

THE LORD AND NICODEMUS

John 3:1-21

This lesson may be approached through what was said in the lesson on John 1 of the attitude of the religious leaders. Nicodemus was an exception, and yet even he did not quite want to stand openly for the Lord. This is a doctrinal lesson, more important for the older young people and adults but still interesting for young children.

Doctrinal Points

The Lord knows our worldly circumstances and makes allowance for our weakness.

The teachings of the Word are given to help and save us, not to make life hard or to condemn.

Disbelief in the Lord comes from unwillingness to live as He would have us live.

We may often recognize evil in our hearts by our efforts to cover up our real feelings.

Notes for Parents

We are told in the first verse of our lesson that Nicodemus was a Pharisee and also that he was a “ruler” of the Jews. The latter term means that he was a member of the Sanhedrin, the high religious court, which had seventy members and was presided over by the high priest. This was the court by which the Lord was later tried and condemned. The Pharisees were a sect who prided themselves on their strict observance of all the religious rules, and we know that the Lord called them hypocrites. They opposed the Lord because His teaching undermined their selfish rule over the people.

Nicodemus showed intellectual independence in differing from the opinion of his fellows with regard to the Lord, and he evidently

wanted to learn from Him but at the time of our story did not quite have the courage to come to the Lord openly. The Lord did not wait for Nicodemus to ask a question. He knows all that is in our hearts and minds. He knew that Nicodemus, like many who came to him, wanted most of all to know how to get to heaven. So He began immediately to show him that the worldly and selfish attitudes into which we are all born must be changed if we are to become citizens of the kingdom of heaven.

John the Baptist had said, “I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance, but he that cometh after me . . . shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost and with fire.” The baptism with water represents reformation—the cleansing of our outward conduct by means of truth from the Word. The baptism with the Holy Ghost (the Holy Spirit) and with fire is the coming into our minds and hearts of the Lord’s truth and unselfish love as we try to drive out false thoughts and evil desires. This is regeneration.

Two other very important things the Lord told Nicodemus. One was that He had come into the world not to condemn people but to save them. People who try to bring others to their particular brand of religion by inspiring them with fear of the Lord’s judgment should study this verse. The Lord never comes to condemn. If we are condemned, it is by our own choice of self and the world, for selfishness and worldliness are the loves which make hell. There is a kind of “fear of the Lord” which is right and good, but it is not fear of punishment. It is the fear of doing anything against the one who loves us so much.

The other lesson is one which Nicodemus needed and which we all often need. It is found in verses 19 to 21. Whenever we try to cover up our real thoughts and feelings, there is a warning signal. Either our thoughts and feelings are not what they should be, or we are not brave enough to speak the truth openly.

For every one that doeth evil hateth the light, neither cometh to the light, lest his deeds should be reproved.

But he that doeth truth cometh to the light, that his deeds may be made manifest, that they are wrought in God.

Primary

First discuss the scribes and Pharisees and the reason for their attitude toward the Lord. Then take up Nicodemus and do what you can with the Lord's instruction to him. The younger children will be more interested in the reason why he came to the Lord by night than in what the Lord told him. You may be able to show them that it is not always the things we see which are most powerful and most important. Verse 8 will help here.

When the Lord came into the world, the most respected among the people were the Pharisees. They were a group who considered themselves more religious than others. They had made up all sorts of rules which were not in the Scriptures and had made the people think that only those who kept all these rules were good. Most of the people did not have the Scriptures themselves and so did not know that the rules of the Pharisees were not part of the law which came from God.

The Lord did not keep the rules of the Pharisees, and He showed the people that the Pharisees were only pretending to be better than other people because they liked to be admired and obeyed. Naturally this made the Pharisees hate the Lord. They tried in every possible way to destroy the people's belief in Him. They could not deny His power to do miracles, but they said His power came from the devil.

But even among the Pharisees there were some men who wanted to do what was right.

One of these was the man in our lesson for today.

What was his name?

He was also a "ruler" of the Jews.

That meant a member of the great council of seventy which ruled the religious affairs of the nation.

What made Nicodemus believe in the Lord?

He was not quite brave enough to come to Him openly.

When did he come to the Lord?

What was the first thing the Lord told him?

Nicodemus could not understand this.

How did the Lord tell him a man must be born in order to enter the kingdom of heaven?

This means that we must learn to think about our souls instead of just about our bodies.

We cannot see our souls any more than we can see the wind.

But our souls are what make our bodies do all that they do.

So our souls are much more important than our bodies.

If our souls are to be healthy, we must learn about the Lord and what He wants us to do.

This was why the Lord came into the world.

