

5. Jesus Confronted the Religious with Love

As we develop leaders who are becoming like their Savior, one of the things we want to show them is how to confront the religious with love. The religious are depending on their own efforts to be right with God. As a result, they think their own efforts are good enough to get them to heaven. Jesus confronted such individuals with the truth, but He always did it with love. In the same way, we want to help developing leaders learn to reach out, in love, to those who are depending on their own efforts to be right with God. We will illustrate this by the way Jesus confronted Nicodemus with love.

One night, early in His public ministry, Jesus had a key Jewish religious leader come to Him. John 3:1-2 says, “There was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. This man came to Jesus by night and said to Him, ‘Rabbi, we know that You are a teacher come from God; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him.’” Nicodemus thought he had an ideal relationship with God. He was a Pharisee. He was a spiritual leader of the Jews. He knew the Old Testament very well. He recognized that Jesus was a teacher that had come from God. He recognized that only God could give Him the power to do the signs He was doing. He only had one problem. He was depending on his own efforts to be right with God.

In most cases, Jesus usually took time to build a relationship with a person. However, in the case of Nicodemus, Jesus immediately confronted Him. John 3:3 says, “Jesus answered and said to him, ‘Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.’” Jesus told him that there was one requirement in order to see the kingdom of God. Christ also used a phrase that would help Nicodemus recognize his lack of spiritual understanding. The phrase “born again” caused Nicodemus to ask a question, because he had no idea what that phrase meant. (Phrases like this can be very helpful when we are talking to people one-to-one, but they are very confusing to people who are in a group and have no opportunity to ask to have them explained. Notice the question of Nicodemus.)

Nicodemus immediately responded. John 3:4 says, “Nicodemus said to Him, ‘How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?’” Here, we see his lack of spiritual understanding. This phrase immediately made him think of a second physical birth. To him, the statement of Jesus was very confusing and had no meaning. This statement was the way Jesus chose to confront in love. Instead of bluntly telling Nicodemus he was headed for hell, Jesus chose to arouse his curiosity, so He asked a question that would make it possible to explain the difference between physical birth and spiritual birth.

Jesus then answered, in John 3:5-7, “‘Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. 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.’” Christ said there must be both a physical birth (born of water) and a spiritual birth (born of the Spirit). Jesus said that physical birth produces physical life. Jesus said that only the Holy Spirit could give spiritual life. Jesus told Nicodemus not to be surprised that he also needed a spiritual birth in addition to his physical birth. Notice that Jesus patiently answered his question and

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explained the statement Nicodemus had not understood.

Christ also followed His statement with an illustration. John 3:8 says, “The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear the sound of it, but cannot tell where it comes from and where it goes. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit.” Nicodemus could see the effects of the wind, but he could not understand where the wind came from or where it went. Here, Christ illustrated that the life of a person will be changed when he is born of the Spirit, however, he will not understand the full process. This immediately caused Nicodemus to ask another question.

John 3:9 says, “Nicodemus answered and said to Him, ‘How can these things be?’” At this point, Nicodemus recognized that he had no understanding of spiritual things and that he needed to begin to understand how the Spirit could give spiritual birth and spiritual life. Nicodemus had been confronted in love. Now, he was ready to have spiritual life explained, so he could understand it. In the same way, when we confront the religious, in love, they will be open to having us explain to them how they can receive eternal life.

Jesus answered, in John 3:10, “Jesus answered and said to him, ‘Are you the teacher of Israel, and do not know these things?’” Nicodemus was one of the best-known teachers among the Jews. He was highly respected by the Jews for his teaching. The fact that he had no understanding of spiritual life meant that other religious teachers also lacked that understanding (In verse 2 Nicodemus had used the word “we”.) They understood the activities of religion, but they had no understanding of the reality of spiritual life. Today, many people have the same problem. They understand the activities of religion (going to church, praying for help when they have problems, reading their Bible, etc.), but they have no understanding of how to have a personal relationship with God. They need to understand the difference between religious activities and true salvation.

Jesus showed, in John 3:11-12, that the reason for this lack of understanding is unbelief. Those verses say, “‘Most assuredly, I say to you, We speak what We know and testify what We have seen, and you do not receive Our witness. If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things?’” In verses 11-21, Christ showed that spiritual life requires belief. In fact, the word “believe” is used seven times in these verses. The Jewish leaders did not believe what Jesus said about earthly things, so it was impossible for them to believe what Jesus said about spiritual things.

Jesus then told Nicodemus, in love, how to believe. He said no one had been able to go to heaven and come back to tell a person how to get to heaven. Jesus then illustrated what it meant to believe with an Old Testament illustration. John 3:14-15 says, “And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.” In that illustration, all the people could do was look to what God had provided and live. In the same way, the Father sent the Son to provide eternal life to all who would believe in the Son.

Jesus also stated that God took the initiative to send His Son down from heaven to make eternal life possible. John 3:16-17 show that both the Father and the Son want to save in love, instead of

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condemn. Those verses say, “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved.” Jesus shared with Nicodemus that God wanted to give him eternal life. Jesus said he could receive that life by believing in the Son. He said that the Son came to save life, not to condemn. This is a perfect illustration of confronting in love.

Then, Jesus pointed out that those who have not believed are already condemned. John 3:18 says, “He who believes in Him is not condemned; but he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.” Jesus showed His love by showing that He wanted all those, who are already condemned, to believe in Him, so they would no longer be condemned. The religious need to realize their present condition and recognize the love Christ showed to set them free from their present, condemned condition.

Jesus concluded this confrontation by giving Nicodemus a choice. John 3:19-21 says, “And this is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For everyone practicing evil hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. But he who does the truth comes to the light, that his deeds may be clearly seen, that they have been done in God.” Nicodemus was told, in love, that he could choose darkness, or he could choose the light. He could continue to live in spiritual darkness, or he could believe in the One who would give him light. In fact, Jesus made it clear that He wanted Nicodemus to come to that light, because He had reached out to him in love.

That loving confrontation changed the life of Nicodemus. John 19:38-40 says, “After this, Joseph of Arimathea, being a disciple of Jesus, but secretly, for fear of the Jews, asked Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus; and Pilate gave *him* permission. So he came and took the body of Jesus. And Nicodemus, who at first came to Jesus by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about a hundred pounds. Then they took the body of Jesus, and bound it in strips of linen with the spices, as the custom of the Jews is to bury.”

Nicodemus was so changed by the spiritual life Jesus provided, he was eager to show his love for Jesus by preparing him for burial. His life was changed because Jesus loved him enough to confront him. In the same way, developing leaders will see lives changed, as they learn to confront the religious, in love, and show them their need for belief. May the Lord richly bless you as you help developing leaders learn to confront the religious, in love.