**WESTMINSTER PULPIT SERIES 11 (UNPUBLISHED, PREACHED IN 1907) - THE PREACHING OF G. CAMPBELL MORGAN**

**06. CHRIST AND NICODEMUS by G. CAMPBELL MORGAN**

*"There was a man of the Pharisees, named a ruler of the Jews; the same came unto Him by night. "*

John 3:1

THE ACCOUNT of Christ's method with Nicodemus is full of importance because to him He said; "Except a man be born anew, he cannot see the Kingdom of God ... except a man be born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the Kingdom of God."

Every man who came to Jesus needed this new birth, but only to one did He in so many words declare the fundamental necessity. Not to Peter, the impetuous and impulsive. Not to the woman taken in the very act of adultery. Not to the dying thief in his death agony. But to the Pharisee, the ruler, the teacher of men, measured by the standards of human nature, in every respect admirable, did Jesus say, A man must be born anew.

Let us follow our usual first, attempting to see Nicodemus and then observing the Master's method with him.

There are certain plain declarations made concerning Nicodemus which greatly help us. We need only refer to them briefly.

Nicodemus was a Pharisee. He was a ruler of the Jews. The first statement at once presents him, to us as a man narrow, dogmatic, bigoted; some of which things may be excellent. Some people are afraid of being narrow, and they become so broad that they are lost in the sands, and there is an end of the life-giving river. Some men are so afraid of dogma that they are certain of nothing, and make no one else certain of anything. I am not prepared to defend the last word, bigoted. That is where narrowness and dogmatism become evil. The Pharisees were all these things narrow in their conceptions, dogmatic in their utterances, bigoted in their determination to stand by the things which they believed. As a Pharisee Nicodemus was bound by tradition, and was in the very essence of him a ritualist; setting great value upon ceremonies and observances. The Pharisees were pre-eminently patriotic in the old Hebrew sense of patriotism. Their origin was that of a determination to keep the Hebrew people clean from contamination with the peoples about them; a perfectly right determination. There is no evil heresy abroad in the world today, or ever has been, that did not grow out of something right and pure and good. Distortion of truth is the most terrible heresy. There are at least three examples in the New Testament that show us the Pharisee at his best; the young ruler and Saul of Tarsus. I am always inclined to group these three in one class and to say they were admirable in every respect; men who were true to the light so far as it had come to them; men who were clean and honest and sincere, seeking after truth. Their very narrowness and dogmatism and bigotry were but evidences of their sincerity and absolute honesty. That was not true of all the class. It was true of these three, and certainly of Nicodemus. Then he was a ruler, which simply means that he was a member of the Sanhedrim, and consequently was trusted and respected as a teacher.

These things plainly declared, however, do not help us so much as the things incidentally revealed as we watch him and listen to him in conversation with Jesus. I want to draw special attention to something which doubtless you have often observed in the story. Nicodemus is placed in definite and immediate contrast to men of whom John had written immediately before. "Jesus did not trust Himself unto them," - did not believe unto them - "for that He knew all men, and because He needed not that anyone should bear witness concerning man; for He Himself knew what was in man. Now there was a man of the Pharisees, named a ruler of the Jews: the same came unto Him by night." Jesus did trust Himself to Nicodemus. He is thus set by John in contrast with the crowd in Jerusalem that Jesus could not trust. These people trusted in Him, but He did not trust in them. They committed themselves to Him, but He did not commit Himself to them. They believed on His name, but He did not believe in them. Here was a man in whom He did believe, to whom He did trust Himself, to whom He committed the deepest and profoundest secrets of His mission in the lone and solemn watches of the night as they talked face to face. That indeed is a revelation of the character of Nicodemus. He was a man of discernment, attracted by the Person of Christ, even though through signs, and he was prepared to come and ask Him what He had to say.

I see also by his coming at night that he was a man of caution. I am told he came by night because he was afraid. I do not believe it for a moment. I think he came by night in order that he might have Christ all to himself, in order that he might investigate, inquire, and, in personal and direct dealing with Christ, have elucidated the things he supremely wanted to know. I see caution, not the caution of personal fear, but the, caution lest he might be deceived in the daylight amid the crowds, a strong desire to find Him at night, alone, and talk face to face with Him.

