

# The Words of Jesus #3

*by: Ronald L. Dart*

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Whatever image you have in your mind of Jesus Christ, it's surely wrong. None of His disciples told us anything at all about how He looked, which in a way is a curious oversight because we really would like to know. I would, I'm sure you would. It comes as a shock to some people when they learn that the picture of Jesus that they bought down at the five and dime and hung on the wall, is a painting of some male model the artist recruited to sit in for the portrait. The most famous one I think is somewhere back in the middle ages. There really was a fellow walking around the streets that looked just like that. There is every indication that Jesus was unremarkable physically. He was a Jew but, what do you expect His disciples to say? Well, Jesus looked like a Jew. He looked like us. So we really don't know anything about His physical appearance, but we know a great deal about His character and His personality. Which when you think about it, it's of a great deal more interest anyway to know about His character and about His personality. He was definitely not a talkative man. And when He did speak He was often cryptic, as people would listen to Him and say. What did that mean? What did He say? But when He acted, well, when He acted He could be pretty definite. There was a day for example when Jesus went up to Jerusalem at the Passover season. And He went up to the Temple and I suppose when a person went to the Temple in those days they had certain expectations.

Especially, I'm sure someone who had never been there before. Because after all this is God's house, it's all the awe and all the greatness of God is here. It's a place of prayer, and one has the idea that it would be quiet and contemplative and maybe the smell of incense in the air. So the visitor to the Temple would not be quite prepared to walk in the gate and have his ears greeted with the lowing of cattle and the bleating of sheep and squawking of birds. And the babble of money changers and all the busy bustle of selling and buying that was going on in the place. Not to mention, instead of the smell of incense, the smell of animal dung. And so when Jesus walked into the Temple, what He saw did not make Him happy. And so He took a little scourge of small cords and He made a whip. And He walked over to the nearest goat and smacked him across the back side. And you can let your imagination go for the rest of it. The goat bolted forward with a great bleat, knocked over several tables, and before He was finished He had driven everybody out of the Temple, at least all the money changers. And there was money that ran over the floor from tables being knocked over. He made quite a mess. And He said to those people, take these things out of here, don't make my Father's house a house of merchandise. Now this is another one of these really short speeches of Jesus, it's not cryptic it's pretty plain and the action pretty definitive.

He said "Get out of here, just get out of here! Don't make my Father's house a house of merchandise!" Now I've often thought about this in the sense that, how did Jesus get away with this? He turned the whole place upside down and not a soul laid a hand on Him. The Temple police didn't come in and grab Him by one arm and the other and then drag Him physically from the place. But you know I think they were a little bit afraid of Him, in the first place they knew He was right. No one was going to argue that these activities should have been going on, and I'm sure there were a lot of people who had been offended by the whole thing anyway. You know how you might have felt if you'd gone to the Temple looking for a little quiet, a time to pray, a little time to think about God, and to maybe sense His presence with you there. Only to be confronted by this mob. The Temple, well it was a mess. They knew it wasn't right. So consequently, it's pretty hard when you don't have the moral high ground, to jump on someone who does. Even if what He does seems a little bit outrageous. And I think also that Jesus had a rather charismatic personality, He spoke and He acted with authority. I suspect that a lot of people, who might otherwise have, some other ordinary man would have told Him off, were a little more careful when it came to Jesus. His disciples remembered what was written in the Bible, "The zeal of your house has eaten me up." And they thought about it as a result of what He did.

By the Jews said to Him, well now wait a minute, what sign do you show to us seeing that you are doing this thing? Where do you get the authority to clean out the Temple? He called it my Father's house. And Jesus answered them and said to them "Destroy this Temple and in three days I will raise it up." I can imagine the Jews who challenged Him standing there blinking and saying what did He say? Or more important, what did He mean? Because they said wait a minute, 46 years this Temple was in building here, you are going to raise it again in three days? What are you talking about destroy this Temple? But Jesus spoke of the temple of His body. But nobody who was standing there knew that. In fact when He was risen from the dead, after three days, His disciples remembered that He had said this to them. And they believed the Scripture and the word which Jesus had said. But now do you see what I mean about Jesus' habit of speaking cryptically and enigmatically? Destroy this Temple and in three days I'll raise it up. It was years before the disciples put together the significance of much of what Jesus said. In fact it's a good thing and probably just as well that the gospel accounts to Matthew, Mark, Luke and John were all written quite a lot later, 20 or 30 years later before they were written. Because in the process of time, a lot of things that Jesus had said, finally came to make sense to them so that they were able to make sense of it for us. Part of the problem was that Jesus' teaching was so new. It was so different from the standards of the time that sometimes it was almost as though He was speaking in a different language.

