



## Nicodemus: It Feels Too Good To Be True

John 3:14-21

### *Inspiration for you:*

Okay, here's a test...

Your spouse (or mother or father or close loved one) calls you on a Sunday morning and says, "I'm broken down by the side of the road you have to come and get me."

You have two choices...

A.) Sorry Mom it's Sunday and I have to keep this day holy. I'm going to church.

B.) I'll be right there.

So, are you going to honor the 4th commandment and break the 5th or break the fifth and honor the 4th?

Now imagine there are six-hundred thirteen commandments. You have to know all of them. You spend your days arguing and settling disputes based on those commandments and how you interpret them and then argue with someone else who would leave mom by the side of the road.

In those days people would follow the rabbi whom they most agreed with. If one rabbi thought certain commandments were more important and you agreed you followed that rabbi. You can say “commandments” all you want to but it does come down to interpretation. Interpretation is built into the system.

The commandments were often classified as light and heavy. You followed the rabbi with the lightest commandments.

Rabbi’s gained respect by their ability to sum up the others. Commandments could be combined and filed together under one heading. The easier you could make it, the better.

A rabbi would then choose which commandments were important. These commandments were called his “yoke.”

When Jesus said “My yoke is easy and my burden is light.” He was trying to explain it wasn’t about the rules. It was about God.

The Pharisees had a lot of power. Not something most people want to give up once they have it. And if you spent your day arguing about commandments that seemed to contradict each other, you learned to be very good at arguing.

When the Pharisees went to Jesus and said “Which is the greatest commandment?” They weren’t interested in his opinion. This was a verbal trap. There was a group of them, loaded and ready for a fight. Because no matter what Jesus said they could argue with him and discredit him and then ignore him. It was a verbal trap.

But Jesus took not only the top ten commandments but all of them ALL 613 commandments and summed them up in 2.

Love God.

Love others.

Let’s just look at the top ten. What are the first four?

No other Gods

No graven images

No taking God’s name in vain.

Keep the sabbath day holy.

And the next batch?

Honor mom & dad

Do not kill

Do not commit adultery  
Do not steal  
No lying against your neighbor  
No coveting

The first four are all about what? Loving God.

The last six are all about? ....loving each other.

So the attempts of the Pharisees to trap Jesus only resulted in him gaining more followers.

In this video Nicodemus says something very profound. He says “My life...” and then he pauses a moment... “No...my religion was in the details.”

How often do we get so caught up in being religious, that we forget to be followers?

Now before you dismiss that, how many of us sit in “our pew?”

How many of us wear our “church clothes?”

How many of us say, “Well I just can’t seem to worship with THAT music or THAT prayer or THAT singer.”

- Sit up straight.
- Kneel when you supposed to.
- If you are going to raise your hands you have to do it like THIS and not like THAT.
- Raise your hands.
- Don’t raise your hands.
- Use the hymnal.
- Project the words on the screen.
- Don’t use THAT word.

*Here’s a true story a youth pastor once told me. He was a new hire at a church and one of the first things he had to do was teach a doctrine class for the teenagers. The Christian Education Committee gave him a test and said all the students had to pass the test before they could be members. He asked what happens if they don’t. The response from the committee was “See that they do.”*

*The youth pastor took the test to the adult Sunday school class and gave it to them. More than half of the adults didn’t pass. The youth pastor threw the test away. He was gone in less than 18 months.*

Jesus is saying, “This...right-here, right-now...this is the church. These are God’s people. This group of messed up folks who can’t make decisions, eat with the wrong forks, decide everything through committee, leave dirty kleenex in the pews, complain about the taste of the communion wine, the Christmas & Easter only attending people...THIS is the church. This rag tag group of people. Not your rules.”

Jesus tells Nicodemus of the kingdom of God as if it were already here. Heaven is here. Right here. Right now. And we call it the kingdom. It is not a destination. It is the journey itself.

Nicodemus, so afraid of what the others might say, meets Jesus at night. Nicodemus misses the point because he tries to take Jesus literally. “What am I supposed to crawl back inside my mother and be born again?”

Jesus wants Nicodemus...and us to see the world with new eyes, to listen with new ears. To see the Kingdom of God not as a reward but as something we connect to...right now.