He did not come to make life hard for us, but to teach us how to live so that we may be happy both here and in heaven.



Junior

This is a good opportunity to make sure that the Juniors understand who the scribes and Pharisees were and the reason for their attitude toward the Lord. They can also understand why Nicodemus came by night. The more important lessons in the Lord's words to Nicodemus can at least be suggested. There are several helpful Bible references for them to look up.

In Gospel times what two groups were considered the religious leaders?

The scribes were men who made copies of the Scriptures and also interpreted and taught them. The Pharisees were a sect who prided themselves on being more strictly religious than others. The Lord called both the scribes and the Pharisees hypocrites. A hypocrite is a person who pretends to be something he is not.

What had the scribes and Pharisees done to the Scriptures?

In our lesson for today who came to the Lord by night?

What two things do we learn about Nicodemus in the first verse?

A "ruler" of the Jews was a member of the Sanhedrin, the supreme council of seventy members who decided all religious matters. Most of the rulers rejected the claim of Jesus to be the promised Messiah. They wanted and expected a Messiah who would make their nation great again and so increase their own power and glory. When the Lord instead told them they must change their own ways, they tried in every possible way to discredit Him. As they could not deny the fact that He performed miracles, they claimed that His power came from the devil.

But there were at least two members of the Sanhedrin who did not agree with the rest. One was Nicodemus and the other Joseph

of Arimathea. Read John 7:45-53 and Luke 23:50-52. Nicodemus was an honest man and could see that the power Jesus exercised must come from God, but he was not quite brave enough to stand openly against the opinions of those with whom he had to associate every day. So he came to the Lord secretly—by night.

Notice that the Lord gave him an answer before he even asked a question. The Lord always knows what is in our minds. Nicodemus was concerned about the way to heaven.

What did the Lord tell him?

What kind of birth did He say was necessary?

Do you remember who baptized with water?

What had John the Baptist said about the Lord's baptism? (John 1:33)

To be "born of water and of the Spirit" means to have both our outward and our inward life—our conduct and our thoughts and feelings—made pure and good by obeying the teachings of the Lord. The Holy Ghost or Holy Spirit is the Lord's Spirit working in us.

The story of the serpent in the wilderness referred to in verses 14 and 15 you will find in Numbers 21:5-9. A serpent, which goes along on the ground, is a symbol of our bodily senses, which are always in contact with the physical world. The Lord showed us what our life in this world is for and how we should use it. He is the example which we should always hold up before us. This is what He means by comparing Himself to the serpent in the wilderness.

The teaching of the Lord in verses 14 to 21 you will understand better when you are older, but you can see a little of its meaning now if you will read John 18:37. The Lord came into the world to teach and to live out the truth so that we may know surely what it is, and be free to do right or wrong by our own choice. Those who reject the Lord do so of their own free will, because they do not want to know and obey the truth. And if we reject the truth and so do wrong, the consequences of our wrong deeds are not from the Lord but of our own making.

The second birth of which the Lord told Nicodemus, which is also called regeneration, is the process of learning the Lord's laws and making ourselves obey them until they have become a part of

our very life. Then the love of right can come into our hearts from the Lord, and we can become truly His children.

Nicodemus remained faithful to the Lord all his life. Read John 19:38-42.

Intermediate

The important lesson for this class is the meaning of being born again of water and the Spirit. Other lessons are also suggested below.

Nicodemus came to the Lord by night. This was, in the literal sense, undoubtedly because open association with the Lord would have brought upon him ridicule and censure from the other “rulers” with whom he constantly associated. For a “ruler of the Jews” was a member of the Sanhedrin, the supreme council, composed of seventy priests and lawyers. In the spiritual sense the night pictures the ignorance of his mind with regard to spiritual truth.

That Nicodemus was a thoughtful man we know because he did not agree with the vast majority of his fellows, but saw that the power manifested in the Lord must come from God. That he was a good man we know because he came to the Lord to ask the way of life, and also because he remained steadfast in his belief in the face of overwhelming opposition. Read John 7:40-53 and 19:39. This took real courage. At the time of our lesson he had not yet developed this courage. The Lord did not at once rebuke Nicodemus for coming to Him secretly, but in verse 21, after His preliminary instruction, He showed him the right course. The Lord knows all our weaknesses and makes allowance for them, but this should not lead us to excuse ourselves.

