

BE THERE
John 3

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James Dobson, in his series "Life on the Edge," tells about his experience with "Pistol" Pete Maravich. Some would say Pistol Peter Maravich was one of the top ten NBA basketball players of all time. Some would say he was among the top five – he was show time before Magic knew what show time was – incredible even in the 8th grade. When he was a freshman at Louisiana State University, he packed out the gymnasium. Everybody came to see him play, and then they went home because varsity was not nearly as interesting as this freshman. He set 43 NCAA records. He still holds the record for the highest average – 44 points per game – during college. His father was a coach when he was a preschooler. He was spinning the ball on his finger and dribbling behind his back. He had it all. He went to the pros – first \$1 million NBA player. Did well in the NBA, earned a lot of money. Elected into the NBA Hall of Fame the very first year he was eligible.

He had it all, but he was a very frustrated man. He was rebellious. He had a drinking problem. He was legendary "bad news." He hated life – all of his money and success was not enough. His life unraveled. He had a bad knee, dropped out of the NBA, went home, closed his door, and stayed home for two years. He was famous and did not want others to see him. He did not even want to live.

But somebody introduced him to Jesus Christ, and it was like putting a match to gasoline. Pete Maravich took all of the energy that he had put into basketball and turned it into spreading the Good News about Christ. You could not be with him for five minutes without him telling you what the Lord had done in his life. Of course, the press that reported his downfall would not report his new hope in Christ.

Dr. Dobson invited him to come to Focus on the Family to be his guest. Pete Maravich had written a book. And Dobson was bold enough to ask Pete Maravich to play basketball with him! The morning before the interview broadcast, they were going to play some pick-up ball. He told James Dobson that he had not played basketball in over a year because of a terrible pain in his right shoulder. The only game he had played in for a year was the NBA Legends game.

But Pete Maravich agreed to play for the fellowship. He came to the gym and played about third speed – just for fun. They played 45 minutes and stopped. All the guys went for water, but James and Pete stayed on the court. James told Pete, "You can't give up this game, you love it too much." Pete said, "You know, I've had such a good time today, I think I'll just get back into pick-up basketball." Dobson said, "I know you have not been feeling well. How do you feel today?" "I feel great. You know, two weeks ago I could not have picked up a two-pound basketball and

gotten it over my shoulder. It's neuralgia or neuritis, or something - they don't know what it is. But I feel really good."

Pete turned to walk away, and Dobson turned and, for some reason, felt compelled to turn back and saw Pete Maravich go down, his face pounding the floor. James thought he was teasing and cautiously approached, expecting him to get up. But he was having a seizure, and Dobson cradled him and held his tongue so he could breathe. The seizure lasted 20 seconds. Pete Maravich moved his shoulder once and died. Dobson gave him CPR, called for the other guys, and the paramedics. Everyone tried and they never got another heartbeat, never got another breath. At the hospital, they worked on him for 45 minutes, but to no avail. He went to be with the Lord. The t-shirt he was wearing said, "Looking unto Jesus."

Pete had a congenital heart defect – only one major artery wrapping around the heart (most people have two). His heart had enlarged to allow him to do athletic things. But he was destined to drop dead at that time in life. James Dobson says, "I don't know why, but the Lord put him with me." Press came from everywhere. Dobson had opportunity to tell the press, "You think that basketball was the purpose of his life – that is not what he really cared about. What he really cared about was his relationship with Jesus Christ." Dobson was able to give Pete's testimony to the world. His cousin was in Guatemala and heard it within thirty minutes. James Dobson had to call Pete's wife, Jackie, and his two precious little boys.

Dobson was so shaken by the event that he went home and said to his own son, "Ryan, I've got to say something to you. I want you to understand that what happened to Pete Maravich was not an isolated tragedy to one man and his family. This is the human condition. It is appointed unto a man once to die. It happened to Pete unexpectedly, but it is going to happen to us all – and someday, somewhere, you'll get that phone call, you'll get that news that I am gone and it's possible we won't have a last conversation. It is possible that what I am saying now may be the last word on the subject, so I'm going to say it to you now and ask you not to forget it. When that moment comes for me and you hear that message that I am in heaven, the only thing that I want you to remember is a simple message, 'Be There.' Be there on the other side, on that good morning, 'Be There.' I care about your life, that you accomplish things in life. I care that you use your abilities and reach your goals, that your life amounts to something. But it is not as important as what I am saying now. I'll be looking for you, I'll search across that city and nothing else is going to matter. Live your life in such a way that you don't disappointed me on that day. 'Be there!' Everything else is insignificant by comparison. Be there, and bring as many people as you can with you! And you will have lived a successful life."

