

# Jesus and Nicodemus

by F. Crossley Morgan

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*The sermon explores the character of Nicodemus, a Pharisee and ruler who was trusted by Jesus and struggled to see the things of the kingdom of God.*

**Duration:** 57:41

**Scripture:** John 2:23

**Topics:** "Spiritual Growth", "Faith Development"

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## Description

In this sermon, the preacher focuses on three main aspects: his discussion with Jesus, his defense of Jesus, and his devotion to Jesus. He emphasizes the importance of spending most of our time on the first aspect, as it holds significant value. The preacher shares a story about a prince among preachers who struggled to understand the concept of the wind blowing wherever it will. He then relates this story to the biblical passage in John 3:8. The sermon concludes with a reference to Robert Louis Stevenson's writing, 'Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde,' which seems to tie into the overall message of the sermon.

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## Transcript

of Christ and Nicodemus, and I have very little doubt that all of us here who are students of these gospel narratives will agree at once that certainly this is one of the most fascinating, one of the most interesting, and indeed one of the most important stories to be found in these gospel narratives. And as we approach the story, let me begin by reminding you that this remarkable man, Nicodemus, with whom we are going to watch our Lord deal, appears upon the page of New Testament history on three separate occasions. First, there is that occasion with which possibly we're all rather familiar.

The occasion when Nicodemus came to Jesus at night, and they talked to one another through the dark hours. Just for the purpose of our memory and our thinking tonight, we might refer to that as the picture of his discussion with Jesus. Then there is that second picture of this man, Nicodemus, with which possibly we're not quite so familiar.

The picture of Nicodemus in that hour when the chief priests and Pharisees, and I but remind you in passing that Nicodemus was a Pharisee, sent officers of the law to arrest Jesus. But they returned not having arrested him. And from my reading this evening, you may remember in that hour, Nicodemus dead in the presence of the chief priests and his fellow Pharisees to challenge their procedure, as he spoke a word in defense of Jesus.

Just for the purposes of our thinking, we might refer to that second picture as the picture of his defense of Jesus in the presence of some of the leaders in the life of the nation Israel. Then there is that third singularly sad little picture. The picture of this same man, Nicodemus, in that darkest hour in all human history.

That hour when, humanly speaking, men had laid hold upon Jesus, the Son of God, and nailed him to a brutal Roman gibbet. And that great head is slumped in death. From the appallingly dark shadows of that hour, you may remember that there came forth two men, determined that at least his sacred body should have decent burial, and not be thrown on the fires forever burning in the valley of Gehenna, where garbage was thrown, and where the bodies of malefactors were thrown.

And one of the two men, this same man Nicodemus. Again, just for the purposes of our thinking tonight, we might refer to that third little picture as the picture of his devotion to Jesus in that dark hour. So that we do have three pictures to examine.

First his discussion with Jesus. Then his dispense of Jesus. And thirdly his devotion to Jesus.

Now my friends, in order to relieve your minds at once of any entirely unnecessary anxiety, let me say that we shall spend nearly all our time with the first picture. I think I better say that at this point, because when I've been speaking about an hour, and I say now we'll turn to the second picture, I don't want you to imagine I'm only at third. We shall be almost at the end.

But we do come back to this first picture and take some care with it. And at the very outset, I must deal with a text just supposing you, maybe as a Sunday school teacher, were going to prepare a message about Nicodemus. Maybe you were going to prepare a character study of Nicodemus.

I wonder where in the gospel according to John, you would begin your reading and study, in order to prepare that message. My friends, I raise the question because I find nearly all Sunday school teachers, and for that matter ministers of the world, when they're going to talk about Nicodemus, they begin at chapter 3 verse 1. In John's gospel, you may remember that's where I began reading this evening, and I've missed it first, that seems the proper place to begin. Because in that verse Nicodemus is referred to for the, but my friends if you begin there, you're liable to miss a fundamental lesson concerning Nicodemus.

And if you miss it, you'll be doing Nicodemus a grave injustice. Well, someone says if we're not to begin there, where should we begin? That is where we generally begin. You ought to go back into the second chapter of John.

I think I said to some this morning in another connection, you know whatever else is or is not inspired in your bible, certainly your chapter and verse divisions are not. And if you're going to be a serious student of this literature, you must forget all about chapter and verse divisions. They're the most misleading things.

