

Sermon The 4th Sunday in Lent March 14, 2021

Grace, mercy, and peace be unto you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.
Amen.

There was a man who lived in Jerusalem during the days of Jesus whose name was Nicodemus. His name means “Victory of the common people.” Sounds like our kind of guy! Nicodemus was a Pharisee. Pharisees were by far the most rigorous in keeping the religious rules. They tried to heed God’s law from the Old Testament, as well as a few thousand of their own rules they thought would be good to follow. This man was also a member of the religious ruling council – the Sanhedrin. In our day we might compare him to an Archbishop or Cardinal or something like that in the Roman Catholic church. Nicodemus, because of his position, was also probably a fairly well-to-do man, not lacking in wealth or possessions in any way. Nicodemus heard Jesus teach in the temple and witnessed or least heard witnesses to Jesus’ miracles. He wanted to know more – especially to suss out if indeed Jesus might be the promised deliverer, the Messiah. Nicodemus catches Jesus after dark. That’s a good time for a little one-on-one with the good Lord. Out of this conversation flows very foundational teachings and truths about the nature of Jesus, his mission, our conversion, and the coming judgement. Good stuff!

Today we have one of the, if not the most well-known verses in all the Bible.

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

Long time students of the Bible know this passage well. However, it always surprises me how many people do not know this verse. Or at least do not know it as the “Gospel in a nutshell.” That phrase might not be as relevant today as in these modern grocery store times. It’s called the gospel in a nutshell because it is such a short, yet profound verse describing God’s entire plan. It’s like it could all fit inside a small nutshell. This catch phrase “Gospel in a nutshell” was no doubt coined back when most people either harvested nuts right from the tree or purchased their nuts in the shell. Some of us remember those days. Nowadays nuts are mostly shelled for us already. I can well imagine it happened that a mother was cracking nuts around the table with the children. She was going over this Bible story with them and commenting on the beautiful verse – John 3:16. Then one of the kids piped up, “It’s like the gospel in a nutshell!” Hey, it could happen! So for the old-timers among us, please excuse me as I point out this hugely important teaching, as many today are not familiar with its contents.

Among Lutherans, we might be inclined to call John 3:16 the “law and gospel in a nutshell.” The verse does have the gospel. That’s the part about believing in Jesus and having everlasting life. But we cannot deny there is that other part about perishing without such a saving faith. That’s the law and pronounces judgement on those who are not washed clean from guilt and have the eternal life Jesus gives.

I’m going to take a little time and work through both these parts of the (law and) gospel in a nutshell. First, let’s cover the law. Jesus here talks very specifically about the problems revealed by the law in this section of John’s book. God’s law instantly reveals the evil in our thoughts, words, and deeds. When we go to the doctor and they run blood tests, take X-rays, run scans, and such, the test results are compared with what is considered healthy. If the doctor finds something not up to par, that’s where the attention is focused. God’s law is the standard against which we are tested. What we think, say, and do is compared to what God says is right in those areas. And of course, we all fail the tests miserably. No one measures up to the holy law of God. By nature most of us know this, and the cure is mostly unknown. Jesus says,

For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed. John 3:20

No argument there. We all know what that feels like. In Genesis, when Adam and Eve disobeyed God and ate the forbidden fruit, they knew they had done something wrong. What did they do then? They hid from God. They would not come out from behind the bushes and come into the light of God’s presence until he called them out. They fashioned clothes from fig leaves to cover their shame and made themselves scarce. Why is our first inclination to always run away when we do evil? It’s because of fear. Fear of God’s judgement because we know his laws are indisputable and right. Or at least fear of punishment from whoever holds sway – our peers, teachers, boss, police, or mother-in-law. Even ol’ Nicodemus came to see Jesus at night. I suspect it was not because he waited until his kids were tucked into bed. He wanted the cover of darkness. He was a prominent citizen with lots to lose. No sense risking being seen having a friendly conversation with Jesus by other Pharisees or worse yet a member of the council! Nicodemus was afraid to go to Jesus in the light of day. This is exactly the kind of thing Jesus is talking about with us. We think we can hide from God and his justice. If we don’t think about it, just ignore it, pretend it doesn’t really matter, we fool ourselves into thinking it is no longer a problem. How many people have died because they did not go see the doctor when they got a serious pain that would not go away or they could tell something else was probably seriously wrong with their body. If they had gone

to get looked at, they might well have been treated and lived another ten, twenty, or thirty years. Let that not be how we deal with our guilt and shame.

