

SAME QUESTION, DIFFERENT ANSWERS

WHAT must I DO to enter the Kingdom of God? Or, WHAT must I DO to have eternal LIFE? 3 times that I can THINK of in the gospels, Jesus is asked that SAME question. And 3 times in the gospels, Jesus gives a DIFFERENT answer. ONE time is in TODAY'S Scripture Lesson. Nicodemus is a religious and political leader, who has HEARD about Jesus and the MIRACLES that He is performing. BUT, he ALSO knows that Jesus is a CONTROVERSIAL figure amongst the JEWS. SO, he decides to meet with Jesus in SECRET, at night. He has some QUESTIONS to ask. Now, we don't know EXACTLY what questions Nicodemus ASKS Jesus. But we CAN tell what his PRIMARY question is simply by looking at the RESPONSE that Jesus GIVES him. Nicodemus asks Jesus something like: *WHAT must I DO to enter the Kingdom of God? Or, WHAT must I DO to have eternal life?* And we KNOW this because Jesus replies: *Unless one is BORN from ABOVE, or BORN AGAIN, one cannot SEE the Kingdom of God.* Now at FIRST, Nicodemus doesn't understand that JESUS is talking about a SPIRITUAL rebirth, rather than a PHYSICAL one. SO, Jesus explains it FURTHER, and tells Nicodemus that he must receive the **SPIRIT** of God in order to enter the **KINGDOM** of God.

The SECOND time this question is asked of Jesus is in LUKE 10. It tells us that, one day, a LAWYER asks Jesus: *What shall I DO to inherit eternal life?* And JESUS asks ANOTHER question in reply: *What is written in the LAW?* The lawyer answers: *You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with ALL your mind; AND you shall love your neighbor AS yourself.*

You have answered RIGHT, replies Jesus. *Do THIS and you will LIVE.*

But WHO is my NEIGHBOR, asks the lawyer? And Jesus goes ON to share with him the **Parable of Good Samaritan**, pointing out that one's NEIGHBOR is ANYONE in NEED, even people we don't LIKE. SO you see: it's the SAME question, but Jesus answers it differently.

ALSO in the Gospel of Luke is the story of a rich young RULER, who AGAIN asks Jesus the SAME question: *Good Teacher, WHAT must I DO to inherit eternal LIFE?* And Jesus replies: *YOU know the commandments: do not commit adultery, do not KILL, do not STEAL, do not bear FALSE witness, HONOR your father and mother.* And the young ruler stops Him saying: *ALL these I have observed since my YOUTH.* And THEN Jesus says: *One thing you still LACK. Sell ALL that you have and give the money to the POOR, and you will have treasure in HEAVEN. Then COME and follow ME.* But WHEN the young man HEARS this, he goes away SAD, for he is VERY rich. And Jesus says to His disciples: *How HARD it IS for those who have RICHES to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. It is easier for a CAMEL to go through the eye of a NEEDLE than for a RICH man to enter the Kingdom.*

SO you see: it's the SAME question, but EACH time it's ASKED, Jesus offers a DIFFERENT response. Well, WHY do you think Jesus gives a DIFFERENT answer EACH time? Well, I believe that He TAILORS His ANSWER to fit the NEEDS of the person asking the QUESTION. I believe that He LOOKS at that person and ASKS Himself: *What IS it that is keeping THIS person from TRULY experiencing God's LOVE and receiving God's SPIRIT, which of course, is what the Kingdom of God is all ABOUT? What IS it that keeps THIS person from having an intimate RELATIONSHIP with God?* Now, in the case of Nicodemus, he is just SO TIED to the OLD ways of seeing the world, and the OLD ways of imaging God, that he is BLIND to experiencing the kingdom of God in ANY other WAY, and of course, the kingdom of God is sitting right BESIDE Him in the person of JESUS! But Nicodemus just doesn't SEE it, because he's STUCK in the OLD paradigm, the OLD model. And I wonder how often WE get stuck in that OLD model as well, and how often WE fail to see God at WORK in this world or in our OWN lives and OTHER people's lives, in NEW ways, WAYS that we never THOUGHT of before, and ways MIGHT not be TRADITIONAL or seem quite KOSHER? I wonder? And like NICODEMUS, maybe WE have to OPEN ourselves to NEW ways of experiencing God.

In the case of the lawyer, HIS block to experiencing the Kingdom of Heaven is that he is NOT willing to be a NEIGHBOR to anyone he doesn't LIKE, OR to people who are DIFFERENT. In other

words, he's FILLED with PREJUDICE, and in THIS case, RACIAL prejudice. SO, Jesus tells him *The PARABLE of the Good Samaritan* to SHOW him what HAS to be done. He HAS to let GO of his prejudice, his pre-conceived NOTIONS, and LOVE his NEIGHBOR and respond to the NEEDS of his neighbor, REGARDLESS of WHO that neighbor IS. And WHAT does that say to US, because IF we are HONEST, many of US feel PREJUDICED, don't we? Is it against illegal IMMIGRANTS? Is it against MUSLIMS? Is it against GAYS and lesbians? Is it against Republicans, or Democrats? Is it against people of COLOR? Who IS it? Well, if WE are HARBORING prejudice of ANY kind, WE need to get RID of it, because it's coming between us and GOD. After all, how do PARENTS feel when SIBLINGS don't LIKE each other and don't HELP each other? Well, MULTIPLY it for GOD!

