



Session Seven

Nicodemus the Pharisee

Nicodemus is one of the characters in the New Testament that we wish we knew more about. He was a Pharisee who believed enough in Jesus to come in the dark of night to hear him. He was a member of the Sanhedrin who protested against their actions against Jesus without a proper hearing. And, finally, he joined Joseph of Arimathea in administering the last rites to the body of Jesus before burial.

But, what we know about Nicodemus brings up more questions than it answers. How did such a high-ranking Pharisee come to know about Jesus' teachings? Was he a full-blown convert or was he merely curious? Was he a secret believer in Jesus who didn't want his colleagues on the Sanhedrin to know about it? What would he have lost if he became an open follower of Jesus? Was he there when the Sanhedrin convicted Jesus of blasphemy and voted to have him executed? Did he become a Christian after the death and resurrection of Jesus or did he return to his role as a high-

ranking Pharisee and member of the Sanhedrin? Were there other secret believers in Jesus who held important positions in the Jewish power structure?

Clearly, we will never know the answer to these questions so, in some ways, Nicodemus is a much more interesting subject for the kind of fiction accounts that are in *Disciples and Other Sinners*. We know so little about him and his situation is so filled with potential drama, conflict and emotion that he is a perfect subject for fictional elaboration in which we can surmise about what his situation might have been like.

? *What did you like best about this week's story?*

? *In what ways did it change your understanding of First Century life? In what ways did it change your understanding of the nature of Pharisees and what it meant to be a disciple of Jesus?*

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Background

Pharisees

The Pharisees were both a religious and a political party because, in first century Palestine, religion and politics were inseparable. The Pharisees were the most powerful religious/political group among the Jews and are constantly mentioned throughout the gospels as the primary enemies of Jesus. During the first century, it is estimated that there were approximately 6,000 Pharisees in Palestine. Most were laymen whose primary work was in non-religious fields such as business and teaching but some were rabbis, priests, and scribes. They met periodically in “fellowships” and were very strict about who was allowed to be a member. They strictly observed every religious rule they could identify and even established several additional observances just for their members. They were radically opposed to Pagan practices, fostered synagogue life and worship, called the people to more intense study of the Scriptures, and performed scores of ritual washings, fasts, and lengthy public prayers, usually in full view of the common people. They were much admired for their austerity and emphasis on righteousness.

Jesus frequently denounced the Pharisees' rigid and frequently hypocritical adherence to the religious laws, their self-righteousness, and their minutia of petty rules and regulations. A constant theme of Jesus' preaching when Pharisees were present was that a person's motivations were substantially more important than whether they rigidly followed specific rules and that following rules without a heartfelt commitment to them was hypocritical.

? *Who in modern times reminds you of the Pharisees?*

The writings of the first century historian, Josephus (himself a Pharisee), are also critical of the Pharisees in much the same way as the teachings of Jesus. In the few writings available to us from the other Jewish religious parties — the Sadducees and Essenes — there is also criticism of the rigidity and self-righteousness of the Pharisees, which indicates that criticism of them existed in other areas even if it was not widespread. In Palestine, they so dominated the religious landscape that it is surprising that any criticism of them existed at all.

The term “Pharisee” seems to have come from the Hebrew word meaning “separatist” but it is not known whether they first identified themselves this way or whether it was an epithet attached to them by their enemies similar to the way in which Methodists and Quakers eventually adopted derisive names for themselves and filled them with new meaning. Also, because the Pharisees claimed to be the party of scrupulous exactness in their observance of God's laws, some scholars believe that behind the term “Pharisee” lies the Hebrew word for “specifiers” in that they saw themselves as the ones who specified the correct understanding of divine requirements. Either way, the Pharisees were probably direct descendents of the Hasidim party who supported the Maccabean Revolt 150 years before Jesus.