I think it's because chapter 3 begins where, but that's where most people begin if they're going to make a study of Nicodemus. You ought to go back into chapter 2. In chapter 2 there are 25 verses. You ought at least to go back to the 23rd verse.

Now be patient a moment as I begin to read at verse 23 of chapter 2 and just read straight into the first verse of chapter 3. As I do it, I want you to try and notice the relationship between that which John is telling you as chapter 2 draws to its close, and that which he says in effect as chapter 3 opens. Now just

listen a moment. Now when Jesus was in Jerusalem at the Passover, during the feast, many believed on his name, beholding his signs which he did.

But Jesus did not trust himself unto them, for that he knew all men. And because he needed not that anyone should believe him, for he himself knew what was in him. There was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews, that came unto him by night and so forth and so on.

But do you detect the relationship between that which John is saying at the end of chapter 2, and that which he says in effect as chapter 3 opens? John is telling you that at this period in the ministry of Jesus, he was not trusting himself to men in general, because he knew what was in man. But then John says in effect, now wait a minute, there was one man to whom he did trust himself. Trusted himself so perfectly as to allow that man to come to him at night.

And as I'm sure all of you are well aware, it was to that man that Jesus entrusted some of the profoundest teachings that ever fell from his lips. In other words, whatever else we're going to discover about Nicodemus, will you please bear in mind, he was a man Jesus trusted, and he knew what was in man. And trusted him at a period when he was not to men in general.

In other words, whatever else we're going to discover, will you please bear in mind, this man was a trustworthy man. He was an honorable, sincere man. Whatever else we're going to discover, please keep that in mind.

Now with that basic fact, thawed away in the back of our minds, but with that fact, what else does John tell us about Nicodemus? Now my friends, I shall never forget years ago now, when for the first time I got that. I shall never forget because at first I was very disappointed because John tells us so little about him. Of course I realized, John does recall the discussion between our Lord and Nicodemus rather fully.

But as to the man himself, you've only got three facts. This is all that John says. He says now there was a man of the Pharisee named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews.

And that's all you've got. John plunges right into his record of the discussion. As he says, the same came to him by night and the conversation opened.

And quite literally, I remember so well, sitting in my study at home, with those three fingers as they are now, suggesting those three facts. And I said to myself, I don't see a great deal there upon which I can build an interesting character study. A man of the Pharisee named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews.

And as I sat in my study at home contemplating those facts, there flashed into my mind that wonderful bit of writing, as I think, by Robert Louis Stevenson, Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. I'm sure you've all read the story. If you haven't read the story, you may have seen the moving picture.

You know, that's a lazy man's way of getting a book. But be that as it may, whether you've read the story or seen the movie, you know it's the story of a man with a sort of dual same man. When that flashed into my mind, I said, now wait a minute, I wonder if John is introducing me to a man with a sort of triple personality, complex in his makeup, three entirely different sides to the same person suggested by those three phrases.

Now I merely tell you of that experience in the study at home, because I want you to look with me tonight at this man as a man with a sort of, let's take a minute or two with those expressions. He was a man of the

parities. Now I'm sure we remember that word parities simply means separate.

The parities as a group were men who had separated themselves from all others, aiming at a more than ordinary sanctity, holiness, strictness of religious life and observance. And my friends, that's always a good thing to do, to separate yourself from the general run of men and aim seriously. It always has its peculiarities.

And the danger is, lest those thus separating themselves become spiritually proud, self-righteous, spiritually snobbish. And from your familiarity with all these stories, John tells us he was a ruler. In all his dealings with them, he was the ruler.

He never allowed them to forget his position. He never allowed any familiarity. He never permitted any liberties.

In all his dealings with the common people, the Jews, he was the ruler. I want you to detect the difference. It would not be accurate at all for John to speak of him as a man of the Jews.

The Jews, the common people, they never saw the man. In all his dealings with them, he was the ruler. He never allowed them to forget his position.

It would not be accurate, I confess to you, without being reminded of an experience I had years ago now. In the deep south, and wild horses won't drag the name of the place out of it, it was a very small place. I was holding a series of services, but it was so small there was no hotel, there was no motel, and I had to stay in a private home.

And I recall that that home was rather unusual in its general layout, because not only the dining room, which of course is usual, but also the sitting room opened. And I remember one evening just before, all my friends, something had gone wrong in the kitchen. I didn't want to overhear, but I couldn't help it.

The room opened off the kitchen. But the point is, I woke up to the fact there were two sides to my hostess. A ruler of the Jews never saw, neither did Nicodemus.