John 3:1-17

Nicodemus, a religious teacher, wanted to know how to "be there." He had been to the best school available. He was a respected religious teacher, a member of the Jewish High Court. He was supposed to know how to be there, he was supposed to be teaching others how to get there. But deep down, he doubted. He was not certain that obeying the Jewish law would earn him a place in the kingdom of God.

His whole confidence was shattered when this new teacher Jesus – who was never seen on campus at Jerusalem University – came out of nowhere. Jesus had never sat at the feet of any of the great teachers. Some had even said that he was the son of a carpenter from Nazareth, newly arrived on the scene. At first, Nicodemus tried to discount Jesus and His message about "being there," being in God's kingdom. At first, Nicodemus even belittled the mobs as they sought to hear Jesus teach. But in the end, Nicodemus knew a religious authority when he heard one, and Jesus spoke with unsurpassed authority. His very miracles attested to the fact that God's power was upon Him! God was with Him.

And what Nicodemus had secretly wondered, he finally had the courage to ask – well, he had the courage to come to Jesus at night, sort of through the back door so no one would see that he, a man of letters, was seeking counsel from this Jesus of Nazareth.

It's odd, but Nicodemus never really asks Jesus how to "be there." Rather, Jesus once again displays his incredible power by just addressing the issue on the mind of Nicodemus.

I. There is only one way to be there.

John 3:1-3, 14, 15

The first thing Jesus tells Nicodemus is that there is only one way. "Nicodemus, you must be born again. You've been born physically, but you must be born spiritually, you must be born again. You must be born from above."

We would like to think that many roads – that all religious teachers and all religious ideas – eventually lead to one God.

Perhaps no idea will be more prominent in the next decade. The idea is: "Just be spiritual. Pick something, some God, some faith, and just be spiritual." Those who continue to teach that Jesus is the only way to salvation will be labeled as closed-minded, self-centered, naive bigots. A wagon-wheel theology is the theology of our day. God is in the center, and each spoke reaches Him. The New Age spoke, the Islamic spoke, the Christian spoke – each path to God is one path among many.

The problem is, theologically and philosophically, Christianity is, by its very nature, exclusive in its claims. Jesus is the Messiah, the only Messiah. Scripture is God's only written word. There is no room in Christ's teaching for another way. Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me." He is emphatic. Jesus did not claim to be one prophet among many. Rather, His claim is clear: He Himself is God. "I and My Father are one!" Faith in Christ Jesus is the only way to "be there."

And yet, there are a myriad of other approaches. We try so many ways to get into God's kingdom.

Some people try to get into God's kingdom by earning/working their way to heaven. Nicodemus was like that. The Pharisees had silly Sabbath rules to follow: spitting on soil equals plowing; ladies, beware of mirrors because you might pull a gray hair; don't take clothes from a burning house, only what you are wearing; even eggs laid on the holy day were called into question.

Nicodemus was struggling to keep all of the Jewish laws to earn his way, to merit a place – his place – in the kingdom of God.

Some of you here this morning have struggled to earn your way to a home in heaven. We feel like we need to "do something" to earn our faith. Nicodemus was working so hard, making sure that in every way, at every moment, he was obeying God's law. We work, we struggle, then we conclude, as Nicodemus had concluded, we can't "do" enough to enter the kingdom of God, because every time we seem to get close, it alludes us, and we are left lost!

Paul concurs. "To the man who does not work, but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith makes him in right standing with God...Blessed are they whose sins are forgiven" (Romans 4).

You can't do enough, you can't be good enough. When you stand before God with your works in your hand, you will stand ashamed. Who, by his own merit, can stand in the presence of the Holy God?

It would be like a baby, banging on his toy piano, attempting to stand in the presence of Ludwig Van Beethoven and show him how to make music. It would be like the child opening his water colors and trying to show Rembrandt how to paint. It would be like a stumbling toddler, grasping his nerf football, looking up to Emmitt Smith and declaring, "Let me show you how to move the football.

It cannot be done. You cannot bring your works and lay them at the feet of the One who blasted His breath and the winds were created, the One who shaped the mountains and treats the deepest ocean as a child's wading pool. Will you stand before Him with your works and say, "Look what I have done"?

We all have those times in our life when we feel inadequate. But if you try to stand before God based on your own abilities, you will be left wanting. You will not "be There," if that is your attempt.

