

SERMON

Grace Street Fellowship, Dr. Jim Burgin, pastor

Sunday, April 8th, 2018

Series: "It's **NOT** complicated" T – Part 1: Nicodemus (John 3: 1-8)

OPENING ILLUSTRATION

A big strapping man was coming out of church one Easter Sunday, and the preacher was standing in the narthex shaking hands. He recognized the guy as an infrequent attender, and ever the recruiter, he grabbed him subtly, pulled him aside and said, You need to join the army of the Lord! The startled man replied, I'm already in the army of the Lord, Pastor. The pastor questioned him, Then, how come I only see you at Christmas and Easter? The man leaned in close to the preacher and whispered, I'm in the secret service!¹

INTRODUCTION

1. "It's Complicated"
 - a. "It's complicated" was a 2009 American romantic comedy starring Meryl Streep and Alec Baldwin. Streep plays a successful bakery owner and single mother of three who starts a secret affair with her former husband ten years after their divorce – only to find herself drawn to another man – her architect Adam (portrayed by Steve Martin).
 - b. "It's complicated" is also a "Facebook Relationship Status." As if relationships aren't difficult enough to manage, apparently, an "It's Complicated" status resolves around a variety of factors:
 - a) how much time the couple spends with each other; emotional investment made in each other, and about whether or not it is ok to sleep around.
2. To many outsiders, Christianity seems just about this complicated. Are you Catholic or Protestant. Some people say the same thing this way: Are you Christian, or are you Catholic. If you are Protestant, are you Presbyterian, Methodist, Lutheran, Baptist, or Pentecostal. Are you evangelical or ecumenical. If you are evangelical, who did you vote for in the Presidential election? An on it goes. Believe me, I could go on. Today, I want to point us to Simple Christianity by reviewing the "Crux of our faith."
3. When we say "the crux of the matter," we are referring to the basic, central, or critical point of an issue.
 - a. Another way to say this might be to say "the heart of the matter."
 - b. Or, perhaps, let's "cut to the chase."
 - c. Or, "at its core," would be another way to communicate the central point of something.
4. Perhaps you know Vince Lombardi's story. It was July of 1961, and 38 Green Bay Packers football players had were in the locker room for the first day of training camp. The previous season was a strong one, but the team had lost the Super bowl late in the 4th quarter, squandering a lead to the Philadelphia Eagles.

The loss had captured the spirit of the team who had been brooding over ever since, and now, on the first day of training camp, it was time to start again. The team wanted to adjust their approach a bit, so that they could win it big – win it all – in this coming year. Their coach, Vince Lombardi, had different ideas.

¹ <http://www.jokes4us.com/holidayjokes/easterjokes/goingtochurchjoke.html>. Accessed April 7, 2018.

He looked at the players and held up a football. He said “Gentlemen, this is a football.” He emphasized the fundamentals again, teaching each player how to block and tackle. They opened the playbook and started from page one. At one point, Max McGee, the Packer’s Pro Bowl wide receiver, joke, “Uh, Coach, could you slow down a little? You’re going too fast for us.”

Six months later, the Green Bay Packers beat the New York Giants 37-0 to win the NFL Championship.² Ultimately, he compiled a 74% winning percentage record as an NFL coach, and he never had a losing season.³

5. In this brief sermon series, I want to remind us of the fundamentals of our faith – in the narrowest sense.
 - a. I hope that this helps provide a renewed focus for some – who may have forgotten;
 - b. I hope too that this brings a renewal to the sense of wonder we can have as Christians. To remember where it all began and the foundation upon which our faith rests;
 - c. Finally, I hope that this series helps each of us to grasp the fundamentals, so that we can share our faith more powerfully than ever before. What could happen if each of us were able to say “This is Christianity,” at its core. Won’t you join us?

JOHN INTRODUCES GOD’S MESSAGE

1. Jesus is God.

- a. *Jesus existed before the creation of the world* – “In the beginning was the Word” indicates that when the world began, the Word already existed (Jn 1:1); So, John actually starts his gospel before the beginning, outside of time and space in eternity.
- b. *Jesus is related to God the Father* – “Jesus was with God” (Jn. 1:1). To be “with God” means that Jesus is personally distinct from God.” The word “with” in the sentence Jesus was with God,” doesn’t mean proximity – in other words – that the two of them were standing side by side. It means that there is a distinctive personal relationship between the two.
- c. *Jesus is God* – (John 1:1) – Jesus is a being distinct, yet of the same essence as God. We discover throughout the Scripture that Jesus is God’s Son.

