

The Teachings of Jesus

Growing in Christ

Lesson #6 for August 9, 2014

Scriptures: John 3:1-15; 2 Corinthians 5:17; John 15:4-10; Matthew 6:9-13; Luke 9:23-24.
Key References: *Steps to Christ* chapter 5; *Desire of Ages* chapter 17.

1. Read John 3:1-15. Nicodemus was attracted by the preaching and the demeanor of that Rabbi from Galilee. He wondered if Jesus could be the Messiah. But, he knew that if he approached Jesus openly, it would raise lots of questions and might jeopardize his position in the Sanhedrin. So, he sought an opportunity to interview Jesus at night.
2. When they met, Nicodemus greeted Jesus very respectfully. Jesus recognized that this was not a time for casual greetings.

He said to Nicodemus, It is not theoretical knowledge you need so much as spiritual regeneration. You need not to have your curiosity satisfied, but to have a new heart. You must receive a new life from above before you can appreciate heavenly things. Until this change takes place, making all things new, it will result in no saving good for you to discuss with Me My authority or My mission.

Nicodemus had heard the preaching of John the Baptist concerning repentance and baptism, and pointing the people to One who should baptize with the Holy Spirit. He himself had felt that there was a lack of spirituality among the Jews, that, to a great degree, they were controlled by bigotry and worldly ambition. He had hoped for a better state of things at the Messiah's coming. Yet the heart-searching message of the Baptist had failed to work in him conviction of sin. He was a strict Pharisee, and prided himself on his good works. He was widely esteemed for his benevolence and his liberality in sustaining the temple service, and he felt secure of the favor of God. He was startled at the thought of a kingdom too pure for him to see in his present state....

But by virtue of his birth as an Israelite he regarded himself as sure of a place in the kingdom of God. He felt that he needed no change. Hence his surprise at the Saviour's words. He was irritated by their close application to himself. The pride of the Pharisee was struggling against the honest desire of the seeker after truth. He wondered that Christ should speak to him as He did, not respecting his position as ruler in Israel. (*Desire of Ages* 171.1-3.)

3. Nicodemus was thrown off his guard. He certainly did not expect to have this humble Galilean challenge his most precious beliefs.
4. So, what was Jesus asking Nicodemus to do?

He who is trying to reach heaven by his own works in keeping the law is attempting an impossibility. There is no safety for one who has merely a legal religion, a form of godliness. The Christian's life is not a modification or improvement of the old, but a transformation of nature. There is a death to self and sin, and a new life altogether. This change can be brought about only by the effectual working of the Holy Spirit. (Desire of Ages 172.1.) [Italics and bold type are added.]

5. What does it mean to be "born again"? *Being born again* does not yield itself to a technical analysis. Some 60 years after this interview and under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, John used the Greek word *pneuma*, which can mean either "wind" or "spirit," to describe what

needs to happen. In either case we can see the effects of the wind or of the Spirit, but we cannot see the cause.

6. Do you think Nicodemus really believed that he needed a new heart? Was Nicodemus changed by that conversation? Do you think he slept that night? Was his mind racing with dueling ideas challenging his thinking? Could it be that his descent from Abraham and his position as a Pharisee and a member of the Sanhedrin did not guarantee him a place in heaven? For three years, Nicodemus mulled over these ideas from that night conference. But, already he was being changed.

In a [168] council of the Sanhedrin, when the course to be pursued toward Jesus was considered, Nicodemus advised caution and moderation. He urged that if Jesus was really invested with authority from God, it would be perilous to reject His warnings. The priests [Sadducees] dared not disregard this counsel, and for the time they took no open measures against the Saviour.