When he was studying this source, from two Greek words, suggesting the Greek influence upon the life of the nation Israel at this period. It comes from the Greek word Nikos, and Nikos means triumph. Deimos means the people.

The word from which we get our word, Deimos, you see. Deimos, the people. Triumphant among the people.

You know, I can almost sit down and just dream dreams in the presence of that name alone. It seems to me I can see devout Hebrew parents bending over the crib in which their little baby boy lies. The hour is approaching when he'll have to be presented and named.

But what should we call him? And like all true parents, they were sure their wee baby boy was going to be a great man someday. And maybe it was mother who said, well, let's give him a great name. Let's call him Nikos Deimos.

Triumphant among the people. He will be someday, you wait and see. And so he came to bear that name, named Nicodemus.

My friends, whenever I stop thinking a moment about those three sides to the same man, I'm reminded of an article I read in the Reader's Digest. Oh, it's years ago now. It was entitled, Mask.

And the writer argued that practically everybody with whom we come into contact in daily life is behind a mask. Should I say mask? You know, the author, as we apply to this person we are talking about, when he was dealing with the common people, the Jews, he was just what he really was, a mask named Nicodemus. Now, it is with that, my friends, if you will sit down and read and reread, shall I say there were three cycles, to be quite technical, Nicodemus set on, Nicodemus set onto him, Nicodemus on the first movement.

You're looking at Jesus, he's behind mask number one. It's conventional. And he's gotten behind mask number two as in, in the darkness, oh, but you're bound to notice that, down to 20 confronted by, just notice in passing, for there's a whole sermon in this, before our Lord was through with him that night, all masks have been removed.

You can put up a mask when you're talking to me, and I may not realize, because as John said, he needed not that anyone should bear witness concerning man, for he himself knew what was in man. He knows you. I may not, he does.

And so gently, kindly, but definitely, he'll remove all masks. You've just got to be what you are. All right, all that, by the way, Nicodemus came, and see if you don't, he gives himself completely away, for he came by night, and he weaned us, weaned.

Why did he use the plural? He was all alone, for no one can do these things, concerning Jesus. There's no doubt they were profoundly perplexed, really. Do you remember Amos, that during a period of, oh, how God had brought his word to his people Israel, through one great prophet after another, voiced, no prophetic voice, voice from John the Baptist, students, well, who art thou, but who can he be? Now, where's that fact? I lay before him our perplexity, and in what this great, sincere, telling our Lord, quite frankly, the conclusion, the proof, that we know thou art a teacher.

These signs that fell from the lips of Jesus, the most revolutionary, all-human, amazing words, as Jesus said unto him, Verily, verily, one be born from above, he cannot see. Now, think through that. In effect, our Lord was saying, Nicodemus, the whole mystery of my life and me, is one of the things of the kingdom of God.

And by your first birth, you do not have the wherewithal to see the things of the kingdom of God. That conclusion you tell me that you've reached, a teacher comes from God, oh, it's entirely inadequate. But you've gone as far as you can.

Along the line of human reasoning, you can't get any further. Our Lord was saying in effect, Nicodemus, by your first birth, you do have the faculties, you do have the wherewithal, if you will train and develop, to understand the things of four kingdoms. The mineral kingdom, the vegetable kingdom, the animal kingdom, the hominal or human kingdom.

But by your first birth, you haven't got the wherewithal to see the things of the kingdom of God. Oh, that cuts clean of crops, all worldly wisdom like. Sit down sometime and think what that means.

It means you can go to grammar school, you can go to high school, you can go to college, you can go to university, you can take postgraduate courses galore. But they cannot enable you to even see the things

of the kingdom of God. You've got to receive new life from above, if you're ever to see.

Oh, I remember some years ago, I was holding services in a college town. They were all held on the college, because they had a larger auditorium there. It was the month of May.

Final examinations were all over. The following week, students were all going home. So many of them attended the services.

It was a lovely month of May. And I remember night after night that week, I sat out under the trees of that campus as students came and talked to me. I remember one young lady especially.

She came and said, now I represent quite a group here at this college. I don't know how to explain the thing, but we're terribly perplexed about the things of our faith. She said, I better explain my own position.

She went on to tell me about herself. She came from a very small town. Her father was a Methodist minister.

Now she said, I grew up in the atmosphere of that home and of that church. I never had any difficulty with the things of our faith. But I've come away to this college campus, and to my amazement, I might always believe.