Jesus gives us a wonderful illustration of the gospel in his talk with Nicodemus. We need to turn the calendar back to about fourteen or fifteen hundred BC. God had sent fiery serpents into the camp of Israel when they were still in the wilderness. They had wined and complained and wanted to go back into slavery in Egypt rather than be out in the great unknown of the desert. God sent the snakes as a message against such nonsense. They were on their way to the promised land. What more could they ask for? They did not have faith in God's total deliverance. People who were bitten by these snakes became very sick and many died. They repented from evil thoughts and asked God to save them. He had Moses make a bronze metal likeness of one of these snakes. He raised it up high on a pole. When anyone was bitten, they could look at the bronze serpent and they would live. Next, Jesus compares the bronze serpent up on the pole with himself.

And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. John 3:15

Now that's an illustration that is simple to understand. Thank God for that! When the Israelites were bitten, they looked to the serpent up on the pole and lived. We, too, have been bitten – or as St. Paul says, “stung” - with the venom of evil. Death is certain. Jesus tells us to look to him lifted up on the cross and, even though we have death running through our veins, we will have everlasting life. By the power of his resurrection from the dead, we, too, will rise, never to die again forever.

Nicodemus was having trouble wrapping his head around Jesus' words. All that being born again and everything. However, by looking at the evidence, it seems he saw the light. When most of the council was crafting a plan to take Jesus down, Nicodemus stood up for the Lord in front of them all.

“Have any of the authorities or the Pharisees believed in [Jesus]? But this crowd that does not know the law is accursed.” Nicodemus, who had gone to him before, and who was one of them, said to them, “Does our law judge a man without first giving him a hearing and learning what he does?” They replied, “Are you from Galilee too? John 7:48-52

Nicodemus took some heat here from the other council members on his suggestion that cooler heads prevail. They asked him if he, like Jesus, was from Galilee. This was a slur. Remember what Peter did when he was accused of being from Galilee? Nicodemus showed some signs of promise here. We get even more encouragement as things

transpire. After Jesus was crucified, Nicodemus teams up with another member of the ruling council, Joseph of Arimathea. Joseph provided a burial shroud and a tomb. As for Nicodemus,

Nicodemus also, who earlier had come to Jesus by night, came bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds in weight. John 19:39

Nicodemus provides the customary spices for preparing the body for burial. This attention to Jesus' burial is a good sign that he had taken Jesus' words to heart and looked to him as the Messiah and his own savior from judgement and death. He didn't care what others might say. He was going to help give Jesus a proper burial.

So we take Nicodemus as our example. Not the part where he skulked about in the night to see Jesus. Rather, we are inspired by his public defense of Jesus, his care for Jesus' crucified body, and whatever other good things he did out of faith. Nicodemus had to make some serious changes in his thinking. He used to think he received God's favor by means of rule keeping, and a lot of it at that. At first, he was afraid to be thought of as a friend of Jesus as he sought him out in the darkness of night. Later, he knew the only way was to put himself under God's grace in his crucified Lord, and he was no longer afraid of associating with the Son of God, dead or alive as he may be.

The voice of Lent continues to call us into a closer walk with Jesus than we have had up until now. We hear the gospel in a nutshell, and follow its simple wisdom for our souls. We mirror the changes in Nicodemus as his resolve and faith in Jesus grow. We look to Jesus who, like the bronze serpent, was lifted high that all who turn to him would live. God grant such a change in us all. Amen.

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