Since hearing Jesus, Nicodemus had anxiously studied the prophecies relating to the Messiah; and the more he searched, the stronger was his conviction that this was the One who was to come. With many others in Israel he had been greatly distressed by the profanation of the temple. **He was a witness of the scene when Jesus drove out the buyers and the sellers; he beheld the wonderful manifestation of divine power; he saw the Saviour receiving the poor and healing the sick; he saw their looks of joy, and heard their words of praise; and he could not doubt that Jesus of Nazareth was the Sent of God.** (*Desire of Ages* 167.2-168.1.) [Content in brackets and bold type are added.] (Compare John 2:13-22.)

In the interview with Nicodemus, **Jesus unfolded the plan of salvation, and His mission to the world. In none of His subsequent discourses did He explain so fully, step by step, the work necessary to be done in the hearts of all who would inherit the kingdom of heaven.** At the very beginning of His ministry He opened the truth to a member of the Sanhedrin, to the mind that was most receptive, and to an appointed teacher of the people. But the leaders of Israel did not welcome the light. **Nicodemus hid the truth in his heart, and for three years there was little apparent fruit.** (*Desire of Ages* 176.1.) [Bold type is added.]

7. Why did Jesus call the conversion experience a new birth? Perhaps you have seen the bumper sticker which says: "Born once, die twice. Born twice, die once!" What is implied by those words? Jesus was trying to teach this Jewish leader that the dry ceremonies that were being practiced in the temple in Jerusalem could no more save one than that serpent of brass that Moses erected in the wilderness. (See *Desire of Ages* 174.4.)

There are similarities between physical and spiritual births. Both mark the beginning of a new life. Also, we produce neither birth ourselves; it's done for us. But there is also an important difference between them: we were unable to choose if we wanted to be born physically; we can, however, choose to be born spiritually. Only those who freely decide to allow the Holy Spirit to generate a new spiritual self within them are born again. God respects our freedom and, although eager to transform us, He does not change us by force. (*Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide* for Sunday, August 3.)

8. How about you? How did your conversion change you? Perhaps you were raised as an Adventist. Did you see a real change when you are baptized? Does our church need some really changed people? Nicodemus was definitely changed by his experience with Christ.

In the Sanhedrin council he [Nicodemus] repeatedly thwarted the schemes of the priests to destroy Him [Jesus]. (*Desire of Ages* 176.2. Compare *DA* 538.3.) [Content in brackets is added.]

After the Lord's ascension, when the disciples were scattered by persecution, Nicodemus came boldly to the front. He employed his wealth in sustaining the infant church that the Jews had expected to be blotted out at the death of Christ. In the time of peril he who had been so cautious and questioning was firm as a rock, encouraging the faith of the disciples, and furnishing means to carry forward the work of the gospel. He was scorned and persecuted by those who had paid him reverence in other days. He became poor in this world's goods; yet he faltered not in the faith which had its beginning in that night conference with Jesus.

Nicodemus related to John the story of that interview, and by his pen it was recorded for the instruction of millions. The truths there taught are as important today as they were on that solemn night in the shadowy mountain, when the Jewish ruler came to learn the way of life from the lowly Teacher of Galilee. (*Desire of Ages* 177.1-2.)