Because when He came, well I have to back off for a minute. It really wasn't so very new, it was absolutely consistent with the Old Testament. The problem was that contemporary religion contemporary faith had charged off down its own channel, it was, well I suppose what you would call the established religion of the time, which was Judaism. Although I don't know that it necessarily was the same as Judaism is today. But nevertheless it was the response of the Jewish people to the revelation of God. I hope I

would not offend anybody if I say that Judaism is not the revelation of God, it is a response to the revelation of God by the Jewish people and it arises out of their culture. And as such it is to be respected as a response to God. But don't make the mistake of assuming that it is the revealed handed down religion of God, because in fact long before there was a Jew, after which the name Judaism could come into existence, Abraham worshiped God and his worship was somewhat different from anything that you find of the Jews of today or even of the first century. So, what Jesus brought was consistent with Abraham and it was consistent with Moses, but it did run afoul of an awful lot of ideas of the religious establishment of the time. So we're talking in this series of programs about the words of Jesus. What did He actually say?

And what was the intellectual content of His message? Some of the most important things that Jesus ever had to say were said in private. There was a man who came to Jesus privately, he came by night almost as though he didn't particularly want to be seen. His name was Nicodemus, he was a Pharisee and he was a member of the religious establishment. He came to Jesus and he said Rabbi we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no man can do these miracles that you do except God be with Him. Now Nicodemus was whistling in the dark, he had hoped that Jesus was only a teacher come from God. Because the whole land of Israel was rife with messianic expectations. Any new figure that came along was of intense interest. And when one did miracles and mighty works, and taught the law, everyone looked at one another and said, is this it? Is this the Messiah? Is someone else coming or is this the one? And so Nicodemus, I think, was at some pains to find out. Now people will still come along and try to tell us that Jesus was a great teacher. They are wrong. Jesus was either the Son of God, the Messiah, or He was a complete fraud, or worse, a mad man. No sane man, no sane and honest man could seriously make the claims that Jesus made in His ministry. No, don't try to minimize Jesus by calling Him a great teacher. And don't look for middle ground, either you believe His words or you don't.

And if you believe them, they are earth shaking. Not to mention, life changing. Well, Jesus answered Nicodemus, and said to him, "Verily verily, I say unto you except a man be born again he cannot see the Kingdom of God." And Nicodemus said, "Well how can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter the second time into his mother's womb and be born?" I almost sense a little sarcasm, a little irony in Nicodemus' comment here. For in fact Jesus seems to be coming almost off the wall, there was no introduction to this. There was nothing to lead into it. Nicodemus says Hi, we think you might be a teacher come from God." And Jesus ignores him and says, "I'm telling you, unless a man is born again he cannot see the Kingdom of God." It seems like He's not even addressing what Nicodemus is talking about. But He is, because the real issue that Nicodemus came to Him about is the Kingdom of God. That is the restoration of the kingdom to Israel. What we're angling to know is, are you the messiah? Are you going to drive out the Romans? Are you going to once again establish the throne of David here? The Kingdom of God, is it going to be here? And Jesus says, "The Kingdom of God is not what you think it is, because unless a man is born again he cannot see the Kingdom of God."

Now, Nicodemus does not seem taken aback by Jesus' statement. He simply addresses one question and one can only wonder why Jesus took this tact with Nicodemus. Because one gathers from this in other passages, that the nature of the Kingdom of God was somewhat at issue. The religious establishment had one view and Jesus had another. So Jesus immediately tells Nicodemus that the kingdom is something entirely different, it's not physical. You have to be born again to enter it. Now the born again part puzzled Nicodemus. From Jesus language he considered being born as the moment of physical birth. When a child leaves the womb and takes his first breath. There's no question about whether He meant begotten or conception or anything else. He was talking about born. And Jesus answered him after he asked his question and said, "Verily I say unto you, except a man be born of water and of 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." Now I don't want to pick a fight with anybody about the question of being born again. When people speak of being a born again Christian, I know what they mean. They believe that conversion is such a life changing experience, it's like being a new man. All past sins are gone, we have a new life, it's morning in our lives.