2. God became a Man

- a. *The Word became flesh* – God joined the human race. He became a man.
- b. *Made his dwelling among us* – *NET* –took up residence. Pitched his tent in our back yard.
- c. *Jesus loves his mom* – In the second chapter, John tells of Jesus’ first miracle, and it is a story that none of the other gospels tell. It is Jesus’ first miracle, and it happens at a wedding when the host runs out of wine. Jesus’ mother wants Jesus to intervene, and he is resistant, because it wasn’t in the divine plan, but Jesus honors his mother and turns water into wine, blessing everyone. Why is this story only in John’s gospel? Remember, on the cross, Jesus asked John to take care of his mother. I believe this was a story Mary told John that the others perhaps didn’t know.

²Vince Lombardi on the Hidden Power of Mastering the Fundamentals. By James Clear. <https://jamesclear.com/vince-lombardi-fundamentals> Accessed Saturday, April 7, 2018.

³ Vince Lombard. Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vince_Lombardi. Accessed Saturday, April 7, 2018.

3. Jesus personally delivered God's Message

- a. *You don't have to live in darkness anymore* – In Jesus was “life, and this life was the light of men” (1:3)
 - b. *You are invited to become a child of God* – (1:120) he came to his own, and to all who will receive the gift of His son, he will birth you spiritually into God's family. 1 John 3:1 says it like this – “What wonderful love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called the children of God.
4. *To Recap* – God the Father sent God the Son to become a man. Jesus was fully God and fully man, and he came to gather his children into the fold.

NICODEMUS DISCOVERS GOD'S MESSAGE

1. The Context –

- a. Jesus had come to celebrate the Passover in Jerusalem, and Jerusalem was packed with people.
- b. Enraged by the way the Temple had been turned into a corporate money-making machine, Jesus picked up a whip and cleared the Temple.
- c. The Religious leaders wanted to know who gave him the authority to do that and demanded a sign. Jesus told them to destroy the Temple, and he would raise it again in 3 days. They were astounded and confused. It took 46 years to build the temple. And you're going to rebuild it in 3 days? He was talking about his death and resurrection – the Temple of His body.
- d. Many believed when they saw Jesus perform miracles, and many wanted a conference with Jesus, but he was careful, because he knew men's hearts.

2. Jesus Meets Nicodemus

- a. *Who was Nicodemus?* John 3:1 tells us that he was a “man of the Pharisees” and a “member of the ruling council.” Sounds pretty important.
 - i. Pharisees talk about God. They were the guardians of God's law, so they spent a lot of time talking about minutia, largely as a way of controlling the people and elevating themselves.
 - ii. A member of the ruling council – a holy man who led other holy men. Nicodemus was on a list of the elite Torah scholars. He occupies one seat on the Jewish Supreme Court. Author Max Lucado describes Nicodemus as having “credentials and clout,” but he also has questions.⁴
- b. *They Met at Night*
 - i. Jesus was already leery of people pushing on him, cozying up to him for some perceived gain, but he agreed to meet with Nicodemus.
 - ii. Nicodemus knew that Jesus was being roundly condemned within the ranks of the religious elite, but there was something troubling which he couldn't get away from.

⁴ Max Lucado, 3:16: The Numbers of Hope. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2007, p4.

iii. As dusk turns to dark, Nicodemus slips out to the streets which would lead him to Jesus.

c. *Their Greeting*

- i. Nicodemus begins with words of honor, addressing Jesus as Rabbi (teacher), but Jesus doesn't return the favor. Nicodemus senses that something is different, and he tells Jesus that one who does miracles like the ones Jesus has performed must be from God.

3. Christ's Message

- a. *Jesus doesn't waste time* or mince words – He dispenses with normal protocols to return the favor of Nicodemus' complements. Nor does he receive the praise.
- b. *You Must be born Again* – If you want to see the Kingdom of God, you must be born again (3:3). What an audacious claim to make to this religious scholar. You won't find your answer, Nicodemus, until you become God's child.
- c. *Nicodemus literally does not understand* – I don't think Nicodemus is stupid, and I don't think he is being coy. He legitimately doesn't understand. He is thinking in physical terms when Jesus is speaking in spiritual terms. Nicodemus asks how a human being can get back into the womb a second time to be born again?
- d. *They are in two different worlds* – They are facing each other, but in between them is an invisible continental divide. Listen to Lucado again: “Nicodemus inhabits a land of good efforts, sincere gestures, and hard work. Give God your best, his philosophy says, and God does the rest. Jesus' response? Your best won't do. Your works don't work. Your finest efforts don't mean squat. Unless you are born again, you can't even see what God is up to.”⁵

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE “BORN AGAIN”?

1. To be born – this is an act God does. God exerts the effort, and he is the one who saves a soul.
2. Again – two words in the Bible for again.
 - a. The first word (*Palin*) means to repeat something already done.
 - b. The second word (*Anothen*) means to repeat from above. In other words, the one who did the work the first time did it again.
 - i. I love to paint/to draw pictures, and I'm very sincere, but not very good at it. One way I attempt to be better is to imitate other pictures. I especially am fond of Rembrandt's “The Prodigal Son” which is a massive painting hanging in the Louvre. I can't come close to imitating it.
 - ii. However, if Rembrandt painted it again, there you go. That's all you need.
 - iii. What Jesus is saying here is that God recreates the human heart as he did the first time, designed for His Spirit to live inside of us.

