

Middle School Sunday School Lessons by

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Year 3: Session 5 – Jesus and the Pharisees

Class 14: John 3:1-17 – Jesus and Nicodemus have a talk

CONCEPTS that will be covered in the lesson

- Review who the Pharisees are
- Explore how “born from above” or “born again” is about starting over/relearning
- Discuss why starting over is not easy.

MATERIALS NEEDED

- Some way to play and show movie clip on rfour.org site for this lesson (from *Forest Gump*)
- 2 index cards and a writing utensil for each person in class
- You will need a deck totaling of at least 25 index cards, so depending on the size of your class, you may have to have index cards with names of famous people written on them that you can add to the cards that the students will make to equal 25 index cards. (for more info see the “materials for activity” – four subsections into the lesson)

THE LESSON

OPENING PRAYER

OPENING QUESTION

- For the opening question for today’s class, one of the teachers will ask the question and then to give you some time to think of an answer; the teacher asking the question will answer first.
- Once the teacher answers the question, we’ll go around the circle.
- When it’s your turn, start with your name and then answer the question to the best of your ability.
- Here’s this week’s question: *What’s something that was or is difficult for you to learn?*

TRANSITION TO ACTIVITY

- Learning in general can be difficult.
- Learning to do something *differently* than you first learned how to do it is even MORE difficult for us because we have to unlearn before we can relearn.
- Our opening activity is a fun way to *sort of* demonstrate this concept.

MATERIALS for ACTIVITY

- Have two 3x5 blank index cards for every person in the class.
- Eventually, as a class, you will play the game of memory.

- So you'll need a board of at least 5x5.
- So you'll want to have pairs of extra 3x5 index cards with names of famous or historical people (Lebron James, Lady Gaga, Ben Franklin, Noah, etc.) written on them to add to the cards that the class will create so that you'll have a total of at least 25 cards.

TELL CLASS HOW TO PREPARE for ACTIVITY

- [hand out two index/note cards to every person in the room.]
- You have two cards in front of you.
- I need you to write your first and last name on one side of ONE card
- While you are doing this, do not bend or rip either card in any way.
- [*wait for everyone to finish*]
- Now, I need you to take the other notecard, AND USING YOUR OTHER HAND, write out your first and last name.
- Again, do not bend or rip the card in any way.
- Once you are done, turn in both of your cards (one with your name written with your regular writing hand and one written with you non-writing hand).
- [collect cards; make sure you have 30 or 36 cards and shuffle them. Then, either on the floor or a table, arrange the cards in a 5x6 or 6x6 grid]

EXPLAIN ACTIVITY

- We're going to play the childhood game of memory.
- I'm going to put all the cards face-down, here, so that we've made a 5x5 (or larger) grid
- You flip over two cards and try to match them up by name.
- If you flip over the name and you can't read it (because the handwriting is so bad), don't ask who's name it is – you just have to try and match it.
- If two cards are flipped over AND one or both names can't be read (and therefore a match cannot be ascertained), I will ask everyone, "If both of these cards were written by the same person, please raise your hand" – if a hand is not raised, then that means a match was not made.
- For every match, your team gets a point.
- Usually the game is played where if you make a match, then you get to go again, but we're not going to do that. No matter what happens, (match or no match), its then the other team's turn.
- You get a chance at an extra point if you match the name of someone in the class and can then successfully select which card/signature was written by the non-writing hand.
 - NOTE: If the person whose name is matched is on the matching team, then that person cannot tell his/her team which one is which.
- Team with the highest point total wins.
- OK, let's split into teams and get started!

DO MEMORY ACTIVITY

ASK

- Was it easy to tell which names were written by the non-writing hand? Why?
- Could you even READ some of the names that were written by the non-writing hand? It was kind of difficult to match names sometimes, wasn't it?!
- Why do you think it's so difficult to write with our non-writing hand? (lack of practice; feels uncomfortable)

- So what do you think? Would you rather keep writing with your current writing hand? Or would you rather relearn how to write with your current non-writing hand?