So being born again is to many people a metaphor for conversion, and there is nothing wrong with that, it's quite an apt metaphor. But is that what Jesus was saying? Is that what He and Nicodemus were going back and forth about? Consider what He said, His actual words. "That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the spirit is spirit." Now what exactly does that mean? Well, I don't have too much trouble with the "born of the flesh is flesh" part because that's what I am and that's what you are. We were born of the flesh and we are flesh. You can pinch yourself and tell very quickly what you are. Then He says, "that which is born of the spirit is spirit." And presumably we're drawing a complete total contrast, something that is flesh is flesh, something that is spirit is spirit and never the twain shall meet.

He said "Marvel not that I said unto you, you must be born again. The wind blows wherever it wishes and you hear the sound. But you cannot tell whence it comes from and you can't tell where it's going. So is everyone who is born of the spirit." Uh, well, I understand in a way what he is saying, you can kind of hear the wind but you can't see it. You can see its effect on the trees when the leaves move, but it's not the wind you see it's the leaves responding to the wind. It's almost as though what He is saying is that it's like a ghost, that He that is born of the spirit is like a ghost. You may be aware of it being there or coming and going, but you can't see it. The Kingdom of God is not a physical kingdom. It is spiritual and you can't take your flesh and blood body into it. That's what Jesus is telling Nicodemus and so your idea of a Messianic kingdom won't work. It's not what we're talking about. Only a spirit being can enter it and to become a spirit being you have to be born again—born of the spirit. Now I think Nicodemus probably knew that that takes place at the resurrection, for he doesn't seem to question it.

In Revelation 1 and verse 4 we have this letter of John to the seven churches of Asia and he says this, “Grace be unto you, and peace from him which is and which was and which is to come. And from the seven spirits which are before his throne and from Jesus Christ who is the faithful witness and,” catch this, “the firstborn of the dead.” Now, there’s not much mistaking of that. The firstborn of the dead likens the resurrection of Jesus Christ to being born again. And Jesus Christ, born from the dead, was able to pass through walls without opening the door. Then Paul addresses this same question from another angle. Because in his time, when he was writing to the Corinthians a great controversy had arisen about whether there even was a resurrection from the dead. Well he answered that and then chapter 15 of 1 Corinthians, verse 35 he said this. “But some man will say, how are the dead raised up and with what body do they come?” Paul was not terribly patient with that question. He said. “You fool, that which you sow is not quickened except it die.” Right? You go out and you put seed in the ground and they cannot make new life, a new plant without the seed being destroyed. “And that which you sow, you don’t sow the body that will be, you sow bare grain.”

Maybe wheat or some other grain, but he says. “God gives it a body as it pleases him, to every seed his own body. All flesh is not the same flesh, you’ve got the flesh of men, the flesh of beasts, another of fishes, another of birds.” Then he says, “Look to the heavens, there are celestial bodies, and bodies terrestrial.” The sun is what he would mean by a celestial body that burns with its own light. The moon on the other hand is a terrestrial body, that is it simply gives reflected light. “So there is one glory of the sun, another glory of the moon, and another glory of the stars. For one star differs from another in glory, so also is the resurrection of the dead.” Now I’ve been asked many times in my ministry, well how are we raised up and what are we like and will we know people in the resurrection? He says well. “The body is sown in corruption, it is raised in incorruption. It is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power. It is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body.” There is, Paul says, “A natural body and there is a spiritual body.” Oh, I got it. So when Jesus says that which is born of the flesh is flesh, He’s talking about the natural body. And when He speaks of that which is born of the spirit is spirit He is speaking of the spiritual body. And how do you get from the one to the other? By dying and being buried like a seed in the ground and being raised up anew in the resurrection, a kind of spiritual rebirth. So in order to enter the Kingdom of God we have to lay aside our natural body and be born again in a spiritual body. The resurrection is that spiritual rebirth. So while you may have been born again in a figure of speech, if you are still in the flesh you have not yet been born again in the sense that Christ spoke of to Nicodemus. Well, Nicodemus answered and said to Him, having heard all this, uh, well, how can these things be? And in answer to that question Jesus becomes absolutely loquacious for him.