? *How important to your faith is the regular adherence to specific religious rules?*

The primary tenets of Pharisaic theology were (1) an absolute adherence to Jewish religious law both in its written form in the Torah and in its oral form as developed over the centuries through the interpretations of rabbis, (2) an affirmation of the resurrection of the dead

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and retribution in the world to come, (3) a belief in angels and spirits as intermediaries between God and humans, and (4) a hope in the coming of the Messiah and the establishment of a new Messianic kingdom through the intervention of God. These ideas, generally, separated the Pharisees from the priestly party (Sadducees), the monastic party (Essenes), and the nationalistic party (Zealots).

? *In modern times, some Christians affirm that the only rule of faith and practice is the Bible. Others add church tradition and the teachings of the church. Others add rational investigation. And, others add Christian experience. What checks and balances are there on the poles of authority of our faith?*

Even though all of these ideas separated them from the other Jewish parties, it was the strict adherence to the minutia of written and oral laws that was the major distinction between the Pharisees and the followers of Jesus. The Pharisees were the “party of the common people” in contrast to the Sadducees who were aristocrats, the Essenes who were monastic, and the Zealots who were armed revolutionaries. And, they were an important factor in keeping the religious participation of the first century Jews at a high level. However, their emphasis on maintaining righteousness and ritual purity through rigidly obeying every known rule required that a person have a massive memory and substantial knowledge of both the Torah and the historic teachings of the rabbis. This was an extreme burden for people who were not religious professionals but still wanted to be people of faith. Many workingmen and most women could not read or write enough to fully understand the Torah and were without the scholarly skills to handle the thou-

sands of rules handed down through oral tradition. Therefore, they had to turn to the Pharisees for guidance on exactly what the rules were for any given situation.

? *Throughout history, there have been times in which the clergy were the only ones with access to Scripture and were, therefore, the authorities on all Christian action. To what degree is this a good or bad situation for our faith?*

Probably much of the hostility that the Pharisees focused on Jesus and his followers was because they, too, were in tune with the common people. And, Jesus was telling the common people that their entrance into the kingdom of heaven was not tied as much to their ability to follow all the rules as it was tied to their faith, their motivations, and their loving outreach to other persons. Again and again, Jesus overruled the Torah and the oral traditions of the rabbis when helping people required violating one of the ancient rules. He healed a man with a withered hand on the Sabbath and then challenged the Pharisees as to whether their restrictions against doing work on the Sabbath also included doing good deeds (*Matthew 12.9-14, Mark 3.1-6, Luke 6.6-11*). He allowed his disciples to pick grain on the Sabbath and told the Pharisees, “the Sabbath was made for humankind not humankind for the Sabbath.” (*Matthew 12.1-8, Mark 2.23-28, Luke 6.1-5*) Jesus never denied that he was violating the religious laws. However, he justified his actions saying they were meeting human needs, which superceded the laws.

? *Why do you think the Pharisees were so hostile to Jesus?*

? *How do you feel about people who believe that certain laws need to be violated in our own time?*

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Even the widespread acceptance of Jewish dietary laws as expressed by the Pharisees were challenged by Jesus. He told the people “Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile, since it enters, not the heart but the stomach, and goes out into the sewer?” He went on to say, “It is what comes out of a person that defiles. For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come.” (*Matthew 15.10-20, Mark 7.14-23*)

Obviously, if people began to make their own decisions about which rules they needed to follow and which ones they could ignore on the basis of human need and personal faith, the power of the Pharisees would cease to exist. Therefore, the Pharisees quickly decided that they had to get rid of Jesus.

Still, such followers of Jesus as Nicodemus, Joseph of Arimathea, and Paul of Tarsus were Pharisees and Jesus seems to have had other supporters within the party because at least three times he was recorded as having eaten meals at the houses of Pharisees.

The Sanhedrin

Both Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea were members of the great senate of Judaism called the Sanhedrin. This Jerusalem council was made up of 71 aristocratic representatives of both laity and clergy and was the highest court in Judaism subject, in the first century, only to the authority of the Roman occupational government. By modern definitions, it was both a religious court and a secular court. However, in first century Judaism, religious and secular issues and laws were so closely intertwined that modern distinctions are meaningless. Various provincial courts throughout the land could appeal cases to the Sanhedrin for final judgment and the Roman authorities allowed them reasonably free reign on all

issues except taxation and sedition.