⁵ Lucado, 5.

iv. The prophet Jeremiah revealed what this new heart would look like –(31: 31-34) – I will write my law on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.

3. Born again – the first birth is by water (a physical birth); The second is by the Spirit, a spiritual rebirth.
4. Did this message affect Nicodemus?
 - a. After Jesus was crucified, Nicodemus shows up again with his friend Joseph of Arimathea. The two offer their respects and oversee Jesus’ burial. No small gesture, given the anti-Christ climate of the day.
 - b. Don’t you know when the word hit the streets that Jesus was out of the tomb, Nicodemus had to smile and remember their late night chat? Born again, eh? Wow. He started with himself.

SO, WHAT IS THE SIMPLE GOSPEL, our core foundation, our football. IT’S NOT COMPLICATED

1. All human beings have rebelled and become estranged from the God who created them and loves them. No exceptions. (God was in the world, but the world didn’t recognize him. He came to those who should have loved him, but they didn’t receive him.) – John 1: 10-11.
2. God’s Son Jesus became a human being, a man, in order to communicate that love to us in a way we could hear. He lived a sinless life and died on a cross to pay our debt. On the third day, Christ rose from the dead.
3. We can be restored to a relationship with God by being born again- We acknowledge that we are sinners and that we need a savior. In faith, we believe he can save us and submit our lives into his hands through a simple request for salvation.
4. As His children, we live as faithfully as possible in this world until he comes for us and/or takes us home.

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN YOU BECOME A CHILD OF GOD?

1. You are forgiven for your sins – You are free from guilt and shame;
2. You are never alone again – He walks with you and talks with you every day;
3. You are given a new family – Clark and I attended a funeral yesterday. Jeff & Billie Byrd have been friends of ours for nearly 30 years. We don’t see them much now, but the friendship hasn’t waned. Two years ago, on August 1st, 2016, the day of Mission Arlington’s 30th anniversary, the Byrd’s contacted us to say they couldn’t come to our anniversary, because their daughter Morgan was getting married the same afternoon. The pastor who was officiating the service was also mutual friends, and they came to see us in the afternoon on their way to perform the Morgan and Caleb’s wedding in Possum Kingdom later that afternoon.

Morgan and Caleb were happily married. Caleb became a firefighter for North Richland Hills, beginning January 2016, and he had served with distinction. Two days after Easter, firefighters found Caleb passed away in the firehouse, at 29 years of age. No one knows why yet.

At the funeral yesterday was a packed house of firefighters from all across the state who came to ring the bell for Caleb’s last call. Firefighters from other counties took the place of the North Richland Hill Firefighters, so that they could attend the funeral.

There was an extraordinary unity among the diversity of people there.

4. You are given peace in the present and hope for the future – You know who you are and to whom you belong, and you know where you are going.

CONCLUSION – “Reckless love”

1. Three days before his death, Caleb Scott posted Cory Asbury’s Reckless Love

Oh, the overwhelming, never-ending,
reckless love of God;

Oh, it chases me down, fights ‘til I’m found,
leaves the ninety-nine;

I couldn’t earn it, and I don’t deserve it, still
You give Yourself away

Oh, the overwhelming, never-ending,
reckless love of God, yeah

When I was Your foe, still Your love fought
for me

You have been so, so good to me

When I felt no worth, You paid it all for me

You have been so, so kind to me

There’s no shadow you won’t light up

Mountain you won’t climb up

Coming after me

There’s no wall you won’t kick down

Lie you won’t tear down

Coming after me

Oh, the overwhelming, never-ending,
reckless love of God

Oh, it chases me down, fights ‘til I’m
found, leaves the ninety-nine

And I couldn’t earn it, I don’t deserve
it, still, You give Yourself away

Oh, the overwhelming, never-ending,
reckless love of God, yeah

2. This song has caused a little bit of a stir – because the word reckless typically means “rash, careless, thoughtless, heedless, unheeding, hasty, impetuous, impulsive, etc.
3. Cory wrote the song with the prodigal son in mind – surely it was reckless for the father to take this young son back into his house. Why would he throw a party with a fattened calf. What about the parable of the lost sheep? Why would a shepherd not care about the safety of the 99 to go find the one?
4. The message isn’t that God is reckless, but the way he loves is like that. He is utterly unconcerned with the consequences of his actions with regards to His own safety, comfort, and well-being. His love isn’t crafty or slick. It’s not cunning or shrewd. His love bankrupted heaven for you. His love doesn’t consider himself first. His love isn’t selfish or self-serving. He doesn’t wonder what he will gain or lost by putting himself out there. He simply gives himself away.

INVITATION