### *Information for you:*

Nicodemus was a Jewish Pharisee who was intrigued and fascinated by Jesus, his teaching, his actions, and his life. Pharisees were Jewish men who were part of an ancient Jewish sect in biblical days. They were known for living their lives according to the strictest observance of both the traditional and written laws of the Jewish people. The Pharisees were the rule keepers and law abiders. The commonly agreed upon total number of rules that had to be lived out if a person really was going to be living right was a whopping 613 laws. Of those 613 laws for life, 243 were things that a good Jewish person was supposed to do; 365 were negative rules and made sure that there was enough things not to do that would cover every day of the year.

The Pharisees lived by the rule book and were the group that the rest of society looked to for interpretations of who was living right and who was living in the wrong. This group of religiously snooty men did all they could to be in power and keep their thumbs on the rest of society so they could have influence and status among the people of their religion.

The only places in the Bible we see and hear from a Pharisee named Nicodemus are found in the Gospel of John. We see him having a conversation with Jesus under the cover of darkness in chapter 3:1-21. He passively lobbies for Jesus to have a hearing before any arrest in John 7:50-51. The final time we see Nicodemus in the Bible is after Jesus had been crucified and is being prepared for his burial in John 19:39-42.

Although it does not state how much Nicodemus witnessed the words and actions of Jesus first hand, the inference in his conversation with Jesus in John 3 leads us to believe that he had been observing Jesus from the sidelines. Nicodemus likely was in the Temple in the previous chapter when Jesus cleansed the Temple and turned everything upside down. Such actions likely caused Nicodemus' wheels to begin spinning inside his mind. Nicodemus possibly began to wonder if Jesus' demonstrations coupled with his mighty miracles and mesmerizing teaching of the masses, were coming together to identify him as the long awaited Messiah. It would take some time for Nicodemus to reach such conclusions, but what he heard from Jesus on that evening conversation captured in John 3 just seemed too good to be true.

Nicodemus had lived his life by the letter of the law; all 613 of them. His whole life was devoted to such ritualistic purity. He thought this was how God would love and accept him, by keeping and wearing each one with pedantic precision. Every "T" must be crossed and every "I" dotted in order to be in right standing before holy God. At least that was what Nicodemus thought. For Nicodemus it must have felt like he had lived every day of his life striving for a perfect grade in God's eyes. It was as if he was trying to be the valedictorian every single moment and then Jesus comes in and offers some kind of a "2.0 and go" philosophy of life. Better yet, it was as if Jesus was conveying that all God was doing was taking a completion grade on this assignment and that Jesus had completed the grade for him already.

Surely what Jesus was telling him could not be right. How could it be that all that was required to be right before God was to believe? That just felt like it was too good to be true. And if it was, should Nicodemus consider his life direction and pursuit to that point a total waste of time? Was he on a religious adventure in missing the point?

After the conversation had gotten underway between an inquisitive Nicodemus and a patient Jesus, talk of needing to be born again had already taken place. Nicodemus was confused and seeking clarity on the things Jesus was telling him. So Jesus does what he so often is seen doing in the pages of the Gospels; he meets people where they are with an example that they could understand and relate to in their context of life. For the Pharisee standing in his midst, Jesus went back to the Old Testament book of Numbers to relate a story of God's rescue and then would equate it to his own impending salvific actions on the horizon which would have the capability of all moving from out of the darkness of death and into the light of life in Christ. We pick the conversation up in verse 14 and move through verse 21.

<sup>14</sup>And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, <sup>15</sup>that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

<sup>16</sup>“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. <sup>17</sup>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. <sup>18</sup>Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. <sup>19</sup>And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. <sup>20</sup>For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed. <sup>21</sup>But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God.” John 3:14-21

Jesus helps Nicodemus to understand that when it comes to being right before God, it all depends on the power of God rather than on the precision of man keeping a bunch of rules just right. The issue that we humans have is a sin problem that poisons our hearts and lives. No amount of right living can suck the poison out and lead to salvation. It all depends on the provision of God and in turn, people looking to God’s provision to save us from what is killing us. To help make the connection that it is not about what we do, but rather, what God does, Jesus refers to how God provided through his servant Moses in a story found in Numbers 21.

Numbers 21 takes place in the context of the Israelites wandering in the wilderness. Moses had led them out of slavery in Egypt. God had been providing their every need along the way. Regardless, the people of God continued to grumble against the servant of God. God was tired of their grumbling and mumbling and sent poisonous snakes into the camp. Many Israelites were bitten resulting in the sickness and death of several people in the camp. The only remedy was one that God would provide. Numbers 21:4-9 provides the account.