Then as I listen to the conversation it is perfectly evident that Nicodemus was an honest man. He did not pretend at once to faith in the things Jesus said, or declare that he understood them when he did not. He named his difficulties. He was perfectly sincere. When Christ explained his first difficulty, he changed his emphasis and stated his new difficulty. He did not stand by the old one. The first difficulty said, It is impossible. The second difficulty said, Tell me how it is done.

He was a man wonderfully logical and instructed. His first question reveals a conception of human life which is very true: None save a master in the knowledge of human nature could have answered it, "How can a man he born when he is old?"

That leads us at once to the consideration of Christ's method with him. I take you back again to the keynote, "Now there was a man of the Pharisees." Christ did not question his right to ask questions. He did not doubt him because he had difficulties. He trusted Him.

This whole section falls quite naturally into three parts. "Nicodemus said;" "Jesus answered." That covers verses one, two and three. "Nicodemus saith;" "Jesus answered." That covers verses four to eight. "Nicodemus answered;" "Jesus answered." That covers verses nine to twenty-one. Christ did not begin. Nicodemus laid bare his heart and his mind; Christ in answer laid bare His heart and His mind.

I shall attempt very rapidly to pass over these three movements. First, Nicodemus and Christ, face to face. Secondly, Nicodemus and Christ, mind to mind. Lastly, Nicodemus and Christ, heart to heart.

First I find them face to face. In this movement we have Nicodemus' estimate of Christ, and Christ's estimate of Nicodemus.

Nicodemus' estimate of Christ, "Rabbi, we know that Thou art a Teacher come from God, for no man can do these signs that Thou doest, except God be with him." That was Nicodemus' estimate of Christ. He was a Teacher come from God. Notice what this reveals as to the attitude of Nicodemus when he first came to Jesus. We know Thou art a Teacher come from God because of the signs. We are able to make our deductions. We are not blind. That is the meaning; note it carefully. He was acquainted with the law, a student of the Prophets; he had listened to the last voice of prophecy which had so startled Judea, that of John the Baptist, and he was determined that there should be no voice to which he would not pay attention. His estimate of Jesus was that He was able to teach him something beyond what he already knew.

Now notice immediately Christ's estimate of this man. He said to him, in effect there is nothing in human nature as it exists today that is able to see or know the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom of God cannot be appreciated, apprehended, comprehended by mental activity. Said Nicodemus, We know; we are not blind. Said Jesus, You are absolutely blind, "Except a man be born anew he cannot see." Said Nicodemus, We see, we observe, we know Thou art a Teacher. We have the signs and have watched them and made our own deductions. We see. Christ said, You see nothing of what I have to show to you. You have come to Me, desiring to take one step forward, to graduate into some higher realm of knowledge. What you supremely need is to get back and begin at the very beginning. You have studied the literature of religion, but you need the capacity to read its first alphabet as it ought to be read. You need no more learning, but you need life. "Except a man he born anew, he cannot see the Kingdom of God." There must be a new beginning.

Then we have the second movement, in which the mind of Nicodemus comes into contact with the mind of Christ. Hear, I pray you his difficulty. Said he. "How can a man be born when he is old?" It was an all-inclusive question. One illustration of the difficulty he then expressed. "Can he enter a time into his mother's womb and be born?" It was only an illustration. The whole question is first. Christ said, A man must he born again in order to see the Kingdom of God. Nicodemus said to Him, not that it was unnecessary, but that it was impossible. The very way in which Nicodemus stated his difficulty reveals the fact that at least he had grasped the profound significance of the word of the Teacher, that he understood that Jesus meant that man, as he was, was quite unable to see or appreciate all the profound meaning of that great phrase, the Kingdom of God. Nicodemus did not deny it. What He said in effect was this. Even though that be true, how can it be? Mark his question, "How can a man be born when he is old?" That inquiry of Nicodemus reveals his recognition of the unity of personality. How can a man he born again? To begin again means to undo all the past and what a man is today is the result of all the past. A man's personality is not merely his person, but it is the whole fact of him; not a day, not one moment, but the sum total of all the moments, hours; years. Christ said, Man must begin again. Nicodemus said, How are you going to undo the past "when he is old"? Mark the significance of it. How can you take hold of a man and make him other than he is? Then he gave an illustration, "Can a man enter a second time into his mother's womb, and be born?" That is to say, man is a growth, a development physically. You cannot unmake him and let him begin again, and there cannot be any mental development and spiritual development that is not closely identified with the physical. Is not that your problem, my brother? Is not that mine? Is not that the problem of humanity the world over? How can a man start again? We are getting to the end of the year, and presently we shall hear people talking about turning over a new leaf. Well, when you have turned over your new leaf, what are you going to do with the past? I have no answer. It is my problem. But Christ has an answer. "Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the Kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is Spirit. Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be born anew. The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the voice thereof, but knoweth not whence it cometh, and whither it goeth, so is everyone that is born of the Spirit." First, the necessity declared. Secondly, the reason given. Finally, the process illustrated.