The Lord also knows what is in our hearts without our telling Him. He saw immediately just what was the question which was in the mind of Nicodemus, and went at once to the heart of the answer. It was essentially the same answer which He gave to others and which He gives to all who look to Him for the way. To be born again, to be born of water and of the Spirit, is another injunction to repent and follow the teachings of the Lord’s truth. You remem-

ber that the wilderness journey of the Israelites represented the period of reformation—the putting in order of our outward conduct—and that John’s baptism with water also represents this. Now read again John 1:33. Regeneration—the bringing of our inner thoughts and feelings into the Lord’s order, which the conquest of the Holy Land represented—is the baptism with the Holy Ghost or Holy Spirit. Regeneration means rebirth.

The same lesson is taught in verses 14 and 15. The serpent pictures the sense life and brass is the symbol of good on the external plane. The brazen serpent which Moses was commanded to raise up on a pole in the wilderness (Numbers 21:5-9) pictures the right use of the sense life, its use to promote the spiritual life. This was exactly the use which the Lord made of the finite humanity which He assumed when He was born into the world. So this reference to the brazen serpent links the Lord’s teaching concerning the second birth, or regeneration, with the statement which follows about His purpose in coming into the world. He came as the truth—the Son—to give the world the light by which men might safely walk. The world had lost its way. The Jews alone had the Word and they had so obscured it by their traditions that even Nicodemus did not know what it really taught.

There is a very plain lesson for all of us in verses 19 to 21. When we are bent on having our own way, we do not want to hear the truth: we prefer to walk in darkness. When we really are trying to do right, we seek the truth, the light. In simple terms this means that whenever we find ourselves trying to conceal our real thoughts and feelings, it is time to examine ourselves carefully to see if our thoughts are true and our feelings kind. And whenever we find ourselves resentful of criticism and impatient of advice, it is time to ask ourselves if what we are doing is really right in the Lord’s sight. We should always remember that our friends are also instruments of the Lord and that the Lord may be using them as means in His constant effort to help and save us. Read verses 16 and 17 of our chapter.

Basic Correspondences

- the serpent = the sense life
brass = good on the external plane
to be born of water = the reformation of the outward
conduct
to be born of the Spirit = regeneration, the changing of our
thoughts and feelings by the Lord's
Spirit
night = a state of ignorance
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Senior

To the lesson suggested for the Intermediates add especially the suggestion made in the Senior notes on the basis of verse 8. Young people need this sort of weapon with which to meet skepticism and materialism, Swedenborg quotes this verse in AC 10240 (where it reads “Spirit” in the first part of the verse where “wind” seems more reasonable, since an analogy is involved). [See, however, AE 130, 183, AR 343 where *ventus* (wind) is used, and also AC 8246, which says “spirit” (or wind).] –Ed.]

In *Divine Providence*, n. 83 Swedenborg tells us: “No one can come into the kingdom of God unless he has been born again, for the reason that man by his inheritance from his parents is born into evils of every kind, but with an ability to become spiritual by the removal of those evils; and unless he becomes spiritual he cannot come into heaven. From being natural to become spiritual is to be born again or regenerated.” Elsewhere (*New Jerusalem and Its Heavenly Doctrine*, n. 174): “Man is not born of his parents into spiritual life, but into natural life. Spiritual life consists in loving God above all things, and in loving his neighbor as himself, and this according to the precepts of faith which the Lord has taught in the Word. But natural life consists in loving ourselves and the world more than the neighbor, yea, more than God Himself.”

Nicodemus was a good man. His comments and questions show clearly the obscurity into which even the good had fallen when the Lord came into the world. He knew of no other birth than natural birth, and could not understand what the Lord meant when He

said one must be born of water and of the spirit. People today are often handicapped in the same way by the materialism of our times. Verse 8 of our chapter suggests a good answer to those who say, “How can I believe in spiritual things which I cannot see?” We cannot see the wind, but we are sure it exists because we see and feel its effects. We can all likewise—if we use our reason—see and feel the effects of spiritual forces.

We can connect the Lord’s words with John the Baptist’s statement (Matthew 3:11): “I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance: but he that cometh after me is mightier than I, whose shoes I am not worthy to bear: he shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost, and with fire.” The baptism with water is the cleansing of the outward life, the baptism with the Holy Ghost (or Holy Spirit) the purification of the thoughts, and the baptism with fire the replacing of self-love by love to the Lord and the neighbor.

The Lord came into the world as divine truth. In the internal sense Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are divine love, divine wisdom, and divine proceeding or operation in the world, a trinity to which will, thought, and act in each of us are analogous. Divine truth is the light of the world. If we recognize and obey it, we walk in the light. If we reject it, we walk in darkness.

The teaching in verses 18 to 21 is very clear and really gives us the whole doctrine concerning judgment. How anyone can read it and believe in predestination is hard to see—or for that matter in punishment as coming from God or in universal salvation or in faith alone.