INTRO/Transition to Bible Story

- Our session of stories right now is about Jesus and the Pharisees.
- The Pharisees are one of the three groups that surround Jesus.
- Do you remember all three groups that surround Jesus (the crowd, the Pharisees and the disciples)
- And as we've discussed in the Jesus and the Crowd classes, each of these three groups have certain characteristics.
- The crowd, as we've seen, tends to be demanding (wants more time/healing from Jesus than Jesus can provide). It can also be persnickety (loves Jesus and then tries to throw Jesus off a cliff). And it is often absent-minded (unaware) and therefore not synchronized with Jesus.
- The Pharisees on the other hand are very focused on following the rules. They think that by following the religious rules found in the first five books (or the Torah/Law) of the Hebrew Bible (what we call the Old Testament), that they and the people of Israel will find/receive God's favor.
- Conversely, if something bad is happening to you (sickness, bad luck, etc), then that must mean that you didn't follow the rules and God is upset with you.
- Since the Pharisees are part of the local religious/political leadership, they often are in a position to pass judgment (and even punishment) on the people.
- Jesus had a very different approach than the Pharisees. Jesus helped and healed people who were sick instead of passing judgment on them. He offered God's forgiveness.
- So there was some tension, to say the least, between Jesus and the Pharisees.
- But not all Pharisees hated Jesus.
- In today's scripture story, Nicodemus, a Pharisee, visits with Jesus.
- During their conversation, Jesus tells Nicodemus that he has to be born from above or "born again" (depending on what translation is used).
- The activity that we just did of writing our names with our non-writing hands has SOMETHING to do with that "born again" part of today's story.
- Let's see if you can figure out what the connection is.

READ John 3:1-17 (*recommend class reads it out loud; one person per verse*)

1 Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. 2 He came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God." 3 Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." 4 Nicodemus said to him, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" 5 Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. 6 What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. 7 Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.' 8 The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." 9 Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" 10 Jesus answered him, "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things? 11 'Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. 12 If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? 13 No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. 14 And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, 15 that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. 16 'For God so loved the world that he gave his only

Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. 17 "Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

ASK (*answers are in parenthesis*)

- Is there anything you find interesting or weird about this story? [*to teachers: You don't necessarily need to answer what they notice or have questions about – sometimes just agree with a, "yep, that's interesting" or a, "Yeah, I find that to be weird, too" works*]
- Verse 2, when does Nicodemus visit Jesus? (At night – which probably means Nicodemus didn't want to be seen visiting with Jesus; but it is also probably a metaphor to remind us that Nicodemus is "in the dark" about this Jesus thing)
- Also verse 2, what does Nicodemus admit to Jesus? (that Jesus is empowered by God/God's spirit. NOTE: Although Nicodemus does not ask a question, we're to understand that Nicodemus wants to know how Jesus does what he does)
- Verse 3 – Jesus tells Nicodemus how Jesus does what he does. What does Jesus say exactly? (You must be born from above)
- Recalling our previous conversations about Pharisees, as a Pharisee, how do you think Nicodemus makes his decisions? (By rules/by the Torah/the Law).
- Verse 8 – How does Jesus say the people born of the Spirit will make choices? (By being moved/guided by the Spirit – which is very different than using rules to make decisions, right?)
- Verse 10 – What expectation does Jesus have of Nicodemus? (basically that Nicodemus would know what Jesus knows)
- Verse 11 and 12 – Who does Jesus seem to imply is at fault for Nicodemus not understanding what Jesus is talking about? (That Nicodemus is at fault for not understanding)
- Verse 17, what is Jesus *not* going to do? (condemn the world)

In case there are more questions about the passage, here are some extra talking points, but this is NOT meant to be part of the teaching part of the lesson:

- Nicodemus coming at night has two meanings to consider: 1. He's afraid to be seen talking to Jesus (so he meets with Jesus with the cover of nighttime) and 2. He can't see very well. He's blind to the light that Jesus offers.
- Literalism vs symbolism – Nicodemus is very literal. Hard to tell if he's that way on-purpose or not. But the author of John definitely wants the listener to be aware of how that literal approach gets in the way of understanding what Jesus is talking about.
- More about born from above: "Born from above" or "born again" – what does this mean? This phrase assumes, rightfully, that we've already been physically born. Furthermore, Jesus is saying that if we want to be in relationship with God, if we want to do the things like Jesus is doing (which is what Nicodemus is talking about), then we have to be born in spiritual manner. VERY IMPORTANT NOTE: Jesus is not talking about our understanding of *heaven* as a place we go when we die. Jesus is talking about God's kingdom – wherever God is allowed to be king – in the here and now. This passage isn't about where we go when we die. This passage is about how to be like Jesus right now.
- **Verse 8:** One of the relearning things that take place when we choose to be spiritually reborn is that we let God/God's spirit direct us. Instead of saying, "I'm going to go do this." Or, "So and so says I have to go do this," we instead learn to and then practice "praying without ceasing," (a Paul phrase). In this praying without ceasing, we ask God/God's Holy Spirit, "What should I do next? How do I handle/prepare for this

upcoming situation?” The wind comment is to remind us/Nicodemus that we/he cannot just guess and assume we know what God is going to tell us what to do. God’s spirit is unpredictable and will surprise us. Therefore, we have to stay in constant contact. And when we do, we’ll end up in amazing and surprising places.

- **Verse 9 and 10** – these are two important verses. Nicodemus doesn’t understand what Jesus is talking about. And Jesus is concerned by this because Jesus *expects* Nicodemus to know what Jesus is talking about. In other words, what Jesus is teaching is NOT a new thing. He’s not making up new things about God. So the idea that this highly respected teacher about God (Nicodemus) doesn’t understand what Jesus is talking about is of great concern to Jesus. This expectation of Jesus toward the Pharisees (and it is NOT an unreasonable expectation) that they would understand what he is teaching and the Pharisees’ resistance to agreeing with Jesus’ teachings, is one of the main reasons for the tension that eventually lead the Pharisees to kill Jesus.
- **Verse 12** “heavenly things” is language describing what we’d say today as “God things” or “spiritual things.” Jesus is speaking about a progression of comprehension here. Jesus is saying it should be easy to understand that we are to surrender our life to God...and if you, Nicodemus, don’t understand that very basic level of spiritual things, how are you, Nicodemus, going to understand anything else that Jesus tells you?
- **Verse 14:** refers to the story of the Israelites in the wilderness after being set free from Egypt and they are unhappy. So they complain and complain until God sends hoards of poisonous snakes to invade their camp and start killing them all. So Moses says, “Hey God, What are you DOING? A little help here!” And God says, “Make a bronze serpent, put it on a pole and tell the people to look at it. If they look at it, they will not die.” Numbers 21:4-9)
- **Verse 14 cont:** “Son of Man” being lifted up like the bronze serpent – The poisonous snakes are a symbol of how complaining is poisonous...a dead end. The bronze serpent is a reminder to keep one’s focus on God’s way of life, which is NOT poisonous. In Jesus and Nicodemus’ conversation, then, it seems like Jesus is saying “Nicodemus, your way of life is filled with poison, so stop trying to live your way, and instead look at me, who will show you how to live filled with God’s Holy Spirit.)
- **Verse 13 through 17:** the Greek that we translate the Gospels from does not have punctuation. So we don’t know if Jesus is actually talking here. Most Bibles put these verses in quotes to tell us that Jesus is talking. But the tone is very similar to how John 1 starts (i.e. the narrator’s voice). It is also dissimilar to how Jesus was just sounding – for instance, Jesus suddenly starts talking in the third person (to be fair, though, Jesus DOES do this in the other Gospels as well). In a lot of ways, this section makes a lot more sense if you think of it as the author of John inserting some theology to the situation as a narrator, instead of Jesus as the speaker.
- Regardless of who is talking, the theology (be it from the author of John or from Jesus) is an argument against the Pharisee way of teaching: Rules will not bring Life. God brings Life. And Jesus, like the bronze snake, is a reminder to pay attention to God. And in this example, BY looking at the reminder, the person IS paying attention to God. (Numbers 21:4-9)
- **Verse 16**, this theology continues: God did not send RULES to save the world. But people (in this case, Jesus) who embody what God wants for and offers to the world (i.e. people). Look at the healing power and incredibly smart teachings that come from this person who embodies God...and it’s available for EVERYONE. That’s how much God loves the world.
- **Verse 17**, whereas the Pharisees use their rules to condemn people, Jesus is saying that this is just the opposite of what God wants. God doesn’t want condemnation, but freedom for God’s people (freedom from the poisonous life as symbolized by the snakes that invade the Israelites in that Numbers 21 story). And

that's what Jesus is offering in *everything* that he does – God's better way. Which is in direct opposition to what the Pharisees are doing.