He answered and said to him, “Are you a master of Israel and you don’t know these things? Verily I say unto you, we speak what we know. We testify that we have seen. And you just simply don’t get it do you? If I have told you earthly things and you don’t believe, how are you going to believe if I tell you heavenly things? No man has ascended up to heaven but He that came down from heaven, even the son of man which is in heaven. And as

Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the son of man be lifted up.” I just don’t think Nicodemus understood most of this. We can kind of grasp it, looking back over the years with all the New Testament theology, with the writings of Paul. With the writings of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, that all kind of give us the picture of what Jesus is driving at. To tell us that no man has ascended into heaven, I don’t think that Nicodemus would have argued with that, because it was not part of his belief system that man had an immortal soul that would go immediately to heaven at death.

Nothing like that exists in Judaism. And so Jesus, having said that, made sense to Him, but then He said, “No man has ascended up to heaven but he that came down from heaven even the son of man who is in heaven.” That must have been confusing, for the truth is, I don’t think Nicodemus quite understood that Jesus had come down from heaven. Or, that as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, the son of man would be lifted up.

Picture two men sitting and chatting with one another, one of them with a very puzzled expression on his face. The puzzled one is Nicodemus who is a member of the Jewish religious establishment, probably rather older than the other man, who is Jesus. And Jesus looks at his puzzled expression and says, "Are you a master in Israel and you don't know these things?" It's fascinating because, I don't think Jesus is being sarcastic, I don't think it's a put down, I think it's a statement that I really would have thought that a man who understood the written scriptures of the Old Testament, would have a better grasp on what God is doing than you have. And he says, “I don’t know what’s the problem with you fellows, we’re speaking what we know, we’re testifying what you have seen, and you just won’t accept the witness will you? If I’ve told you earthly things and you don’t believe, I wonder how you’re going to believe if we really get into the big stuff. As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the son of man be lifted up. That whosoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in Him should not perish but should live forever.” I doubt that the puzzled expression came off Nicodemus’ face at this time. In fact he may, if anything, have been more astonished. I don’t have much question that Jesus told it to him just like this. And at the same time it’s hard to imagine how a leading Jew of his time would have really understood what Jesus was saying. And I suspect that it was only later as He explained it to His disciples that they understood exactly what He was talking about, what He was saying. Because He talks about the son of man being lifted up. Now with all that I know about the New Testament, with all the subsequent events, I can make the connection going back to Moses and Israel.

Of when a plague of serpents broke out among the people and they were being bitten by them and dying and they put a brazen serpent on a pole up where people could see it. And when they were bitten, they could look at that serpent and they would be healed and not die. I can make the connection between that and Jesus Christ being lifted up between earth and heaven on a stake. Being crucified and being killed, so that all men, when they would look up to Him might be healed, might be saved, and might live. But it’s hard for me to know how Nicodemus could have made that connection. Or how he would have understood it

when Jesus said. "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 sent not His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved. Jesus here foreshadows everything that He is going to do, and all the power of the things that He is going to do to this leader of the Jews on this night.

He goes on to say, "He that believes on Him is not condemned, but He that believeth not is condemned already. Because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. And this is the condemnation, that light has come into the world and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil." Ah, yeah, when we're not doing what we should, we'd rather keep it in the dark. "Everyone that does evil hates the light, and they don't come to the light lest their deeds should be reproved. But he that does truth comes to the light that his deeds may be made manifest that they are wrought in God"

What in the world did Nicodemus think about all of that? I don't know but, I know what I think. I think that you and I have lived our lives as losers and we've made enough mistakes, and we've screwed things up enough that we need help. And I think that God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whoever believes in Him could stop being a loser and be turned into a winner.

Until next time, this is Ronald Dart and don't forget, you were born to win.

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