

Being Good doesn't save, Jesus does.

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. - John 3:16-17

The verse, John 3:16, is one of the most beloved and often quoted Bible verses. This verse and this reference have been made into logos, printed on shirts, walls, bumper stickers, and is often known by people who have never even opened a Bible. I wonder if Jesus knew that this simple sentence that He spoke to Nicodemus late into the evening of that night would be repeated so many times throughout all of history. The verse is the Gospel in a sentence, and is such a great verse to memorize as part of our essential verses of the Christian faith.

To understand the context of this verse we need to look at the setting in which it was said. In John 2 Jesus just finishes throwing the vendors out of the temple. Read John 2:14-16

In the temple he found those who were selling oxen and sheep and pigeons, and the money-changers sitting there. And making a whip of cords, he drove them all out of the temple, with the sheep and oxen. And he poured out the coins of the money-changers and overturned their tables. And he told those who sold the pigeons, "Take these things away; do not make my Father's house a house of trade."

Imagine the chaos Jesus created. Imagine going into a shopping mall today with a whip and chasing out all of the people! Many people picture Jesus as meek and mild – Not here! Jesus threw these people out because they were making the temple a place of commerce rather than a place of worship. In response to this, the leaders of the temple asked Jesus, "By whose authority do you do this?" Perhaps they were expecting that he did this with some kind of Roman mandate, perhaps they were being sarcastic thinking

that he had no right to do this. The miracle here is that Jesus wasn't arrested by the temple guard since God's time was not yet come for Jesus to be arrested and tried.

Jesus response to this question is no doubt a memorable one for the temple leaders because they used it against Him at his trial. In verse 19 Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up."

We now know that Jesus was referring to his own body, but the temple leaders must have thought He was referring to the actual building, which took over 40 years to build!

The passage goes on to tell us that many people came to see Jesus – He was in Jerusalem at Passover when many in Jerusalem would be going to the temple. Jesus continued to preach and to heal and many believed in him, but in verse 24 it tells us that Jesus did not commit himself to them because He knew what was in the heart of man. This reminds us that many people are attracted to Jesus, but only some of them are willing to commit their lives to Him. An example of this attraction or curiosity about Jesus is the target of our discussion today – a man named Nicodemus. This man was a member of the Jewish religious rulers. He was a high-ranking leader for the Jews, and would have, no doubt, been aware of Jesus' throwing people out of the temple just as few days before. He would know that the Jewish leaders hated Jesus, and he would have known that many people were healed by Jesus' power.

Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night. This is important, because he would have had plenty of time and opportunity to come to Jesus during the day, but he came at night, probably to avoid detection, and probably to hide the fact that he wanted to hear what Jesus was saying. Nicodemus was not sure of Jesus but he wanted to ask more questions. He approaches Jesus and admits that Jesus is a person from God because of the works Jesus has done. Imagine, Jesus is healing people all over the place and doing

incredible miracles. Imagine Nicodemus saying, “Ok, I guess you must be from God.... Because of the stuff you are doing can only be done by God.”

Jesus doesn't give Nicodemus a chance to ask any questions, he just jumps right in knowing what is in Nicodemus's heart by telling him that he must be born again to see heaven. This shatters Nicodemus beliefs and confuses him.

Nicodemus believed he was working his way to heaven by being a good person. The Jewish leaders followed strict rules and laws and believed if they followed these laws they would be worthy of Heaven. Jesus tells him that he must be born again to go to Heaven. Nicodemus is confused and Jesus goes back and forth with him about this for a little while. Nicodemus is thinking of earthly birth – the kind that happens to babies – and Jesus is talking about heavenly birth – the kind that happens at Salvation. Jesus then tells him the method of this birth by explaining that belief in Him is the way to a spiritual birth.

John 3:16 – 17 is how Jesus says to explain salvation.

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Jesus is telling Nicodemus that forgiveness of sin cannot come by keeping the law, and doing good. It cannot be something that is earned, but something that is given.

Nicodemus spent his whole life keeping laws, trying to do good works, and thinking that this would earn him the right to go to heaven. Jesus tells him the problem with this type of reasoning, and that the law was not given to save, but to condemn. Romans 5:20 tells us

Now the law came in to increase the trespass, but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more,

The law was given to show us that we are sinners, *not to save us from our sin*. Without the law we would not know what sin was! The law was never given to provide us a solution to our sin, sacrifices were the solution to sin. Nicodemus had these confused. God instituted sacrifices, not the law, to forgive sin. The Jewish people believed that the law could save them from their sin, but this was never God's plan.

Jesus was the true sacrifice for all sin. Verse 17 tells us that all of the world could be saved by believing on Him. Belief in Jesus, and his sacrifice for you is the **only** way to God. God loved us so much that he sent his only Son to die for us. Michael Easley, former president of Moody Bible Institute once remarked that there were some people that he might imagine dying for, but not one that he could think of that he would send his son to die for. As a father of five wonderful children I can identify with that. I couldn't imagine the love that God has for us that he would send *his Son* to die for us. Amazing!

Jesus' gift of forgiveness is a free gift – we can't earn it, and being a "good" person will not substitute for it. The only way to pay the price for your sin is death, and Jesus paid the price for your sin so that you wouldn't have to. Jesus offers his death as a sacrifice for your sin as a free gift. Won't you accept this best gift of all time?

A few years later we meet Nicodemus again in John 19. This time he is not coming by night, but going to the Jewish council and asking for Jesus' body after crucifixion. Nicodemus finally identified with Jesus as he risked his prominence and his position by taking the body of Jesus and anointing it for His burial. We don't know for sure the extent of Nicodemus's beliefs, but I'm sure that Jesus' words about being born again were in his mind as he wraps Jesus body for burial. Jesus' resurrection is the best picture ever that Nicodemus could see of being born again! Imagine – he knew Jesus was dead – he touched the dead body and wrapped it for burial. I'm sure that he heard of Jesus' resurrection (and

perhaps even saw him). This resurrection of Jesus makes Him the first of many to be re-born – or resurrected. Romans 8:29 tells us that

For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.

Jesus' resurrection is our proof that He paid the price for our sin. Jesus was resurrected, and God promises that many will be resurrected along with Him. What a gift Jesus gave to us. What a promise of re-birth into eternal life.

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