

**A Sermon for Dayspring Baptist Church**  
**By Chris Fillingham**  
**Beyond Beliefs pt. 4: Seeing is Becoming**  
**John 3:1-10**  
**January 28, 2018**

This morning I want to offer you a bit of spiritual wisdom, wisdom that has bubbled up in my studies this year...

and a bit of wisdom that Jesus seems to be hinting at,  
late at night,  
as he sits next to the fire,  
talking with a curious Pharisee named Nicodemus.

And the spiritual wisdom is this:

“**How** we see,  
determines **what** we see,  
and **what** we see **shapes the soul**.” (repeat)

This is part of what Jesus is trying illuminate for Nicodemus there in the darkness.

“How we see,  
determines what we see,  
and what we see, shapes the soul.”

Got it?  
Clear as daylight?

If only it were that easy, right? That’s the problem with spiritual wisdom. It’s never easy to grasp. It’s almost always confusing. It never clicks at first.

By the way, that’s why spiritual wisdom rarely makes a good Facebook meme. It takes more than a passing glance and the click of a “like” button to get it. So most of what our culture passes off as wisdom is really cheesy clichés, aren’t they?

But real wisdom, deep wisdom, takes some work.  
It makes us stop and slow down.  
It takes time to process...  
And chances are, it’s going to frustrate your thinking...  
and make you feel frustrated... at least, at first.

That’s how Jesus’ parables often work, you know. They don’t quite make sense at first to his audience. He turns the expected way of things upside down. And it confuses the heck out of the crowds and even out of the disciples at times.

Real wisdom, deep wisdom... takes some work... and it’s going to frustrate you at first.  
And so, if you’re not willing to give it a little time,  
and to work with it,  
and to chew on it for a while...  
You’re going to miss it.

Which is... a bit sad really, because... there is a chance with wisdom teaching that you’re close to something good and beautiful...

something that could be life-giving for you... if you'd just stick with it.

But that's hard, isn't it, when you're frustrated, and busy, and have other things to do. Shoot, I imagine that is exactly how Nicodemus felt....

frustrated with what Jesus is saying,  
tempted to just throw his hands up in the air and walk away.

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I mean, think about it. Here Nicodemus is, trying to be *open-minded* and all. Jesus has just turned over the tables at the temple.

Remember that last week from chapter 2? Jesus has been making some enemies with the religious leaders. The Pharisees and the temple authorities aren't too happy with him.

But here comes Nicodemus, trying to understand. Trying to be *open-minded* about the whole thing. "Look," he says, "we know Jesus, that you must come from God" "because no one can do the signs you do apart from the presence of God."

There's that word I mentioned a few weeks ago. Everything Jesus does in the Gospel of John is a *sign*, pointing to a reality beyond the event itself.

Jesus turns water into wine at a wedding and it is a "sign"  
trying to tell us something.

Jesus turns over tables in the temple. It is a sign... He's trying to tell us something.

Nicodemus, he's reading the signs here and in his voice we have the first conclusion someone is making about these signs: "We know you must come from God... because those signs tells us... they tell us that the presence of God is in you."

Nicodemus doesn't know what it all means yet.  
Maybe you don't either. That's OK.

So, Jesus tries to explain.

"No one can see the kingdom of God without being born again."

That's Jesus' wisdom saying for the night. It's frustrating Nicodemus. You can hear a little irritation in his voice because he's taking Jesus literally. And how you see determines what you see, and what Nicodemus starts to picture is pretty funny if you think about it.

He starts picturing his mom...  
and trying to get back into his mom's womb...  
and that's just a picture he'd rather not imagine

And I'd guess that Bryant, and Joe, and Sandy, and Patrick, and Cheryl, and any other doctor in our congregation would say the same thing. "Jesus, that ain't going to happen. There's no going back."

But the problem here isn't with Jesus. It's with the way Nicodemus is picturing what Jesus is saying. He's stuck in the concrete, rational mind and, "*how we see determines what we see,*" remember?

Nicodemus is stuck in the concrete, logical mind. And so, Jesus tries to help him realize he's using the wrong set of eyes.

"What is born of flesh is flesh.  
What is born of the Spirit is spirit."

Now, I don't know if that cleared up anything for Nicodemus, but I think what Jesus is saying is that you're not going to understand spiritual wisdom with the logic centers of the mind.

When you look with the logical/concrete mind, you'll see the logical concrete world and that's part of reality, yes, but there is more.

If you want to see the world of spiritual mystery and wonder, then you have to look with the eyes of the soul.

That's why we need a new kind of birth...  
a birth that comes from God.

God invites us into a deeper way of living and being in this world... a way that Jesus describes as the Kingdom of God.

You'll only see the Kingdom of God, it will only make sense to you, when you look with the eyes of the soul.

"Flesh gives birth to flesh,  
And spirit gives birth to spirit."

***How you see determines what you see.***

This is at the heart of all great wisdom traditions of the world. And so, Jesus is dismayed that even their own religious leaders have somehow missed this. "You are a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?"

Jesus is surprised. Nicodemus is frustrated...  
And us? We're caught in the cross hairs... aren't we?

In fact, I have a hunch it's a line Jesus would have liked to repeat to his church... again and again.

Because, let's face it, so much of the time the church has missed this wisdom too. We've ***read the gospels*** with the eyes of logic, systematic theology, and ethics, but forgotten how to read the gospels with the eyes of the spirit.

And as a result... we've forgotten how to  
***read our lives*** with the eyes of the soul, through the lens of the Kingdom of God.

And when we lose the ability to see our lives and our world with the eyes of the spirit, then our lives become hallowed out, just a shell of what we are created to be.

