

John 3:1-21 - Teacher to Teacher¹

Before the lesson – Make copies of the handout, John 3:16-17 (Amplified Bible), to be used in the Transformational Exercise.

Fellowship Question: (Use one of these to break the ice, begin some discussion, and lead into the study):

When did you last attend a surprise birthday party?

What phrase do you use to emphasize that you are making a true statement? (“Really!” “I promise!” “I’ll tell you what’s the truth...”, etc.)

Information

Today’s Bible story includes one of the most memorized verses of the Bible, John 3:16. It is a wonderful verse of the Bible, but the familiarity of this story and of that verse puts us at risk. We may be closed to hearing new things from an old passage. This is the challenge that Nicodemus faced. Jesus took familiar images (like a baby’s birth) and gave them new twists. Let’s open our spirits to be willing to hear something new in an old tale.

Imagine this is the first time you have heard this story...

- Have a class member read John 3:1-9.

How does the Gospel describe Nicodemus’ role in the community? (a Pharisee, a leader of the Jews)

The conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees is well known. The Pharisees were sticklers about keeping the law. Jesus was much more liberal, stretching and deepening the meaning of the laws. Jesus looked for the spirit where the Pharisees looked for the letter of the law.

- Have a class member read John 7:11-24.

How did the Pharisees compare Jesus with themselves educationally? (Jesus is uneducated) In many societies, education is a privilege of the wealthy, the elite. Jesus did not have the benefit of a formal education. He was the son of a carpenter, a house framer.

The Pharisees were an elite group in this society. And, they had tremendous social power.

- Have a class member read John 12:42-43.

But there is an identifying word before Nicodemus is identified as a Pharisee. What is that word? (a man)

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“Man” is an ordinary word, but it is packed with meaning. The word in Greek is *anthropos*, like “anthropology.” Anthropology is the study of what? (human beings, people) So, *anthropos* means “humanity” or “mankind.”

“*Anthropos*” is significant here because John used it two times in a verse just before he tells the Nicodemus story.

- Have a class member read John 2:23-24.

Jesus knows the heart of people. What do you think this means? (He knows their motivations, their inner thoughts, and why they behave in the ways they do.)

“John has just noted: ‘But Jesus, on His part, was not entrusting Himself to them, for He knew all men [the Greek here is simply the word *pas*, meaning all. It is not the word *anthropos*.], and because He did not need anyone to testify concerning man (*anthropos*), for He Himself knew what was in man (*anthropos*)’ (John 2:24-25, NASB) Then in the next sentence, John writes, ‘Now there was a man (*anthropos*) of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews’ (John 3:1, NASB). Nicodemus becomes the first example of Jesus knowing what is in the heart of man (*anthropos*).”²

So we have a powerful man, one of the elites in the community coming to talk with an ignorant (but authoritative, miracle -making) carpenter. How does he address Jesus? (Rabbi) Rabbi was a term of respect and honor. Why do you think Nicodemus would address Jesus in this way?

Nicodemus’ words to Jesus sound like a testimony. Do you think Nicodemus was sincere? Was he a seeker? Or, was he (like other Pharisees) trying to set a trap?

John sets many phrases and images against one another. Jesus is the light and Nicodemus visits in the dark. We might see that as “good guy versus bad guy”, or “white hat versus black hat.” What hat color does Nicodemus wear in this story?

“Nicodemus is a character who appears three times in the Fourth Gospel: here, in the first extensive dialogue of the Gospel; again when the Temple police attempt to arrest Jesus (John 7:45-52), and finally at the tomb after Jesus is dead (John 19:39). One is not sure how to understand Nicodemus. He is, on the one hand, a leading member of the Jewish council and therefore participates in the council that ultimately has Jesus arrested and killed. On the other hand, it appears that he is somewhat open to Jesus...It is too much to call him a secret disciple, but the portrayal of Nicodemus suggests that even leaders of the Jews might have remained

² E. Randolph Richards and Richard James, *Misreading Scripture with Individualist Eyes* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2020), 168f.

somewhat open to Jesus...Nicodemus remains throughout a cryptic figure about whom we are left to ponder and question.”³

One scholar notes, “Some believe night was the typical time for scribal discussion. In context, it was the proper time to learn about the sky as opposed to the earth (see v. 10).”⁴

Have you noticed how often Jesus says, “Verily, verily, I say unto you” (in the King James Version)? How does your translation phrase this?

Jesus says this twenty-five times in the Gospel of John. He says it three times to Nicodemus. It is Jesus saying, “I give you my word, on my honor, you can trust what I am saying.” Why do you think Jesus wanted to make this assurance so often in this conversation?

When someone makes a promise or a statement of fact to us, what makes us trust them?

Why should Nicodemus trust Jesus’ words?

The phrase “you must be born again” or “born from above” catches Nicodemus by surprise. He seems to be taking Jesus literally. But what Jesus was saying was as shocking sociologically as it was physically or even spiritually.

“It is critical to recognize that the topic here is birth. Birth status was the single, all-important factor in determining a person’s honor ranking...The honor derived from one’s status at birth...usually stayed with a person for life...To be born over again, born for a second time, however unthinkable that event might be, would alter one’s ascribed honor in a very fundamental way. A new ascribed honor would derive from a new birth. Thus, a second birth, especially if it differed substantially in honor level from the first birth, would be a life-changing event of staggering proportions.”⁵

How does a person’s status change when they are “born again” spiritually? In the world’s eyes? In God’s eyes?