TELL

- Sometimes, learning how to do something different can be a very difficult thing when we've already learned to do that something in a certain way.
- So for instance, if you were told you had to learn how to write with your non-writing hand – you would be tempted, I think, to keep writing with your regular writing hand when no one was looking because it'd be so much easier and faster, right?
- This is an example of how things we've previously learned makes it difficult to learn similar, but different, things.
- Unfortunately for Nicodemus, this is what he is being told by Jesus.
- Jesus is telling Nicodemus things about God that are just different enough that Nicodemus is going to have to start all over.
- Because, even though Jesus is talking to Nicodemus about God, Jesus is telling Nicodemus that life with God isn't about following rules.
- Instead, Jesus is telling Nicodemus that a life with God is lived by trusting God's spirit and guidance.
- In other words, for Nicodemus to do like Jesus does, Nicodemus is going to have to start all over and learn how to live life very differently than how he now lives it.
- It's like being a baby again – to have relearn very simple things.
- The temptation, of course, for Nicodemus, will be to go back to living the ways he's learned to live -- to keep writing with the hand that he originally learned to write with.
- But if he does that (goes back to living the way he knows to live), then Nicodemus won't ever learn how to live and do like Jesus lives and does.

TRANSITION to the MOVIE CLIP

- Sometimes the first way we learn how to do something isn't the best way to do the thing (like people who type with two fingers)
- The problem with learning something the "wrong way" is that it makes it harder for to really learn how to do that something in the better way.
- So, that's why I wanted to end today's lesson with a movie clip that shows the "reward" – if you will – that a person can experience once they learn to do something the best way.
- In today's movie clip, there's a young boy by the name of Forrest Gump (which is also the name of the movie that the clip is from), who has had a bad back.
- He's been given these leg braces that we'll see at the beginning of the clip that are meant to help him learn how to walk correctly.
- Let's see if those braces teach Forrest how to walk in a better way.

WATCH MOVIE CLIP

ASK

- So was there a better way for Forrest to walk? (Yes, by running)
- What was the final motivation that Forrest needed in order to learn this better way (a rock to the head and the yelling of his friend to "Run, FORREST, run!")
- Once Forrest learned this new way, did he keep doing it? (yep. "Like a running fool")

- Do you think he'll ever go back to the leg braces? (seems unlikely)

TELL

- So Nicodemus' understanding of God is life without leg braces, but with the back problem.
- Things never would've gotten better. There only would've been so much Forest would've been able to do.
- Forest, though, with his mom's enforcement, wore the braces and those braces taught Forest's legs how to move the best way – and he became a running fool.
- Since Nicodemus sees that Jesus moves with God a lot better than anyone else, Nicodemus is curious what he needs to do to move like Jesus.
- Jesus tells him he must learn to live with God's spirit being his guide.
- In other words, Nicodemus is going to need some braces to relearn how move through life – because Jesus is saying all those rules Nicodemus has learned to trust need to get thrown out the window.
- This is not an easy thing Jesus is telling Nicodemus.
- However, it's not impossible.
- And, the reason Nicodemus might choose to try is because he can see how much more exciting God's way of life is vs his/ Pharisees' way of life.
- And that's why we might choose to learn how to live God's way, too. Because there's something very attractive to us about the way Jesus lives his life.
- But, the difficulty of starting over is pretty scary for Nicodemus AND that threat of starting over is why the other Pharisees so quickly rejected what Jesus was offering
- Next class, we'll talk some more about why the Pharisees want to get rid of Jesus.

CLOSING PRAYER