FINALLY, in the case of the rich young RULER, his WEALTH is HIS barrier to communion with God. UNTIL he can let GO of his WEALTH, he can NEVER really FEEL God's love, RECEIVE God's SPIRIT, **OR** learn to TRUST and depend upon GOD rather than his MONEY. And we all know how THAT one applies to us, DON'T we? So you see: JESUS looks at EACH and every PERSON as an individual, and He SEES what it is that is standing in the way of THAT person experiencing God's love, receiving God's SPIRIT, and having an INTIMATE kind of COMMUNION with God. And He says to EACH one: *THAT'S what you need to let GO of in order to inherit the Kingdom of Heaven.*

And SO, the question that EACH of us ought to be asking OURSELVES, and PRAYING about, is: what **IS** it that keeps **ME** from experiencing God's LOVE and receiving God's SPIRIT? What **IS** it that keeps **ME** from having an INTIMATE relationship with God? It MAY be one of the SAME blocks that we see in the gospels. But MAYBE it's not ANY of those. Maybe Jesus would say to some of US: *You really need to QUIT your JOB, because your JOB has become your god. You've made your JOB into the thing that gives your life its MEANING and purpose, and there's no ROOM left for GOD.* You see, WHATEVER gives our life its MEANING is our GOD. And therefore, IT becomes a BARRIER, IT becomes a WALL, that KEEPS us from having an INTIMATE relationship with the one **TRUE** God, and that KEEPS us from **fully** experiencing God's LOVE and receiving God's SPIRIT. **OR**, Jesus might say to SOME of us: *YOU need to LET GO of your ANGER, **OR**, YOU need to STOP having an AFFAIR, **OR**, YOU need to quit DRINKING, **OR**, you need to put your CHILDREN, or your SPOUSE, into PERSPECTIVE because THEY'VE become your MEANING-GIVER, your GOD.* You see: whatever it **IS** that BLOCKS us from experiencing the one TRUE God; whatever it **IS** that BLOCKS us from having an INTIMATE relationship with God, **THAT** is what we NEED to CHANGE, and very OFTEN, get RID of. **THAT** is what we need to let GO of, or DIE to. And friends, we ALL have these BARRIERS and BLOCKS in our lives! We ALL have BIG and little CORNERS of our lives, where we just DON'T want God's SPIRIT to enter. And EACH and every ONE of us is DIFFERENT. And so, we NEED to expect DIFFERENT answers when we ask that question, *WHAT must I DO to enter the Kingdom of Heaven?* Or, *WHAT must I DO to have eternal life?* And I would urge ALL of us to **PRAY** about that question, and to REALLY do some SOUL-SEARCHING about it. And when I say that we need to **PRAY** about that question, I mean that we need to ASK God that question, and then shut up and LISTEN for God's REPLY.

Now MOST of us, when we start to PRAY, WE start TALKING. Well, I want you to REMEMBER that **IF** you're TALKING, either verbally or in your MIND, any MORE than **10%** of your prayer time, you're NOT really PRAYING. You're just lifting up your **WISH LIST** to some cosmic SANTA Claus somewhere. **PRAYER**, on the other hand, is a DIALOGUE. And the BIGGEST part of it is **LISTENING** to God. It's learning to EMPTY ourselves so that the WORD of God, the VOICE of God, the SPIRIT of God (WHATEVER you wish to CALL it) might FILL us UP. And when it DOES fill us up, it **FEELS** like we're receiving a TASTE, or a GLIMPSE, of the Kingdom of Heaven. It **FEELS** like we're receiving a TASTE, or a GLIMPSE, of eternal life.

You know: the *Prayer of St. Francis* says it SO beautifully. It ENDS with the most BEAUTIFUL line. It says: *And it is in DYING that we are BORN to ETERNAL life.* And in one sense, I'm sure St. Francis meant that LITERALLY, but in ANOTHER sense, I believe that St. Francis UNDERSTOOD what JESUS is trying to TELL us by ALL these different ANSWERS to the SAME question. He UNDERSTOOD that Jesus is telling us that WHEN we let GO of, or when we DIE to, the

BLOCKS and BARRIERS that KEEP us from having an INTIMATE relationship with the one TRUE God, that KEEP us from fully experiencing God's LOVE and receiving God's SPIRIT, it's like being born AGAIN! It's like being born ANEW! It's like being BORN from ABOVE! And our lives suddenly have a NEW meaning, a NEW purpose and a new FULLNESS! And it's just POWERFUL, and SO life-giving! But Nicodemus would never KNOW it, and neither would the rich young ruler, because they just COULDN'T take that STEP. They just couldn't DIE to their illusionary gods. You see: it's OPEN to ALL, but MOST of us just don't GET it!

So, what IS it that blocks YOU from experiencing God's LOVE? What IS it that blocks YOU from receiving God's SPIRIT? What IS that keeps YOU from having an INTIMATE relationship with God? What IS it that Jesus would tell YOU that you must DIE to, that you must LET GO of, in order to have ETERNAL life? Friends: THAT is a GREAT question for ALL of us to struggle with, ESPECIALLY during this HOLY season of LENT. And I hope and pray that all of us WILL struggle with it, and PRAY about it, and then LISTEN for the VOICE of GOD in reply, so that EACH of us might be BORN from above, BORN to eternal life, in and through our Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.