

# *The Gifts of Jesus: Wisdom*

a sermon

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John 3:1-17

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Nicodemus was a smart guy.

He knew things, lots of things and a lot about them. And he taught those lots of things that he knew a lot about to lots of people who looked up to him, ... a lot, to people who respected him, to people who appreciated his knowledge and valued his insight.

The things he knew and the things he taught were things

about the Bible,

about Moses,

about the prophets,

about the holy story of Israel,

about how the people were to live and how they were to behave,

about God.

That's a lot to know. And there's no reason to think that Nicodemus wasn't good, maybe even very good, at knowing and teaching these things he knew and taught.

And let's be clear. These things he knew and taught weren't unimportant bits and pieces, random facts he could use to fill in a crossword puzzle on a lazy Sunday afternoon or in Friday night trivia contests at the bar. No, they were all about matters profound and sacred and holy.

All together, these things were what the Scriptures would call "wisdom," and the one who knew these things "wise."

Nicodemus pondered often the things that make for wisdom, and for that reason he was likely thought of as wise.

And yet, for all his knowledge, even about things that should make one wise, it seems that something hadn't quite clicked for Nicodemus. When it really came down to it, when he was really put to the test, Nicodemus' wisdom was somewhat lacking.

Because when Nicodemus sits down with Jesus, and Jesus begins to talk, and Nicodemus begins to listen, again and again Nicodemus simply doesn't get it.

Jesus talks to Nicodemus about birth.

*Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.*

And Nicodemus doesn't get it, because he thinks of physical childbirth, and so what Jesus says doesn't make sense to him.

Jesus speaks with Nicodemus about the freedom of the Spirit.

*The wind blows where it chooses,  
and you hear the sound of it,  
but you do not know where it comes from  
or where it goes.  
So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.*

And Nicodemus still doesn't get it, because he's still thinking about physical realities rather than spiritual ones; he doesn't understand that Jesus is talking about the power of God.

This happened a lot when Jesus spoke. A lot of people misunderstood him; many failed to get what Jesus was saying. We see this a lot in the Gospel of John. Jesus is talking about something up here, but people don't get it because they're thinking down here. They get confused because they're thinking on a surface level, and Jesus means something much higher.

For Nicodemus, the surface level had to do with matters of physical birth and life. But Jesus wasn't talking about *physical* birth and life. He was talking about *spiritual* birth and *eternal* life.

Jesus means something more, or higher, or deeper. He is pushing beyond the surface and going far past the obvious. Jesus is speaking of truths that elude and realities that challenge. And so he is dealing with matters of *wisdom*. And it is wisdom — the wisdom Jesus has, the wisdom Jesus gives — that Nicodemus, for all his intelligence and knowledge, had trouble grasping.



Now, maybe we ought not to be so hard on Nicodemus. He struggled with these notions of new birth and eternal life. That's because he had in mind his own notions of birth and life. So he was not ready when Jesus talked about these in ways that went beyond what he knew and farther than he expected.

We ought not to be so hard on Nicodemus. Because maybe *we* don't entirely get what Jesus is saying. Maybe we, too, tend to hear Jesus through our own preconceptions, against the backdrop of our own experiences, with an expectation that we've already got the answers. And then we fail to understand adequately what he is telling us.

We fail to understand because the realities of which Jesus is speaking are in that realm of spiritual experience and holy understanding that is rightly called "wisdom," where it is right and good for us to be humble and open to his gift.

Because when we hear terms like "born again" and "eternal life," a good number of us are confident that we know what these mean.

But do we?

First, that term "born again." Let's be honest, here. This is a phrase that means a lot to some of us, and that also makes a good number of us suspicious. To some it is the very heart of the gospel and the right impulse for all Christian mission. To some it is bumper-sticker religion at its worst, the sure sign of a religious nut.

I tend to think there's some truth in both of these impressions.

It's true that this notion of new life is the heart of the Gospel, the essence of Christian faith and action. And it's also true that "born again" can be misunderstood, twisted, and sloganized.

It's true that the life of which Jesus speaks is a gift of God. And it's also true that *newness* in this life is essential, that belief in Jesus Christ must change the believer in significant ways.

“Born again” contains a twofold truth. Both parts must be understood. If you grab onto only one part, then you’re not going to get it. Just like Nicodemus. And in the grasping of both parts is found the wisdom Jesus gives.

Maybe you noticed that the translation I read (which is the translation in our pew Bibles) doesn’t say “born again” but rather “born from above.” In our translation, the verse goes this way: “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” And then, a few verses later, “You must be born from above.”