Sometimes we try to get into heaven based on what we feel. So we try to feel "heavenly," some try to have worship services that pump them up, pep rallies full of emotion and show. But when we leave, that old earthly feeling remains and we realize we will never get there based on what we feel.

Modern worship must be careful. It cannot cease to focus on God and begin to focus on humanity. We're not here on Sunday morning dispensing "feel good" worship or pep rally preaching. We're trying to serve a steady diet of sound Apostles' theology. We are here to present to you the teachings of Jesus and the words penned by the apostles. You and I cannot feel good enough to go to God's kingdom. Being part of the kingdom of God has nothing to do with our emotional highs. The presence of God in our lives is an objective reality based upon God's acting in history at Calvary.

Jesus tells Nicodemus there is only one way to "Be There." You must be born again. You, individually, must be born spiritually. You must come before God admitting your sinfulness, asking Him to forgive you, accepting the death of Jesus as your own that you, too, can accept His resurrection as your own.

II. Jesus tells Nicodemus that not everyone will "be there"!

Some of you have hoped against hope that some way, some time, God will say on that dreadful day of His wrath, "Well, I examined your lives, and I decided to grade on the curve. You all made it; let's move on."

But God is holy. He cannot, by his very nature, overlook our shortcomings. His wrath must be revealed against all sins.

Romans 1:18

John 3:18-20

Jesus makes it very plain to Nicodemus. "There is only one way to be there" and "not everyone will be there." Rather, only those who believe.

It is a basic theological foundation of the New Testament that not everyone will be in the kingdom of God. Jesus said (Matthew 24:40-41), "There shall be two men in the field; one shall be taken, and the other will be left. Two women will be grinding at the mill; one will be taken, and one will be left."

Jesus says in John 7:24, "Unless you believe that I am the Messiah, you shall die in your sin."

Jesus constantly brings division. He separates sheep and goats, believers from unbelievers. Those who proclaim Jesus as Lord will be there. All others will miss God's kingdom.

Once we truly grasp that not everyone will be there, it changes our life's priorities. We become energized to be busy telling the Messiah's message.

III. The Father wants you to be there.

James Dobson was so startled by the death of Pete Maravich that he went home and spoke to his son Ryan about "being there." You see, as a father, he wanted his son to also be a partaker of the grace of God, to sit at the banquet table with the King of kings and Lord of lords. He wanted his son not to be left out. So it is with our heavenly father (John 3:16, 17).

God has done all that He can do. He must punish sin, but He has punished His Son in your stead, if you will only believe. The Father wants his children to "be there," but He knows the choice is up to them.

God loves you. He sent Jesus to die for you. He desires for you to believe, but He will not force you. He gives you the freedom to reject the very One who formed you! We have freedom to say "no" even to the One who created us.

That is something of a scary thought, that we are empowered to do ourselves the ultimate detriment – to reject God's plan of salvation and not become part of His kingdom. But make no mistake about it, the Father wants you to "be there." He is the Father who looks over the horizon, hoping that His prodigal sons and daughters will come home.

In his book, *Written in Blood*, Robert Coleman tells the story of a little boy whose sister needed a blood transfusion. The doctor had explained that she had the same disease the boy had recovered from two years earlier. Her only chance for recovery was a transfusion from someone who had previously conquered the disease. Since the two children had the same rare blood type, the boy was the ideal donor. "Would you give your blood to Mary?" the doctor asked. Johnny hesitated. His lower lip started to tremble. Then he smiled and said, "Sure, for my sister." Soon the two children were wheeled into the hospital room – Mary, pale and thin; Johnny, robust and healthy. Neither spoke, but when they met, Johnny grinned. As the nurse inserted the needle into his arm, Johnny's smile faded. He watched the blood flow through the tube. With the ordeal almost over, his voice, slightly shaky, broke the silence. "Doctor, when do I die?" Only then did the doctor realize why Johnny had hesitated, why his lip had trembled when he'd agreed to donate his blood. He'd thought giving his blood to his sister meant giving up his life. In that brief moment, he'd made his great decision. Johnny, fortunately, didn't have to die to save his sister. Each of us, however, has a condition more serious than Mary's and it required Jesus to give not just His blood, but His life. (Thomas Lindberg *Leadership*, Vol 5, No 1)

John 3:16 – "Be there!"

John 19:38-39

I think Nicodemus will be there, as he shows up to bury our Lord when all the other disciples left Him and fled.