The Lord as the truth came into the world that men might know the way with certainty. The only reason why men have rejected Him is because they “loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil.” There are no rational grounds for rejecting the Lord—only selfish grounds. It is wholly a matter of our free choice. From the beginning the Lord has always given men light for their way if they were willing to use it. Jeremiah wrote: “And the Lord hath sent unto you all his servants the prophets, rising early and sending them; but ye have not hearkened, nor inclined your ear to hear.”

There is a lesson for us, too, in the fact that Nicodemus came to the Lord by night. It was, of course, a symbol of his ignorance, but it also showed his unwillingness to face the consequences of showing his real opinion in public. Whenever we feel ourselves unwilling to be “open” in our dealing, it is time to take stock of ourselves. We may, like Nicodemus, be thinking rightly but ashamed to stand up for what we think. Or we may be selfish in our thoughts and feelings and trying to pretend that we are not. In either case something needs correction. The Lord knows our weaknesses and deals with us very kindly, trying to lead us to face ourselves honestly. Notice that although he did not charge Nicodemus with his cowardice, His instruction led finally to the statement in verse 21, which clearly pointed out his fault. Read John 7:45-53, which shows that Nicodemus at least made an effort to support the Lord after this, and also John 19:39, which shows us that Nicodemus remained a faithful follower of the Lord.



Adult

There are several good discussion topics here: the reason why people accept or reject the Lord, the meaning of reformation and regeneration and the necessity for them, the purpose of the Lord’s coming, and the reason why people are saved or condemned.

Nicodemus was a Pharisee and a ruler of the Jews, yet he believed that the Lord came from God, and he came to Him for instruction. The Pharisees were a sect who adhered very strictly to the literal observance of the religious laws. We know from the Lord’s own words that they were for the most part hypocrites (Matthew 23:25-28), keeping the law only externally and caring nothing for its spirit. Nicodemus was evidently altogether ignorant of the meaning of the Scriptures, for he did not understand what the Lord is talking about; yet he wanted to learn. His coming by night pictures his state of ignorance, as well as his fear of the judgment of his worldly associates. His recognition of the Lord’s authority was based not upon any understanding of the Lord’s character but

upon the miracles He had performed. The Lord did not immediately call his attention to his cowardice in coming by night, but explained to him with divine patience just what his state was and what was needful if he was to attain the kingdom of heaven. We should note, however, that His instruction led up to the statement in verse 21, which must have shown Nicodemus his weakness. The Lord did not advise Nicodemus, as He did the rich young man, to leave his wealth and position and follow Him, but He pointed out the necessity of a change in his inner attitudes.

That Nicodemus remained true to the Lord is attested by his attempt to defend Him later (John 7:50) and by the fact that he was one of the two rich men who cared for the Lord's body after the crucifixion (John 19:39). The Lord always recognizes our outward circumstances and the limitations they impose on us. Recall the permission given to Naaman the Syrian by Elisha (II Kings 5:18-19) and the Lord's prayer for His disciples: "I pray not that thou shouldest take them out of the world, but that thou shouldest keep them from the evil." (John 17:15)

We know that throughout the Word natural birth and development are analogous to regeneration, but the Jews had no such knowledge, although more ancient people had had it (AC 4904²). Regeneration, which means rebirth, does not take place suddenly and all at once, but gradually and progressively, like natural conception, birth, and growth. Nothing could be clearer than Swedenborg's explanation of the Lord's teaching in our lesson: "No one can come into the kingdom of God unless he has been born again, for the reason that man by inheritance from his parents is born into evils of every kind, but with an ability to become spiritual by the removal of those evils; and unless he becomes spiritual, he cannot come into heaven. From being natural to become spiritual is to be born again or regenerated." (DP 83) "Man is not born of his parents into spiritual life, but into natural life. Spiritual life consists in loving God above all things, and in loving his neighbor as himself, and this according to the precepts of faith, which the Lord has taught in the Word. But natural life consists in loving our-

selves and the world more than the neighbor, yea, more than God Himself.” (NJHD 174) See also NJHD 179 below. A detailed explanation of verses 5 to 8 of our chapter is given in AC 10240.