The answer of Jesus insisted upon the spiritual as the essential in human life. To deal, therefore, with the spirit at the centre is to deal ultimately with the whole man. How can a man be born again? He must be baptised in water and in the Spirit. He must "be born of water and the Spirit, " and if he be born of water and the Spirit at the centre of his being, then by the whole man will be changed, radically, absolutely, finally, until at the last the man when he is old is remade, and in the great and gracious word of the New Testament he becomes a new creature in Christ Jesus. Notice, therefore, that when Christ says a man must be born of water and the Spirit what He means. He was dealing with a man who had listened to the preaching of John and He laid His emphasis upon the accuracy of what John had been preaching. John had preached "the baptism of repentance unto the remission of sins." He had also said. "I indeed baptise you with water unto repentance; but He that cometh after me shall baptise you with the Holy Ghost." John's baptism had been the external symbol of the putting away of guilt, the remission of sins. The baptism which he foretold was infinitely more than the putting away of sin, it was the communication of a dynamic in the power of which a man should go out and sin no more. Jesus declared both these things to be There must be that which the water baptism symbolised, the remission of sins; but there must be infinitely more, there must be the actual, positive, inner mystery of the whelming of the spirit of man in the Spirit of God in order that man at his centre may be remade, renewed and enabled to go out and live the life of victory over sin.

Human nature, apart from its regeneration by the Spirit of is the finest thing in the creation of God. Of course, now I refer by creation to that creation of which man is the crown. Take life anywhere further down in the scale, and it is very beautiful. Be patient with me now. If you have a dog, and you are a real human being, you are fond of your dog, and there are excellent things about a dog. That is one type of life. A dog can be very faithful and very true. A dog can know the trick of your footfall and the very whisper of your voice. That is dog life. But a human being is infinitely superior to a dog, quite apart from the giving of new life. You may have love, friendship, art, and all things beautiful in human nature unregenerate. Nevertheless, a man at his best does not see the Kingdom of God unless he is touched with the new and mystic life from without. A man at his best cannot enter the Kingdom of God unless he have remission of sins and the renewal of his own spiritual life. No longer ago than this week, a fine, intelligent girl came to see me, herself a Christian, and told me her difficulty. She described her friends, cultured, refined, lovable, beautiful, but, said she, they hold me in perpetual contempt because I want to worship on Sunday. Exactly. They cannot see the Kingdom of God. Their ruin and their failure is exactly as you describe it to me, my friend. These people are not interested. They cannot see the Kingdom of God, for they are after their kind, flesh merely. Sensual life may be refined and cultured, but it has no vision of no sense of eternity, and no power in prayer, it laughs at these things. If it but understood itself its laughter is the dirge of its own sepulture. Christ said, Men cannot see the Kingdom of God. You tell a man of merely human culture and refinement that you go every Tuesday night to a prayer meeting, and he looks at you in pity and surprise, and out of the refinement of his human nature he will not say anything unkind to you; but he thinks you are living in an age of superstition. If you know anything about prayer, however, his attitude cannot alter your attendance at the prayer meeting. You know what it is to touch and handle things unseen. The evidence of God to you is not documentary. You do not believe in God because literature proves that He exists. You know Him, and that is age-abiding life. Christ said to Nicodemus You cannot see the Kingdom of God unless you are born again. That is Christ's great word to humanity. Flesh is flesh. It may be very refined as human nature; but the vision of God and the sense of the eternities, and the certainty of the spiritualities - these things come not by mental equipment. The Kingdom of God by observation comes not, but by the mystic touch of the Spirit of God and by the revelation that comes only by His illumination.