Because remember, ***how you see determines what you see.***  
***And what you see shapes the soul.***

And so, along the way the church and sometimes our lives, have been shaped in unhealthy ways. We've become about the concrete things of ***money and power***,  
rather than the soulful things of ***joy and peace***.

Our lives become about ***being right and admired***,  
rather than ***patience and kindness***

Our lives become about ***success and control***,  
rather than ***love and goodness...***

All those fruits of the spirit end up missing... in our lives and yes, have so often been missing in the church, hasn't it? And what happens?

Our lives, and the church, and yes, even our world, becomes a shell, a hallowed out shell of what it was intended to be.

"You are a teacher of Israel, and you do not understand these things?"

"You are the followers of Jesus, and you do not understand these things?" How can that be?

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"If you want to see the Kingdom of God," Jesus says, "you have to be born from above." A different kind of awareness is needed. A different way of looking and seeing, one that comes from God.

If you want to see the God who is love,  
you have to see with the love God has planted in your own soul.  
If you want to see the goodness of God's creation,  
you have to see with the goodness that is flowing to you  
from the spirit of life.  
If you want to see the sacredness of the people in your life,  
you have to see with the spark of God alive in you.

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Take Carl for example. Carl is so busy taking care of his family and taking care of all that is on his plate at work, that every Monday morning he wakes up with a ***knot in his gut***. Each week stares him down like the beginning of an exhausting and long sprint that he knows he has to run.

But week after week, all these sprints are turning into a marathon...  
and he slowly has begun to resent all that is on his plate,  
and it's made him more irritable when he's with people  
and more lonely when he is not with people.

When Carl looks at his life all he sees is responsibilities, and obligations, and demands, and chores...and yes, certainly those things are there.

But then one day Carl gets a diagnosis.  
And for a while it looks like it could be the end,  
and there's some real suffering in there,

But in the suffering he begins to see what a precious gift his life has been... the work, the family, the responsibilities... they were all gifts... precious and profound gifts.

Well, Carl is one of the few lucky ones. He survives, but he's not unchanged. He sees goodness, and beauty, and joy, and gift, in all that his life is...  
and he becomes a gentler person, more kind and patient... more grateful... and there is a kind of abiding deep joy in his life... and he knows it is from God.

***How Carl sees his life, has changed what he sees.  
And what he sees is shaping his soul.***

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Or take Erin, for example.

Erin learned about global warming in high school... and the whole idea... that we'd just ignore the environment for the sake of profit, made her mad. So she went on to study environmental science at

Mizzou. While there, she started a student organization to push the school to be greener and had great success there.

Once she was out of college she went on to work on local public policy efforts. It seemed like everywhere she went in her city there was waste and neglect of the environment. It drove her crazy. After awhile, it's all she'd talk about.

In fact, she kind of became difficult to even be around.  
Her tone was always critical.  
Nothing was ever good enough.

But then in her mid-30's... something in her began to change.

It started with a short trip to the coast of New England...for two days she watched wave after wave pulse against the rocky shore...and there were moments in there...where she thought she felt the heartbeat of creation itself...the heartbeat of the Creator.

But it wasn't just one of those vacation flukes. When she got back home she began to notice the way the trees danced in the wind... and allowed herself to feel the cold wind against her cheeks. And she breathed deep and felt something coming alive in her.

The warmth of the winter sun fed her.  
The song of the spring river consoled her.  
The red, and yellow, and blue, of the summer flowers strengthened her.

For the first time since Erin was a kid... she started to see nature around her not as something to be fixed, but as something beautiful and powerful.

In fact, creation became alive to her; enchanted in a way it never had before. It was a presence that surrounded her.

And slowly her self-righteousness lessened,  
even as *her passion and love deepened.*

She didn't stop advocating for the environment,  
but she came across differently.  
She became alive and her love became contagious...  
*and it changed people's hearts, not just their actions.*

And through it all, a new kind of joy that began to shape her life and her soul.

Because *how you see, determines what you see,*  
*and what you see shapes your soul.*

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"Flesh gives birth to flesh. Spirit gives birth to spirit."

So, if you want to see the Kingdom of God... the mysterious, beautiful, life giving, holy, healing, redemptive, joyous kingdom of God, then you have to be born from above.

And that birth is the work of the Spirit in you...  
It is the work of God in you.

You can't make it happen on your own. "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." Jesus says.

We can't make it happen, we can only ask for it... and make ourselves ready to receive it.

And so, I want to invite you to do that now.

Set aside your usual way of seeing for a few days.

Maybe that usual way is full of questions...

and maybe some hurts or disappointments...

That's OK. But sometimes you have to set them aside.

And for a moment, open yourself up to seeing in new ways...

Open yourselves up and ask the Spirit of God... to blow deep in your being.

Pray with me: [Lord's Prayer]

*O God of the ocean waves and mountain snows,*

*O God of winter's waiting and summer's growth.*

*O God of wind that blows beyond our understanding,*

*O God whose image has been placed in every human soul*

*O God of our Lord Jesus Christ...*

*Come to us now, we pray.*

*Birth in us your life, we pray.*

*Give us eyes to see and ears to hear and hearts to receive your life all around us...*

*so that what we see,*

*might shape us into your loving kindness to the world.*

*Through Christ we pray,*

*Amen.*

Silent Prayer:

*As the hand is made for holding and the eye for seeing,*

*You have fashioned me for joy.*

*Share with me the vision that finds that joy everywhere:*

*In the wild violet's beauty;*

*In the lark's melody;*

*In the face of a steadfast person;*

*In a child's smile;*

*In a mother's love;*

*In the purity of Jesus.*

~ A Gaelic Prayer