

For God So Loved the World

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Jesus once said, “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). This is arguably the best-known teaching of Jesus, but also the least understood. The conversation in which Jesus made this statement is deeply revealing about God, Jesus, the Spirit, and how we are to interact with them. In this article, we will attempt to unpack this teaching of Jesus.

About the Context

1. The danger of preconceptions. This conversation was initiated by a Jewish rabbi: Nicodemus. He was a formally educated member of the Sanhedrin Council. He and his colleagues had been carefully observing Jesus. Nicodemus was curious enough to come to Jesus directly.

Nicodemus came with two bold assertions about Jesus: 1.) We know. 2.) You are a teacher from God. As the dialogue commenced, it became clear to Jesus that Nicodemus did not know. Jesus explained vital information about the kingdom of God; yet, Nicodemus did not understand anything Jesus was saying. Jesus was surprised by Nicodemus’ lack of insight. Jesus said, “...Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?” (John 3:10).

Yes, Jesus was a teacher from God; however, Jesus was much more. Jesus was not like Nicodemus. Jesus was the Son of God. His divinity established(s) His supremacy over us. We need to be cautious in declaring to Jesus what we know about Him. Preconceptions will prevent us from understanding Jesus and keep us out of the kingdom of God.

2. The necessity of the new birth. Jesus commanded, “...Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God” (John 3:3). At this point, Nicodemus could not accept that Jesus’ command applied to him. Nicodemus was an Israelite, a child of Abraham, and a Pharisee. Yet, Jesus was emphatic about Nicodemus’ need to be reborn of water and the Spirit (John 3:5).

No one becomes part of the kingdom of God by nationality or biology. We are not born into the kingdom. We must be reborn. We must undergo a new and different kind of birth. We must be born from above: born of water and the Spirit. There is a spiritual rebirth that can only be accomplished by God, Jesus, and the Spirit through our faith. Unless and until we are reborn, we will never see the kingdom of God.

3. The role of the Spirit. The Spirit is a critical part of Jesus’ teaching. Jesus said, “That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’ The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit” (John 3:6-8).

Flesh alone cannot inhabit the kingdom of God. Only spirit can enter the kingdom. Therefore, we must be reborn by the Spirit. Jesus recognized the perplexity of this concept. To clarify, He used the analogy of the wind to help Nicodemus understand.

Like the wind, the Spirit is on the move whether we recognize the Spirit or not; whether we believe it or not. And, like the wind, we cannot see the Spirit. But, like the wind, we know the wind exists by what the wind produces. We feel the wind's breeze. We see trees sway. So it is with the Spirit. We cannot see the Spirit, but we can experience the Spirit's results: the Spirit's fruit. In other words, the proof of the new birth is a new way of life.

4. An unavoidable choice. Jesus was careful in what He told Nicodemus. Yet, Jesus led him to an unmistakable conclusion: Nicodemus had to decide whether or not to believe Jesus. The snake-bitten Israelites could either look at the brazen serpent on a pole in faith and live or close their eyes and die (John 3:10-14). Men could choose to believe in Jesus or they could reject Him and die in darkness (John 3:17-21). Thankfully, making the right choice has been immeasurably aided by the love of God.

The Love of God & Our Faith

1. God loves us. For the sake of our faith, God has shown us His love. Jesus said, "For God so loved the world..." (John 3:16). God's love for the world is astonishing when we consider our mistreatment of Him and His world. Despite our sin, God continues to provide for our existence. Rather than punishment, God seeks to forgive us for our malevolence.

2. God gave us His only begotten Son. Jesus attempted to convey the extent of God's love for the world. The enormity of God's love for us is revealed in Jesus. God gave the world His only begotten Son. However, God's love is more than fraternal. God's love is sacrificial and self-giving.

God gave us Jesus, the only One of His kind. God gave us His best. But, God did not just give us Jesus to live among people like Nicodemus. God gave Jesus to be raised on a pole like the brazen serpent Moses raised on a pole. God's love for us compelled Him to give us Jesus to die so that we might be saved from eternal condemnation.

3. God wants us to believe. The blessings of the new birth and eternal salvation made possible through the love of God can only be experienced by believing in Jesus. God wants us to believe that He exists. God wants us to believe that He loves us. God wants us to believe so the Spirit can regenerate us and His Son can save us.

Conclusion

John 3:16 has been aptly described as the golden text of the Bible. Jesus conveyed a wealth of teaching about our loving God and how we can receive all the goodness He offers. Yet, we must be cautioned against a warm familiarity with this text dulling our senses to the profoundness of Jesus' teaching.

Jesus shakes the foundations of what we think we know. In light of what He commanded, we need to be asking whether or not we have been reborn into the kingdom of God. We need to analyze what proof there is of the Spirit's new birth in our lives. Our salvation depends on our acceptance of what Jesus taught the night Nicodemus visited.