Once again, and finally, Nicodemus did not deny, he did not even argue. He said, "How can these things be?" The sense is, How can these things come to be? How can these things come to pass? I believe that was a cry out of his heart. I think that clear-eyed Pharisee, that honest, sincere soul to whom the Master of Truth could commit Himself, had seen the vision, and had caught the significance of the illustration about the blowing of the wind, and said, How can these things come to pass? The question means, Yes, I see the necessity. I see how personality can be remade by beginning at its central and essential fact, spirit; but how is it to be done? I think that was a cry as sincere as that of the publican, "God be merciful to me a sinner." Do not try to force every man to say, "God be merciful to me a sinner." Some will say, "How can these things be?" and, blessed be to the man of intellectual strength, who unveils his heart to Christ, Christ will answer intellectually out of the depth of His own heart. How did Christ answer? First of all, with that gentle, wonderful satire that so often characterised Him, "Art thou a teacher of Israel, and understandest not these things?" Then He said to Him in effect, If I told you earthly things, and all these were earthly things, things experienced by men on the earth, the outward manifestation; if I told you these things and you cannot believe, how will you believe if I tell you heavenly things - that is, the deep, hidden, eternal secrets? But He did tell him. He began at the point where Nicodemus could follow Him. He always does that. You ask Me, How? Here is the answer, "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up; that whosoever believeth may in Him have eternal life." I do not think Nicodemus knew what he meant that night, but in about three years' time they fitted up the Son of man on the Cross. They left Him to die, and He died, and when He was dead a rich man, Joseph of Arimathea, begged his body to bury it with tender, loving hands, and he obtained. Now, see, who is this coming, laden with a weight of costly spices? It is Nicodemus, and I think as he wound the linen cloths about the body of the dead Christ he knew what He meant. He had been lifted up. How can these things be? You shall have your life, when I lay Mine down. By the mystery of My dying you shall live. By the outpouring or My life you shall find yours. That is the heavenly answer, and it is a heavenly answer indeed. That thought was never invented in the schools or men. That is heavens heart laid bare. "The Son of man shall be lifted up." That is the process Nicodemus. But where does it come from? I have just said that it is heavens heart laid bare, "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth on Him should not perish, but have eternal life."

What is the responsibility? "Light is come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the light." That is your responsibility. See how in this answer about the heavenly things Jesus used all the expressions of the heavenly language. Life, by the lifting up of the Son. Love, out of the heart of God. Light, flashing upon the pathway of the individual. Walk in the light and share the life which springs from love at infinite cost.

"How can these things be?" "How can a man be born when he is old?" Are you saying it? If you are an honest man, and you have not seen Christ, you know you cannot undo the past. Here am I, with scars on my very flesh, with prints upon my mind, with furrows in my soul. God help me out of the past. How can I be born again? The answer is, taking it in the eternal order. God loved, and gave His Son Who died to save. Christ died, and liberated His life that I might share it, and now He touches me, not first in the externality of this physical form, not first in the mentality of me, but first, blessed be in the central fact of my being in the spirit. There am I born again, and He will never finish the work until in me there is the mind which was in Christ Jesus, and until He "shall fashion anew the body of our humiliation, that it may be conformed to the body of His glory." So may the past be undone. So may the years that the cankerworm hath eaten be restored. If you have anything to compare with it, give it me. If you have any other gospel that will touch a man such as I am, with a past that needs undoing, let me have it. It is not cheap. It is not easy, either for the Christ Who brought it, or for the soul that receives it. Through processes of beating and buffeting, and fire, and tears, and blood do we win through to the Kingdom. Tonight, ere you pass from this house, the inner fact of you, your spirit can come into living union with the Spirit of God and the life of Christ, and the work can begin. It will never be finished in me until I see His dear face, and the vision of His glory complete what the virtue of His Cross did commence: but blessed be it is begun. He is doing His work. "Born anew." Not full grown, growing up into the final stature, but the life has been received.

So we have but touched the fringe of Nicodemus' story. It is a wonderful story. Let me gather it up, and finish. Christ will give Himself to you if you are honest. Christ recognizes and emphasises the limitations of your mind. Do not imagine you are going to encompass God or yourself by your intellectuality. Christ declares the great necessity to be that of spiritual birth in order to spiritual illumination, and so in order to spiritual dynamic.