Not “you must be born again,” but instead “you must be born from above.”

Maybe this confused you. Maybe this bothers you.

What is going on here?

Well, the word John uses in these verses has a twofold meaning, for which both “born from above” and “born again” are basically correct translations. And in a way, we need them both. Both of these English phrases together convey the holy transformation that Jesus describes: a *new* reality that takes place by the hand of *God*.

The problem with some who appear to sloganize “born again” is that they seem to be doing almost the same thing as Nicodemus. For Nicodemus heard Jesus tell him about the necessity of some birth, and his understanding stayed fixed on the “again” aspect of this birth, the newness, and that alone. In much the same way, the sloganizers focus on the “born again” part so much that they seem to forget the “born from above” aspect.

What’s wrong with that? Well, it makes it look as if this new birth is all about them, as if it were something *they* have brought about, by *their* choice to believe, *their* act of personal faith, *their* decision to ask Jesus “into their hearts” (which, by the way, is a phrase not found in the Bible).

Yet those who get the heebie-jeebies about “born again” talk (maybe even the translators of our pew Bibles) sometime take that too far, as well. In seeking refuge in the “from above” aspect of the Christian life, they seem to reject all its necessary newness.

What’s wrong with that? Well, that feeds into a suspicion of every conversion as fake, of every act of devotion as phony, of all repentance as unnecessary. And that would empty of all meaning every form of Christian belief and action, and it would make nonsense of the gospel.

But what Jesus is saying is that we can’t see his new reality, we can’t walk joyfully in the blessed tomorrow he is bringing about today, unless we are born *anew* from *above*. He requires (and he gives it, too) both the newness and the “aboveness,” the renewal of the person by the hand of God,

opening the eyes,  
softening the heart,  
filling the lungs with the fresh breath of the Holy Spirit,

a new birth, from above,

which Jesus also calls “eternal life.”

Ah, now there’s that other difficult phrase: “eternal life.”

It’s difficult because, for many of us, “eternal” is a word that has to do with *duration*. Something eternal is something that doesn’t end. But in the Bible, “eternal” is not only about duration but also about *quality*. It’s not only about *length* of days but the *connection* of those days with God. Since only God is truly eternal, then eternal life must be connected with God, meaningfully and richly connected.

Life in Jesus is eternal not only because it is unending.

It is eternal because, by the power of Jesus, it is joined to God.

It is eternal because, by the love of Jesus, it is embraced by God.

It is eternal because, by the mercy of Jesus, it is fulfilled in God.

This kind of life, *eternal* life, impacts not only your existence beyond physical death. It truly impacts your present. It makes a difference today.

When you have eternal life, you have it *now*, not just later. It is the way Christ's resurrection echoes into your current moments and his return is felt even now.

When you have eternal life, Christ makes himself entirely present to you: his birth, his ministry his death, his resurrection, his ascension, his return in glory. All distinctions between his past, present, and future collapse under his power to take the most ordinary of your living and give it eternal life.

Eternal life must mean something for today, not just for the "tomorrow" that comes after one's earthly days have ended. Because one who has eternal life in Jesus will seek to be like Jesus, will strive to follow his example, will endeavor to conform their behavior to him

who healed the sick and fed the hungry;

who taught the seeking and guided the wandering;

who forgave the sinner and lifted up the fallen.



But none of this is obvious. None of this is among those everyday facts one can just easily pick up and know. To know something about this eternal life, this born-again-from-above life, is to be given wisdom by Jesus Christ. And that is a gift that continues to shape you and stretch you, a gift you take your whole life to understand, to explore, to celebrate.

To understand this strange new reality,

to understand the born-again-from-above eternal life,

to understand not only what Jesus says but also what he gives,

is not like understanding math, or a foreign language, or some area of science, or how to take apart a car and put it back together. This is not the kind of thing that can be understood like those things.

Because this is a spiritual matter, requiring spiritual understanding. To understand it, you've got to be given it. And when you are given it, you are also given to *wrestle* with it.

That gift with which we wrestle, even the wrestling itself, it's all a matter of wisdom, Christlike and Christ-given wisdom.

And wisdom is Christ's gift, a gift that continues to shape you and stretch you, a gift you take your whole life to understand, to explore, to celebrate.



Among my dearest hopes is that more and more of you, my friends, will desire to embrace the gift of wisdom that is among the precious gifts given by our Lord Jesus, that you will embrace it and the spiritual wrestling and growing and changing that this gift, once embraced, always brings about.

May we all embrace his gift of wisdom, and become wise in Christ.