

“The Superior Teacher Corrects a Supposed Teacher” (series #7)

By Pastor Rand Lankheet, for New Horizon URC, first service on April 2, 2017- Bible text: John 3:1-17

Before reading: There is a saying in English. It goes like this: “It is easy to lose the forest for the trees.” We can so focus on the details, that we fail to see the big picture. So it is with John chapter 3. Almost every verse in this chapter is a sermon in itself. But I want us to see the big picture.

So we are going to look more generally, more broadly, at these verses. [Read 3:1-15.]

Introduction: One of the special vocations (职业, 呼召) in life is to be a teacher.

Teachers have such a great impact on their students.

Teachers inspire their students to love learning, and to grow in knowledge.

-The main teachers among the Jews, at the time of Jesus, were called “rabbis.” (拉比, 老师) Many of the rabbis in that day belonged to the group known as the “Pharisees.” (法利赛人) / Now, in the gospels, almost all the references about the Pharisees are negative. But, the original goal of the Pharisees was a good goal: namely, to teach the Jews about holiness. God’s holiness. And to lead them into God’s holiness. Indeed that was, and is, a good goal.

Here in John chapter 3 we read about a Jewish rabbi named Nicodemus. visits Jesus.

He visits while Jesus is still there in Jerusalem. Jesus had traveled there for the Passover (逾越节) .

-Now to become a rabbi, a Jewish teacher, Nicodemus had to study for many, many years.

He would have studied what we know as the Old Testament, those 39 books.

Nicodemus also would have studied what famous rabbis had written about these books.

All their ancient commentaries. By the time he meets Jesus, N. had become an expert teacher.

1. But Nicodemus WAS CONFUSED in his Jewish teaching.

In particular, he was confused about Jesus. Part of his confusion is because he was

so focused on the miracles which Jesus had performed. [Read vs. 2.]

Chapter 2: 23, tells us that while Jesus was in Jerusalem, he performed many of these signs

for the crowds, these miracles. And we read in vs. 23 that people believed in Jesus, because of those miracles.

Perhaps Nicodemus had been part of the crowd. And saw Jesus’ miracles with his own eyes./

Now, on the one hand, it is good that Nicodemus was impressed by those miracles.

By those signs, Jesus was showing that He was indeed the promised Messiah—and that He was the very Son of God. So, on the one hand, Nicodemus is rightly attracted to Jesus because of those miracles.

But, on the other hand, **this is not so good.** Why not? It seems that for many Jewish people, miracles had become too important. It’s true for many people, today, also.

For many people today, miracles have become the most important thing. I’ve been

volunteering some of my time with missionaries (宣教士) in the country of Costa Rica. Thousands upon thousands of people there want to see miracles. Huge crowds will fill stadiums (体育馆) because a man promises them healing. Supposed Christian preachers are promising people today that they will get rich. If only they come to these meetings. So people attend these meetings by the tens of thousands. Not really to learn about Jesus. Instead, they want a miracle. Or they want to become rich.

-**So Nicodemus focuses, wrongly, on the miracles** of Jesus.

Vs. 2: “God must be with you, Jesus, because you perform such mighty signs,” Nicodemus says.

But notice that Jesus completely ignores what Nicodemus says about the miracles. Jesus says, instead, vs. 3: “Listen, Nicodemus. Listen well.” The opening words in vs. 3 in the original Greek language are these words: “Amen, Amen.” In Hebrew background, those are very serious words. They are related to taking a vow, or making an oath. “Amen, amen. God has spoken the truth. So it shall be.”

What is the truth of God, which Nicodemus must understand? According to Jesus?

Look at the last words of vs. 3: Nicodemus needs to be “born again.” This can be translated: “born from above.” Nicodemus needs to be born of God, who reigns above.

In vs. 8, Jesus speaks of this new birth, as being “born of the Spirit,” the Holy Spirit.

Though he is a trained teacher, Nicodemus doesn’t know this truth. The truth is this: that it is not enough for people to have physical life. To be born biologically. No!

Everyone needs a second birth.

We all need an new, inner life born in us by a working of the Spirit of God.

Why? Well, the Bible says that each of us comes into this world spiritually dead.

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We are physically alive, but spiritually, in our souls, we are dead. Ephesians 2:1. In Romans chapter 3 we read that by nature, no one understands the true God. No one naturally seeks the true God. Everyone has turned away from Him.

Though Jesus doesn't say all this to Nicodemus, Jesus is clear: "Nicodemus you need to be born again. Because you are spiritually dead, Nic. You need a new birth by the Spirit of God."

Illus: I recently read a book about a branch of super-strict Jews living in New York City. The author, a Jewish woman, was raised in a very strict Jewish group. Here's what she writes (quote): "We are praying to the God of our people, whom we call *Hashem*, literally, 'the Name.' The true name for God is devastatingly holy/...For the sake of this divinity (神性) I must surrender myself each morning, body and soul; ...God lives in my soul, and I must spend my life scrubbing my soul clean of any trace of sin so that it deserves to host his [God's] presence.... I look at the others...as they are shamelessly crying and wailing (哀哭) to God to help them expunge (擦掉) the *yetzer hara* [in Hebrew], or evil inclination, from their consciousness (意识)." ."

Here's one way this Jewish group tries to erase their "evil inclination." "Any part of a woman's body must be covered, from the collarbone (锁骨), ending at the wrists (手腕) and knees. ...Every time a man catches a glimpse of any part of your body ... he is sinning. But worse, you [as the woman] have caused him to sin. It is you who will bear the responsibility of his sin on Judgment Day" (p. 36, Ibid.).

Other religions, or extreme wings of those religions, go much farther in women's clothing.

