

SAVED (Part 4 of 6)

John chapter 3 and verses 1-2 says, “There was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews: The same came to Jesus by night, and said unto him, Rabbi, we know that thou art a teacher come from God: for no man can do these miracles that thou doest, except God be with him.”

Verse 1 tells us a great deal about Nicodemus and his belief concerning salvation. He belonged to two parties according to verse 1: First, he was a member of the Pharisees (“a man of the Pharisees”). Second, he was a member of the Sanhedrin (“a ruler of the Jews”). The Sanhedrin were a powerful ruling body of the Jews in the first-century. The Pharisees were hyper-legalists who externalized religion. Both parties had a common belief about salvation. Both parties had hatred toward Jesus. In fact, John records in chapter 9 and verse 22 that they (Pharisees) were known to put people out of the synagogue for believing in Jesus: “These *words* spake his parents, because they feared the Jews: for the Jews had agreed already, that if any man did confess that he was Christ, he should be put out of the synagogue.” This could explain why Nicodemus “came to Jesus by night” in verse 2. He was afraid of what his party might think of him, or that he himself might be excommunicated from the synagogue by the party to which he belonged. Nevertheless, he came with a sincere desire to learn – he was willing to risk everything.

Nicodemus, the Sanhedrin, and the Pharisees represent the futility of religion. They were the very epitome of all who pursue a form of godliness with no reality. Their statement of belief included adherence to more than six hundred laws, many of which were simply of their own making.

One writer in his study of these hyper-legalists said, that they believed and taught “that it was all right to swallow vinegar on the Sabbath but not to gargle it – gargling constituted labor.” The same writer also said that they believed and taught “that it was permissible to eat an egg that had been laid on the Sabbath only if the chicken was killed the next day for having violated the Sabbath.”

When Jesus said unto Nicodemus “Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God” (John 3:3), Nicodemus’s mind went into convulsions – he didn’t understand. Nicodemus had always believed that salvation was earned by works. He probably even expected Jesus to commend him for his good works. Instead, Jesus confronted him with the futility of his religion. What a disappointment. Unlike religious works, being born again was something Nicodemus could not do himself. Jesus shattered all of Nicodemus’s attainments, all his merits of human deeds, all his prerogatives of natural birth and status in life. Jesus in His words to Nicodemus makes it clear that spiritual birth is something one undergoes, not something he produces.

Jesus was demanding that Nicodemus forsake everything he stood for, and Nicodemus knew it. Far from offering Nicodemus an easy conversion, Jesus challenged him with the most difficult demand He could make. One author put it like this: “Nicodemus would gladly have given money, fasted, or performed any ritual Jesus could have prescribed. But to call him to spiritual rebirth was asking him to acknowledge his own spiritual insufficiency and turn away from everything he was committed to.”

Nicodemus knew that “the law *is* holy and the commandment holy, and just, and good” (Romans 7:12). He should have also understood that this meant that his works were inferior (lower in order) to the law. Too, he should have understood that “by the deeds [works] of the law there shall no flesh be justified in his sight: for by the law *is* the knowledge of sin” (Romans 3:20). “Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law” (Romans 3:28).

Nicodemus should have known that his whole religious system was faulty, and could not save. Being the man that he was, and holding the position that he held, he should have understood this – but he didn’t! He didn’t understand that “he” needed salvation.

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