<sup>4</sup>From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom. And the people became impatient on the way. <sup>5</sup>And the people spoke against God and against Moses, “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we loathe this worthless food.” <sup>6</sup>Then the LORD sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died. <sup>7</sup>And the people came to Moses and said, “We have sinned, for we have spoken against the LORD and

against you. Pray to the LORD, that he take away the serpents from us.” So Moses prayed for the people. <sup>8</sup> And the LORD said to Moses, “Make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live.” <sup>9</sup> So Moses made a bronze serpent and set it on a pole. And if a serpent bit anyone, he would look at the bronze serpent and live.” Numbers 21:4-9

Jesus was helping Nicodemus to see that life and death depended upon God and his provision. All that people could do was be obedient and respond to what God was doing through his servant. The only thing Nicodemus’ ancestors could do was look at the provision that was being lifted up on a pole in the form of a bronze snake. They must believe that God would use his own provision to cure his people. Likewise, there were not enough sin remedies that religious people could conjure up and keep to make them right and holy before God. In this passage, Jesus foreshadows his own death as the provision from God to bring a dying people back to life by curing the poison of sin in their souls. The image of the twisted snake on a pole represented healing and life. The same image is true for modern medicine today. And the image of Jesus hanging and lifted up on a cross represents a different kind of healing and life. The same image is true today for all who believe.

All the Israelites could do was look at provision that was lifted up. In the days to come, all that would save people from perishing was to look at the provision that God was making through his one and only Son, Jesus, as a remedy for sin, death, Satan and hell. Jesus would be lifted up on the pole of the cross as a sacrifice to save his people from their sins. Such a salvation would move people from darkness to light. It all hinged on one’s belief, not on one’s obedience to all 613 laws that no mortal man or woman could live to perfection every day of his or her life.

This way of belief felt too good to be true for Nicodemus.

John goes on to write the words that Jesus spoke about who this remedy for sin was for and why it was made available in the first place. Verse 16 captures what Martin Luther has since called “the gospel in miniature.”

“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.” John 3:16

It is the love of God that drives forth the provision for eternal life. The way to receive such a gift is not through keeping a bunch of religious rules in correct fashion. Jesus tells us that it starts and ends with belief in Jesus. It has been said that religion means “we must do something.” However, the message of the Gospel means “Jesus already did

something on our behalf.” We must now believe and receive. For some it just feels too good to be true. But it is true.

Dallas Willard has noted that the message of the Gospel is one that leads us toward “a heart to have rather than a bunch of rules to keep.” The only way we have such a heart toward God is to believe. We must believe that what Jesus did on the cross is sufficient for our rescue from sin. The level of our obedience to rule keeping does not affect the acquittal or condemnation before God. That’s what Jesus was saying in verses 17-18 from our text.

“<sup>17</sup> 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. <sup>18</sup> Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God.” John 3:17-18

Jesus’ death on the cross is God’s unique provision that saves all who turn toward him and believe. It is similar to how God provided for his people in the desert with the snake bites. They had to turn toward God’s unique provision that would save them from their impending sickness leading to death. They had to put all their hope in what God had done on their behalf and believe. Those who did were saved from their death sentence by snake bite. If they did not turn toward the bronze snake they were condemned to death already. Likewise, those who do not look to Jesus as the remedy from sin and its devastating, eternal consequences also are condemned already.

The remaining verses in the passage help tie a bow on the greatness of Jesus and the provision made through him that leads to life in Christ. He is the light of the world that leads all that live in the darkness of sin into a new hope because of what God has done on our behalf that we could not do on our own.

“<sup>19</sup> And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. <sup>20</sup> For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed. <sup>21</sup> But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God.” John 3:19-21

Part of what it means to live in the darkness is to refuse to relinquish control of one’s life and ways to the life and ways of Jesus. It would have been a tragedy had Nicodemus left that conversation and remained in his ways of merely trying harder to be perfect by fulfilling all the 613 laws. He seems to have been on the edge of stepping out of the darkness and into the light during that night with Jesus. However, he seems to have



been in process toward a decision that later would lead to him doing what Jesus told him that all must do in order to live in the light: believe.

Eventually Nicodemus seems to have done what was true and did indeed come to the light found in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Christian history and tradition believes that ultimately Nicodemus not only became a follower of Jesus through his belief in the Messiah, but also was martyred because of his belief in Jesus later in the first century A.D. According to what Jesus taught, had Nicodemus put his hope in keeping the 613 laws, he would have perished for eternity. However, Nicodemus most likely did believe, and thus continues to experience eternal life in Christ. Such a decision is far from being too good to be true.