? *Imagine a modern court in which religious law and secular law were closely intertwined. What would be the result of this?*

The Sanhedrin met in the Temple area in the Chamber of Hewn Stone on the south of the priest's court. They controlled the Temple police force, examined and approved or disapproved candidates for ordination to the priesthood, and administered the eleven political districts of the Jewish provinces. The council was made up of officials in three main groups — chief priests, elders, and scribes — and the presiding officer was the High Priest. Within these three groups, some were Pharisees — like Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea — but most were Sadducees.

The most powerful group in the Sanhedrin was the group of chief priests which included the high priest (Caiaphas), retired high priests (such as Annas and others of his family), the Captain of the Temple, the Temple overseers, the Temple treasurers, and the heads of the 24 courses of volunteer priests that served in the Temple for two weeks each year. Most of these chief priests were from the high priest's family or from families that were absolutely loyal to him.

The second group, the elders, was made up of the heads of old aristocratic families many tracing their heritage back to the original twelve Hebrew tribes. Many of these nobles were from the Sadducees party but, because their positions were defined more by heredity than wealth, power, or religious importance, some were Pharisees and others were not active members of any party. Joseph of Arimathea was certainly a part of this group and, possibly, Nicodemus.

The third group, the scribes, were the tech-

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nicians for the council. The scribes — mostly members of the Pharisee party — were scholars and experts in the details of Jewish law. On the Sanhedrin, they served somewhat like the lawyers who are attached to modern government committees providing advice on statutes and writing legislation. It is very likely that Nicodemus was a scribe attached to the Sanhedrin.

? *What are the implications of a high court which perpetuates its own membership through hereditary appointments and appointments of members of specific families and groups?*

Burial Practices

Three kinds of burial practices in the first century need to be considered when studying the burial of Jesus: Roman practices, Jewish practices, and the burial of executed criminals. Roman burial practices varied according to the person's status in Roman society. At virtually all levels except the extreme lowest stations in life, the body of the deceased was washed and anointed with oils prior to burial. Burial of a body was considered to be very important even if, as in the case of soldiers buried in the field, only a little soil could be placed over the body. Even battlefield enemies were regularly given this respect.

However, the importance of burial in Roman custom also made the practice of not burying executed criminals extremely important. Commonly, crucified corpses were left on their crosses for carrion birds. This, of course, makes the actions of the high-ranking Pharisees, Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea, important in that they were able to get Pontius Pilate to go against this custom of depriving executed criminals of a proper bur-

ial. However, the Roman historian Philo reported a few instances in which Roman officials allowed the burial of executed criminals on the eve of festive occasions.

? *Why do you think that Pontius Pilate allowed Jesus to be given a proper burial even though he was an executed criminal?*

Jews also held proper burial to be very important even for executed criminals. The Jewish law stated, "When someone is convicted of a crime punishable by death and is executed, and you hang him on a tree, his corpse must not remain all night upon the tree; you shall bury him that same day." (*Deuteronomy 21.22-23*) However, the first century historian Josephus maintained that criminals were buried in unmarked graveyards rather than in family tombs. In the first century, and probably earlier, most Jews were "buried twice." That is, they were buried once wrapped only in burial cloth. Then, a year later, after the flesh had wasted away, the bones of the deceased were gathered and put in an ossuary in the family tomb.

When a Jew died, the eyes of the deceased were closed, the mouth was bound closed, the corpse washed, and the body anointed or encased with heavily spiced oily paste to retard the stench of decomposition. The body was quickly laid in a tomb which was then sealed by a large stone held in place by a smaller stone. Normally, this temporary tomb would not be opened for a year at which time the bones would be collected to be placed in the ossuary in the family tomb.

Nicodemus' role in the burial of Jesus was to bring 100 pounds of spiced oils for anointing Jesus' body before it was placed in the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea.