Not only are women covered from collarbone down. In certain groups of these religions women are completely covered. Even their necks, and faces, and hair. Covered with black cloth. A small opening is cut in the cloth, over their faces, so that they can look out. And they wear long black robes, down to the feet. And black socks or stockings, to cover all their ankles and feet.

Of course, the Bible teaches modesty (稳重) in clothing. For women and men. Of course, it is true that in our culture today, many people wear immodest clothes. Clothing which can encourage lust. By both men and women.

But, man-made religion, makes rule upon rule. Why? So that people think that they can become holy! That they can please Yahweh or Allah, or some other imagined god. In her book, this woman author explains how there is still so much sin. In this strict group. It's mostly secret, kept behind closed doors. But sin is multiplied: there's jealousy, gossip, envy, hatred (仇恨), abuse of women, parents who are cold and unloving, and so on. //

Back in Jesus day, the man, Nicodemus, wanted to be holy, pure, before God. As a rabbi-teacher, Nicodemus was teaching other people how to become more holy. That they could achieve holiness by following more and more rules.

But here is Jesus. He's the better teacher, the superior teacher. Jesus explains that people cannot come to God, unless they are born again. In other words, we cannot reach God by trying to become more holy. No. We need to be changed in our souls by the Holy Spirit.

2. *That's how Nicodemus* is **CORRECTED BY JESUS**. Nicodemus was confused.

And he remains somewhat confused during this entire conversation.

Now, interestingly, we read about Nicodemus later in John's gospel. After Jesus was crucified (被钉十字架) .

We read that Nicodemus helped to prepare Jesus' body for burial. Evidently, Nicodemus came to trust in Jesus as the true Teacher. And more than that, he trusted in Jesus as his Messiah. And Saviour (救主) . So it seems that Nicodemus became "born again." /

But at this point, in John chapter 3, Nicodemus only thinks about physical reality. He asks

Jesus: "How can anyone be born again? It is impossible to re-enter the womb, like a baby, to be born a second time." Vs. 10—and *you are Israel's teacher?* Jesus asks, rhetorically (反问地) . "Nicodemus, you are supposedly an expert teacher in Israel. And, yet, you don't understand?" You see, Nicodemus is **terribly confused**.

Paul later says in the NT, that some teachers were teaching many man-made rules: They told the people: "Do not touch that food. Do not drink that drink. Do not wear that clothing." Supposed teachers. Teachers who seemed to offer holiness. But each of these teachers, and students, fail to become truly holy. Why? Because, brothers & sisters, *sin is within us*. In our minds, in our hearts, in our attitudes. /

For example: I know a Christian parent who has a rule for the children. The rule is this: "Do not say the word 'hate.' Because you must not hate people. Not anyone." Now, for very young children, that might be a good rule.

But then, what? You don't say the word "hate." But you can be filled with all kinds of hatred in your heart. You follow mother's rule—never saying that bad word. But, inwardly, you still sin against God and your fellow man.

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Bros & Sisters: **Rules never change us.** In fact, obeying the rules, if we are not careful, can

actually make us proud. Remember the parable (寓言) of Jesus, about a man like Nicodemus—a man who was a Pharisee? He entered the holy temple, no doubt, after washing himself and following the other Jewish rules. But in the Temple he prayed this way: "O God I thank you that I am not like other people in this world. People who don't live by the rules. I am thankful that I am different from the rest of people. I thank you that I have reached up to you, by obeying the rules."

Jesus says that man was actually on his way to hell. Though he didn't know it. That man, observed his rules for holiness. But he missed the heart of true religion (敬虔).

He had not been "born again" by the Holy Spirit. He did not have true faith in Jesus/

-And what is at the heart of true faith, according to the superior teaching of Jesus?

Well, again, Jesus is a bit cryptic (神秘的) in these verses. He will not reveal everything, not yet. In vs. 13-14, Jesus is explaining something about himself. Today, we understand more fully.

[Read vs. 13-14.

Under God's direction, the man, Moses, brought the Israelites out of Egypt. The people traveled through the wilderness. At one point, they were bitten by poisonous snakes. Numbers 21. Read it again, sometime.

Hundreds, even thousands, of Israelites died from those snake bites. And many more people would die. So Moses prayed to the LORD for mercy. The LORD told Moses to cast in bronze, the likeness of a snake. Looking like one of those poisonous snakes. And God told Moses to put that bronze snake up on a pole. Then the people of Israel had to look upon that snake. And they had to trust in God to save them.

"Look up and live," Moses told the people. "Look upon God's mercy, to you. Trust His promise."

The people looked upon that snake, which had been lifted up high. And they lived.

So Jesus teaches Nicodemus:

"Listen, Nicodemus, a day is coming. A special day when the Son of Man will be lifted up."

And we know what happened: Jesus was lifted up on that tree, that cross. He was lifted up

high for everyone to see. And everyone who truly puts their trust in him, in the crucified Jesus, shall live. By looking upon Jesus, and trusting in Him, we will live. [Read John 3:16.

Brothers and sisters: Don't put any confidence in man-made rules, to bring you to God.

Following certain rules will never make you holy enough to approach God.

-Cover a woman's body completely, and men will still lust from their hearts.

- Prohibit the word 'hate' from your speech. And people will still hate.

-Make a hundred rules for holiness, oh, add a thousand more, to seek more holiness.

But all those rules will fail. Just as the rules of the Jewish rabbis have failed.

Instead, we must look upon the One who was raised up on the cross.

Look to Jesus, and live. And then, be willing to follow Jesus.

He is, and will be, your Best Rabbi, your Best Teacher. **LET US PRAY.**