9. The Holy Spirit is constantly seeking to draw us individually to Christ. We can resist; or, we can yield to It.
10. Is there some way to know for sure if you have been born again? These are tough but really important questions. Do you see the effects of the Holy Spirit working in your life? Should those effects be seen by people around you? (See Matthew 5:16; 7:20.)
11. When our lives are transformed and we determine to choose God's way instead of our own way, giving up selfishness as our guiding motive, exchanging it for God's love, there is an unmistakable behavior change in us. But, this change usually takes place gradually and subtly. It took Nicodemus three years, but the Philippian jailer and his family were converted overnight. We they changed overnight? (See Acts 16:25-36.) We need to make an effort every day to act more in loving ways instead of selfish ways.
12. What would happen if we as Seventh-day Adventists did a spiritual experiment? What if each day we actually did something for someone else around us that required self-denial on our part and showed loving care for that other person? Would they be amazed? Puzzled? Would they even wonder what had happened to us?
13. We need to develop a Christ-likeness habit. Read John 15:1-10. What does it mean to "abide in the vine"? Do we clearly understand how to abide in Christ? Seventh-day Adventists or their predecessors have been preaching about the soon coming of Christ for nearly 170 years since the Great Disappointment. What would happen if we individually behaved as if Christ is coming again very soon? Could we learn to behave in very Christian ways all day long and not just during morning prayers and evening devotion? Would that make a difference?
14. Jesus planned every day of His life—especially during His ministry—with His Father and the Holy Spirit. He was in constant communication with Them. Could we develop such a habit? We would need to spend more time focusing on Bible study and prayer. More than that, in order to cement in our minds our understanding of the truths with which God has blessed us, we need to practice explaining those truths to others. We call that witnessing. Witnessing is one of the greatest ways to discover how much we do or do not know about our own beliefs! Then we need to go back to the Bible and study some more. Practice on your friends!
15. And if we take that approach to forming a more direct and full association of faith with Jesus Christ, He responds by saying: "Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find;

knock, and it will be open to you.” (Matthew 7:7) Does that prayer sound a little selfish to you? It is not! Christ was offering to help us spread the gospel to others so it can be finished. This is not a prayer so we can live lives of luxury sitting back and doing nothing.

16. So, how should we pray? The disciples asked that question to Jesus; and, of course, He responded with what we call the Lord’s prayer. (Matthew 6:9-13) But, there are certain conditions to be met when we pray. We must believe that God can answer us. (Matthew 21:22) We must be willing to open our hearts up not only to God above us but also to our neighbors around us. (Mark 11:25) And we must always be willing to pray according to God’s will. (Matthew 6:10; Luke 22:42) And despite our best intentions, not everything we pray for—even in spreading the gospel—will be answered at just the time and in just the way we think best. (Luke 18:1)
17. Read Luke 9:23-24. Is living this new kind of life going to be easy? Jesus told us to take up our crosses. A cross was a sign of the destruction of a traitor to Rome. Why is it that we must die to self in order to truly live? What was Paul trying to tell us in Galatians 2:19-20 (NKJV): “I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me.”
18. We are born with an incredible drive for self-preservation. As we grow, that desire usually turns into selfishness. And it requires an incredible amount of determination to overcome that inherent selfishness in us.

No man can empty himself of self. We can only consent for Christ to accomplish the work. Then the language of the soul will be, Lord, take my heart; for I cannot give it. It is Thy property. Keep it pure, for I cannot keep it for Thee. Save me in spite of myself, my weak, unchristlike self. Mold me, fashion me, raise me into a pure and holy atmosphere, where the rich current of Thy love can flow through my soul.

It is not only at the beginning of the Christian life that this renunciation of self is to be made. At every advance step heavenward it is to be renewed. . . . Only by constant renunciation of self and dependence on Christ can we walk safely.—Ellen G. White, *Christ’s Object Lessons*, pp. 159,160.

19. When was the last time you died to self? Can you tell when you have died to self?

The warfare against self is the greatest battle that was ever fought. The yielding of self, surrendering all to the will of God, requires a struggle; but the soul must submit to God before it can be renewed in holiness.—Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ*, p. 43.3.

We cannot retain our own self and be filled with the fullness of God. We must be emptied of self. If heaven is gained by us at last, it will be only through the renunciation of self and in receiving the mind, the spirit, and the will of Christ Jesus.—Ellen G. White, *undated MS 73; In Heavenly Places*, p. 155.3; compare *ST*, November 21, 1892 par. 4.

Why are we called to deny self daily? If we do not deny self and if we allow self to dominate all that we think or do, what kind of lives would we live? Would our lives in any way resemble that of our Master? What does your answer tell you about yourself apart from Christ? Will there be any selfish people in heaven? If not, shouldn’t we start practicing now?

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Last Modified: June 3, 2014

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