The Scriptures

John 3.1-9

The Secret Night Meeting

Nicodemus was a Pharisee and probably a scribe (Jesus called him a “teacher of Israel”) who was a member of the Sanhedrin, the highest court in Judaism. He would have been, therefore, one of a handful of the most highly respected scholars in all of Judaism. While the chief priests and patricians on the high court were there because of hereditary status or nepotism, the scribes were on the council because of their knowledge of the law. And, the author of the Gospel According to John used this nighttime visit by a great scholar to introduce one of the most important theological dissertations in the New Testament — Jesus’ emphasis on rebirth and salvation.

In this nighttime interaction between Nicodemus and Jesus, the scholar asked Jesus three questions and Jesus responded with his gradually unfolding theology of new birth and salvation through faith in Jesus the Christ. Because Judaism had no concept of regeneration, Nicodemus found it difficult to understand what Jesus was saying about “being born from above” and “being born of water and Spirit.” The most profound concept of the Christian faith is that the sin in a person’s past can be totally forgiven, totally washed away, and that he or she can then start over in life as a totally new being. This is possible because God broke into history as Jesus Christ who lived, taught, died and was resurrected. When a person has genuine faith in this profound idea it brings about significant change.

? *What is your understanding of what happens when a person comes into a new relationship with God through faith in Christ?*

John 7.50-52

Nicodemus’ Argument in the Sanhedrin

The second appearance of Nicodemus in the Gospel According to John was at an important meeting of the Sanhedrin when many of the council members wanted to have Jesus arrested and tried. The Temple police had already been sent out to arrest Jesus but had returned empty handed. When the police returned, the members of the Sanhedrin asked them why they had not arrested Jesus and the police indicated that when they had heard Jesus speak, they had been impressed, “Never has anyone spoken like this!” (*John 7.46*) The council accused the police of having been deceived by Jesus just like the people on the streets who do “not know the law” and “are accursed.” (*John 7.49*)

At this point, Nicodemus, who had already met at least once with Jesus, asked, “Our law does not judge people without first giving them a hearing to find out what they are doing, does it?” (*John 7.50*) The rest of the Sanhedrin then accused Nicodemus of being from Galilee because he was speaking out in favor of giving the Galilean, Jesus, a fair hearing. The anti-Galilean remarks of the crowd (*John 7.41*) and the Sanhedrin (*John 7.52*) likely came more from urban snobbery than from the theological idea that neither a prophet nor the Messiah could come out of Galilee.

? *Why do you think the Sanhedrin was so radically focused on getting rid of Jesus?*

John 19.38-42.

The Preparation of Jesus’ Body for Burial

The appearance of Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea soon after the death of Jesus is one of the more poignant moments in the gospel narratives. Here were two high-ranking mem-

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bers of the Jewish religious elite coming to help bury the body of a man who had just been executed as a blasphemer and insurrectionist. It is impossible to think of any motivation for their actions except that their love and respect for Jesus and the new movement he had started was more important to them than the possible risks to their positions.

There is no record of any bad things happening to either Nicodemus or Joseph for their actions but it could be significant that they both disappear from the New Testament immediately after the burial of Jesus. It is not difficult to imagine that the wealthy patrician, Joseph, and the open-minded scholar, Nicodemus, suffered substantially for their actions. It is certainly interesting that, at the time of the arrest, trial, execution, and burial of Jesus, his closest followers virtually all ran away and hid while the women and these two Pharisees courageously came forward to tend to the body.

? *What do you think happened to Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea after they helped bury Jesus' body?*

Preparation for the Next Session

The next session is about Mary of Bethany, the sister of Lazarus and Martha, and one of the women of the New Testament that can genuinely be called a “disciple” of Jesus because she was a student as well as a follower. In *Disciples and Other Sinners*, Mary wrote about her life with Lazarus and Martha on their olive plantation near Bethany, about her romantic affection for Jesus, about her participation in the scholarly discussions side by side with the disciples, about the time when she washed Jesus' feet with her hair, about the miracle of the resurrection of Lazarus, and about her grief at the death of Jesus. Remind the class to read both the story in the student's book and the material in the gospels (*Luke 10.38-42 and John 11.1-44, 12.1-8*) and to compare and contrast the two before coming to the next class session. Also, students may want to read about the family of Lazarus in Bible dictionaries or other resources to help prepare them for discussion in the next class session.