They're not believed here. She said, I never had any difficulty in believing in the story, as Mark and Luke tells us, of the surge in birth of our Lord. Well, it's not believed here.

Not even in our Bible, thanks. I always believed in the wonderful things Jesus did, what we speak of as his miracles. They're all explained away here.

I always thought of Jesus as God incarnate. I believed in his deity. They don't here.

Oh, they believe he was divine in a sense as we are, but not in his deity. She said, I always believed and almost got excited about the resurrection story. They're not believed here.

Yes, they believe he rose, and she said, I've told you about it. But I've got to say, in fact, I just happened to know, because of their own, neither dad or mother had their academic ability. But all right, they surely ought to know better than my dad, and we to listen to them.

And my friend said, there are thousands of young people up against that door. Of course, I took the girl right here. Except a man be born from above who can't see these things, much less is he in a position to speak with authority about them.

My friends, if I had some problem in the realms of things of the kingdom of God, I would much rather go and sit down and talk to any salvation army lassie that's been born from above than I would if he was still living to Thomas Edison. I'm not speaking disrespectfully of that amazing man, for such he most surely was. Oh, it was indeed, but insofar as his public utterance, he was never in a position to speak concerning the things of the kingdom of God.

Oh, if I wanted to know something concerning the mystery of how this thing works, although I wouldn't think of going to any salvation army, but that's another kingdom. If I had some problem in the realm of the things Nicodemus sat on, it means we've got to listen. In effect, Nicodemus was saying, let me tell you our philosophy of life, and life's a growth, isn't it? What I am as I stand in front of these things, now that I can't

go back to receive this new second birth, the result physically should be Jesus answers.

He cannot enter into the kingdom of God. You can see maybe from the Mount of Olives story of him when he was quite a young man, weather-beaten old fellow, what we'd call him, but seeing that weather-beaten old fellow, he ought to be able to tell me. He didn't wait till he knew it.

Repentance, the clear teaching of your new testament is turning away from known sin, believe on the law of Jesus Christ, bring with the ability to see and understand the things of the kingdom of God. Nicodemus answered and said, how can these things become? How is it going until that hour? And I guess what? Half any of the rich proud Judeans to the south, all right, all I want you to see in that second picture is this. When Nicodemus, he's no longer, he was humanly speaking, they've done their work.

Two men come to him. They begin with the grave cloth. I notice one of the two has brought a big bundle, myrrh and aloes.

And as I look, I say, surely that's Nicodemus. And I say to myself, well it can't be. He's a ruler.

Where were the rulers back then? Well, you all know. When that flood staked in it, teared up by the rulers. Well, you can't clasp him with the rulers, can you? And he's already broken with the Pharisees.

What have you got left? A man named Nicodemus, triumphant among the people. Oh, I can dream. If so, I wonder if their minds were, if they were, I can believe they looked through tears and looked up and said, praise be to Jehovah.

Are we laddies grown up worthy of that great big name we gave him? He's triumphant among the people today. They've crucified the son of God, but at least our lad is showing his devotion. Oh, you know, that makes me think of another of the great excesses that fell from the lips of our fathers.

Usually no wife entering to the kingdom. Isn't that what I see happening to this man? The first time I knew him, complex. He's just like a little child, following the light, obedient to the best thing that's in or one other line of thinking we're through.

I'm merely suggesting that. Do you think that night when we talked to our Lord, that first picture, do you think this man talked again and talked differently? Because if so, that's repentance. Do you think we could write across that first story of repentance? And this second story, there doesn't seem any doubt about it.

It was when the Pharisees said, have any of the rulers believed? Or the Pharisees? This man spoke up instantly. It certainly looked as though he believed in some measure. And if so, that's faith.

Do you think we might write across the second story of faith? There doesn't seem any doubt at all about the first. He's confessing to any who care to witness what he's doing, his love and his loyalty. But those are the three things we said were the equivalent of hoisting the sail.

And so I go on with my wondering. I only have to say that day when all the symbolism of the old feet, where was Nicodemus? Wherever he was. If those three things are true, life from above, can it be possible though? Oh yes, he's that indeed.

God of very God, one with the Father, the eternal Son, by whom, through whom, unto whom, all saviour of the world. You see other people while they do well, you just don't see them. My dear friend, turn from all known things.

Believe on the Lord Jesus. Let the world know where you stand. God isn't road.

Just the sea is only the God.

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