and sometimes even God Himself.

God grew tired of their grumbling and mumbling and sent poisonous snakes into the camp. Many Israelites were bitten resulting in the sickness and death of several people in the camp.

The only remedy was one that God would provide. Numbers 21:4-9 provides the account.

Numbers 21:4–9 (NIV): They traveled from Mount Hor along the route to the Red Sea, to go around Edom. But the people grew impatient on the way; 5 they spoke against God and against Moses, and said, “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? There is no bread! There is no water! And we detest this miserable food!” 6 Then the Lord sent venomous snakes

among them; they bit the people and many Israelites died. 7 The people came to Moses and said, “We sinned when we spoke against the Lord and against you. Pray that the Lord will take the snakes away from us.” So Moses prayed for the people. 8 The Lord said to Moses, “Make a snake and put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live.” 9 So Moses made a bronze snake and put it up on a pole. Then when anyone was bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake, they lived.

Jesus was helping Nicodemus to see that life and death depended upon God and his provision. All that people could do was be obedient and respond to what God was doing through his servant.

The only thing Nicodemus’ ancestors could do was look at the provision that was being lifted up on a pole in the form of a bronze snake. They must believe that God would use his own provision to cure his people.

Likewise, there were not enough sin remedies that religious people could conjure up and keep to make them right and holy before God.

In this passage, Jesus foreshadows his own death as the provision from God to bring a dying people back to life by curing the poison of sin in their souls.

The image of the twisted snake on a pole represented healing and life. The same image is true for modern medicine today. And the image of Jesus hanging and lifted up on a cross represents a different kind of healing and life. The same image is true today for all who believe.

All the Israelites could do was look at provision that was lifted up.

And in the days to come, all that would save people from perishing was to look at the provision that God was making through his one and only Son, Jesus, as a remedy for sin, death, Satan and hell.

Jesus would be lifted up on the pole of the cross as a sacrifice to save his people from their sin. And because of that sacrifice move from darkness to light.

It all hinged on one's belief, not on one's obedience to all 613 laws that no mortal man or woman could live to perfection every day of his or her life.

And

But this way of belief felt too good to be true for Nicodemus.

John goes on to write the words that Jesus spoke about who this remedy for sin was for and why it was made available in the first place.

Verse 16 captures what Martin Luther has since called "the gospel in miniature."

We all know it, it's possibly the most quoted scripture in all of history. . .

John 3:16 (NIV): For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

It is the love of God that gives us the provision for eternal life.

It's not through keeping a bunch of religious rules in the correct fashion.

Jesus tells us that it starts and ends with belief in Jesus. It's Jesus plus nothing. It has been said that religion means "we must do something." However, the message of the Gospel means "Jesus already did something on our behalf."

All we must do is believe and receive. And for some it just feels too good to be true. We have heard too many times nothing is free, you must work. But that is not the Gospel, Jesus did the work so that we didn't have to. And when He cried out "it is finished." It was finished. And listen church it wasn't free Jesus died. It cost Heaven it's best.

Dallas Willard has noted that the message of the Gospel is one that leads us toward "a heart to have rather than a bunch of rules to keep."

The only way we have such a heart toward God is to believe. We must believe that what Jesus did on the cross is sufficient for our rescue from sin.

The level of our obedience to rule keeping does not affect the acquittal or condemnation before God.

Look what Scripture tells us. . .

Hebrews 9:22 (NIV): In fact, the law requires that nearly everything be cleansed with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness.

It was true of the Old when they had to slaughter the animals to atone for their sins. And it was true in the New when the perfect lamb of God sacrificed his life once and for all so that we could be free from the grips of sin and walk in newness of life.

That's what Jesus was saying in verses 17-18 from our text.

John 3:17–18 (NIV): For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. 18 Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God's one and only Son.

Jesus' death on the cross is God's provision that saves all who turn toward him and believes.

It is similar to how God provided for his people in the desert with the snake bites. They had to turn toward God's unique provision that would save them from their impending sickness leading to death.

They had to put all their hope in what God had done on their behalf and believe. Those who did were saved from their death sentence of that snake bite. If they did not turn toward the bronze snake they were condemned to death already.

Likewise, those who do not look to Jesus as the remedy from sin and its devastating, eternal consequences also are condemned already.

The remaining verses in the passage help tie a bow on the greatness of Jesus and the provision made through him that leads to life in Christ.

He is the light of the world that leads all that live in the darkness of sin into a new hope because of what God has done on our behalf that we could not do on our own.

John 3:19–21 (NIV): This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. 20 Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed. 21 But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done in the sight of God.

Part of what it means to live in the darkness is to refuse to relinquish control of one's life and ways to the life and ways of Jesus. Simply put, allowing Jesus to be expressed through your life.

It would have been a tragedy had Nicodemus left that conversation and remained in his ways of merely trying harder to be perfect by fulfilling all the 613 laws.

He seems to have been on the edge of stepping out of the darkness and into the light during that night with Jesus.

However, he seems to have been in process toward a decision that later would lead to him doing what Jesus told him that all must do in order to live in the light: believe.

Eventually Nicodemus seems to have done what was true and did indeed come to the light found in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

Christian history and tradition believes that ultimately Nicodemus not only became a follower of Jesus through his belief in the Messiah, but also was martyred because of his belief in Jesus later in the first century A.D.

According to what Jesus taught, had Nicodemus put his hope in keeping the 613 laws, he would have perished for eternity.

John 5:39–40 (NIV): You study the Scriptures diligently because you think that in them you have eternal life. These are the very Scriptures that testify about me, 40 yet you refuse to come to me to have life.

You can't just study this book you need a relationship with the author. That's why Jesus came, that's what he was telling Nicodemus. That's what I'm sharing today.

And Nicodemus most likely did believe, and because of that he continues to experience eternal life in Christ.

Such a decision is far from being too good to be true. It was true for Nicodemus and it is true for us as well.