“To be born ‘from above’ – that is, to be born of the sky, of the realm of God – is to belong of that realm, to become a veritable child of God. This is, of course, to acquire an honor status of the highest sort.”⁶

- Have a class member read John 1:12-13.

³ Mark A. Matson, *John*, Interpretation Bible Studies (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 26.

⁴ Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social Science Commentary on the Gospel of John* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 81.

⁵ Malina, 82.

⁶ Ibid.

What does this say about us? How might this understanding, “I am a child of God,” affect our self-image? How might this understanding affect our attitudes?

Jesus offers another “verily, verily” statement in verse 5. Scholars debate Jesus’ meaning here, so we can, too! What do you think? [Some questions based on various scholars’ interpretations: Is the water referring to a physical birth’s breaking of water? Is it pointing to baptism? Is it a reference to the blood and water that will come from Jesus’ side when he is “lifted up” on the cross? (John 19:34)]

In verse 11, Jesus offers yet a third, “verily, verily.” Before we hear it again, let’s remember what Jesus said in his first two “verilies”: You must be born from above, from the sky, from the heavens. And, I, Jesus, have come from above and will be raised up to the sky for the world’s salvation.

- Have a class member read John 3:9-16.

Jesus is adamant that he knows what he is talking about. He knows about life from above because he comes from and will return to the above. In spite of Jesus’ testimony, not everyone believes in him. Your translation may note that the “you” is plural when Jesus says in verse 11, “you do not receive our testimony.” In other words, we need more Southern translators, so this would read “y’all.”

To whom is Jesus referring? (the Pharisees, those who walk in the darkness and prefer it, all humanity, etc.)

John 3:16 is one of the most memorized verses of the Bible. Salvation is rooted in God’s love for the world. “It is the first explicit mention by John of love, which he emphasizes more than do the other Gospels, the culmination coming in his final chapter”⁷ when Jesus asks Peter three times, “do you love me?”

“Eternal life” in John’s gospel does not refer to the length of life but to the quality of life. This is the new life we have in Christ which is “more abundant” (John 10:10) and which we are living now. John’s gospel does talk about life after this life (John 14, for example), but eternal life begins once we begin to follow Jesus.

“Eternal life is identified with Jesus, whose life is shared, before as well as after their death, with those who trust him. So the decisive events are the death and resurrection of Jesus, and eternal life means not just ‘life after death’ but life after the death and resurrection of Jesus - which means life with Jesus now.”⁸

⁷ Ford, 96.

⁸ Ibid.

What are some implications if we take John 3:16 to mean a future afterlife rather than life on earth? (Trust in Christ is only a transaction - fire insurance from Hell in an afterlife; We aren't concerned about present earthly concerns such as hunger, environmental issues, etc.)

John 3:16-17 reveals to us the character of our God. What do you see of the character of God in these verses?

“For John, Jesus is the revelation of God’s love, and so the *imitatio dei* [imitation of God] becomes the *imitatio Christie*, an imitation of Jesus. The Jesus of John’s gospel says, ‘I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.’ (John 13:34) The symmetry between the message of Jesus and the testimony of the post-Easter community is striking: love one another because the character of God as known in Jesus is love.”⁹

Does John 3:16-17 assure us of universal salvation, meaning that everyone goes to heaven and no one will perish?

“This Gospel contemplates the appalling possibility of rejecting this love, cutting oneself off from it, and, as this passage goes on to say, being condemned for hating the light and doing evil... People can do horrendous things... To assume that all will inevitably say yes to the love of God is to turn them into automatons, depriving them of freedom. One may rightly hope that all will say yes, but we have to take the ongoing drama and the decisions it demands with utmost seriousness. The world is not risk-free, and neither is relating to God.”¹⁰

John loves to have parallel, contrasting images. In this last passage, he will do this with light.

- Have a class member read John 3:17-21.

Again, this is not talking about a *future* salvation or condemnation, but our *present* daily lives on earth. What are some implications if we take John 3:17-21 to shape our daily life on earth?

There is a sense in which Nicodemus is “coming to the light” in his coming to Jesus at night. What does that say to us about persons who are not yet followers of Jesus? What does this conversation between these two teachers teach us about how we might converse with persons who are seeking “the light”?

Transformational Exercise

Although John 3:16 is one of the most memorized verses in the Bible, it may be that you have not memorized it. Memorization of Scripture is a foundational spiritual practice. How might Scripture memorization help your soul?

⁹ Marcus Borg, *Jesus: Uncovering the Life, Teachings, and Relevance of a Religious Revolutionary* (HarperSanFrancisco. 2006), 185.

¹⁰ Ford, 97, 98.

[Distribute handout.]

For your soul work this week, I invite you to memorize John 3:16-17, if you have not done so yet. Use this bookmark to serve as a reminder.

If you have it memorized in the King James Version, try memorizing it in a newer translation. *The Amplified Bible* is a translation that offers a variety of word options for keywords in a passage. Use this as a meditation tool this week. Read it prayerfully each day. See how God speaks to you in a fresh way with different words.

[Text on handout:] For God so greatly loved and dearly prized the world that He [even] gave up His only begotten (unique) Son, so that whoever believes in (trusts in, clings to, relies on) Him shall not perish (come to destruction, be lost) but have eternal (everlasting) life. For God did not send the Son into the world in order to judge (to reject, to condemn, to pass sentence on) the world, but that the world might find salvation and be made safe and sound through Him.

[Close in a prayer something like this:] *God of light, reveal in us whatever blocks our love for you and for our neighbor. Remove that barrier so we can be more like you. Help us to be bearers and sharers of your light. Thank you for the eternal life you offer us even as we live our daily lives. Amen.*

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