

# Jesus Explains Why God Sent Him

John 3:12-21

In this passage, Jesus is talking with Nicodemus, a Pharisee and a member of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish religious ruling council. Nicodemus had come to Jesus under the cover of darkness to find out for himself who Jesus really was. Nicodemus believed that Jesus was from God (John 3:2), but he didn't want people to think he was one of Jesus' followers.

Jesus launched into the conversation by making it clear that new birth is the only way to God's kingdom. For Nicodemus, a strict follower of the Law who thought obedience to a set of rules was his ticket to heaven, the concept of a "new birth" was tough to grasp. He had trouble accepting that all his good works and intentions wouldn't get him into God's kingdom. So in this passage, Jesus clearly states what it takes to get to heaven—and why God sent him to earth.

Why did God do it? Why did he send his own Son to die an agonizing death on the cross? The answer is clear in verse 16: "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." In this sentence Jesus summarizes God's entire plan of salvation. The Greek word used for "love" in this verse is *agape*, the highest type and form of loving described in the Bible. When one stops to contemplate the magnitude of God's sacrifice, it seems nearly incomprehensible. A normal human father might give up his life to save his own child's life. A mother might even give up her life to save another mother's child. But for a parent to give the life of his or her child for the sake of others who don't even care seems out of the question. And then to think of God, the creator, sustainer, and owner of the universe to give up his *only* Son for sinful, rebellious people—that seems truly unimaginable. But God did it. For me. For you. For them. What amazing love!

Perhaps Nicodemus was thinking that Jesus' presence in the world condemned it. Jesus seemed to be pointing out that the religious leaders were doing everything wrong. No doubt Nicodemus felt condemned by things Jesus had said. But in verse 17, Jesus makes it clear that the condemning part of his presence was only to help people to an awareness of their sin. The real purpose for Jesus' coming was to save those who saw their need for him and who responded to him in faith.

Jesus' message for Nicodemus and for us today is that following all the religious rules won't win us God's favor. God has a different plan, because all the good we can ever do won't wipe out a single sin. Only Jesus' sacrifice on the cross, paying the death penalty for us, makes it possible for us to enter heaven. And only our response in faith to that offer and to the Holy Spirit's working in our lives will seal the deal.

We don't know how Nicodemus responded to Jesus that night. But we do know that he stood up for Jesus' right to speak for himself before the Sanhedrin (John 7:50-51). We also know that he brought a large quantity of expensive embalming materials for Jesus' burial after the crucifixion. But that's the last we hear of Nicodemus in the Bible. Did he come to genuine faith in Jesus, or did he continue to try to win God's favor by doing good things? Use this lesson to help your class members explore that question in their own lives.

### **Devotion for Teachers**

**The One Thing:** There are many awesome "benefits" of a relationship with Jesus, but *this* is the ultimate: We can be born again! A new life, a fresh start, a clean slate!

**Weaving Faith Into Your Life:** John 3:16 is so familiar that it's tempting to skim it without taking its full meaning to heart. So stop for a moment and reread it. Now imagine you're Nicodemus. How would Jesus' words impact you? What would *your* questions be? What would you want to say to Jesus? Go ahead and say it in prayer right now.