We are familiar with the teaching concerning reformation and regeneration, for we had it in the stories of the wilderness wanderings and the conquest of the Holy Land. Reformation is the first part, our first duty, the setting in order of our outward lives in accordance with the truths of the Word. Regeneration begins when we begin to try to recognize and fight our inner foes, the evils and falsities in our hearts and minds, enabling the Lord’s spirit to enter as we drive out the things which oppose it. This inflow of the Lord’s spirit is compared to the wind. We do not see it but we are conscious of its effects. It may be noted that it is the same word in the Greek which is translated “spirit” in most of the chapter and “wind” in verse 8, the context suggesting the change in translation. The Greek word has both meanings. The same lesson is taught in the brief parable in Mark 4:26-29. Reformation and regeneration are also described in the work of John the Baptist and that of the Lord, and John the Baptist uses words similar to those in our chapter in Matthew 3:11. That only the Lord’s spirit has power to raise men into heaven is taught in verses 11 to 15. The brazen serpent lifted up in the wilderness for the healing of the people was a symbol of the Lord’s sensual nature which He lifted up by conquering all its temptations, thus showing us the way to heaven. The human which He took on in the world was in the inverted order described above, but in His life in the world He progressively glorified it, that we might see what the true order is and form our lives according to it. By the second birth, the birth of a new character from the Lord’s spirit working within us, we become children of our heavenly Father. “But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name: Which were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.”

Naturally we think of those teachings of the Word which oppose our selfish impulses as hard. The Lord seems to condemn. Yet we

have intelligence enough to see that this is not so. In Deuteronomy 6:24 we are told that the Lord commands us to keep His statutes and to fear Him “for our good always.” The Lord came into the world in a human which He calls His Son to show us the nature of His love, to show us that He is always ready to give us His love if we will only open the way for it in our souls by putting aside the evils which shut Him out. He wants us to be happy, and He knows that happiness can never come through self-seeking. He teaches us this by every means in His power, by plain instruction, by parable, by miracle, by personal experience, by His own life in the world. If we believe in Him—really believe in Him so that we take His advice—we shall without fail be happy; we shall have “everlasting life.” But if we do not believe in Him, we are “condemned,” not by Him but by our own choice of worldliness and self-seeking, which are bound to lead us to unhappiness.

To believe in the Lord’s “name” is to believe in His character, to believe that the love, humility, meekness, and gentleness which He manifested are truly divine characteristics, virtues to be cultivated. If we do not believe this, we are, as He says, “condemned already.” For the love of self and the world which we cultivate instead of His virtues is in itself the fire of hell. Verses 19 to 21 are easily understood. We know that when we are bent upon having our own way, we will not listen to advice; we do not want the light of truth to show us that our way is wrong. This is the fundamental reason for disbelief in the Lord—unwillingness to recognize our evils and to correct our lives according to His teachings. Whenever we are anxious to cover up our deeds, or our thoughts, or our feelings, we may recognize it as a danger signal, for “he that doeth truth cometh to the light, that his deeds may be made manifest, that they are wrought in God.”

From the Writings of Swedenborg

The New Jerusalem and Its Heavenly Doctrine, n. 179: “Every one has an internal man and an external man; the internal is what is called the spiritual

man, and the external is what is called the natural man, and each is to be regenerated, that the man may be regenerated. With the man who is not regenerated, the external or natural man rules, and the internal serves; but with the man who is regenerated, the internal or spiritual man rules, and the external serves. Whence it is manifest that the order of life is inverted with man from his birth, namely, that serves which ought to rule, and that rules which ought to serve. In order that man may be saved, this order must be inverted; and this inversion can by no means exist, but by regeneration from the Lord.’

Suggested Questions on the Lesson

- J. Who were the (1) scribes, and (2) Pharisees? *(1) men who copied the Scriptures, (2) a strict religious sect*
- J. What had they done to the Scriptures? *added many of their own ideas*
- J. What did the Lord call them? *hypocrites*
- J. Why were they opposed to the Lord? *he exposed their hypocrisy*
- P. What is the name of the man in our lesson for today? *Nicodemus*
- J. What was he besides being a Pharisee? *a ruler (member of Sanhedrin)*
- P. Why did he come to the Lord by night? *afraid of ridicule*
- J. Why did he believe in the Lord? *miracles*
- J. What did the Lord see he wanted to ask? *way to heaven*
- P. What did the Lord tell him? *you must be born again*
- I. What did the Lord mean by being “born again”? *repent, follow His teachings*
- J. What did the Lord say about the brazen serpent in the wilderness?
. . . so must Son of man be lifted up
- J. Why did the Lord say He came into the world? *to save it*
- J. Why does He say some people are condemned? *will not believe*
- J. Why should we stop to think every time we find ourselves trying to cover up our thoughts or feelings or actions? *probably means we just want our own way*
- I. What does it mean to be “born of water”? *outer life cleansed*
- S. What does it mean to be “born of the Spirit”? *inner life purified*
- S. How is this related to the work of (1) John the Baptist, and (2) the Lord?
(1) cleansing outer life
(2) purifying thoughts, replacing self-love with love of the Lord and the neighbor