

Sunday, June 7, 2026 Sunday Morning Worship Sermon

“Born of the Spirit” Pastor Takaaki Inoue

1 Corinthians 15:50–58, John 3:1–9

❶ 【How can I become like you?】

One night, an elderly man named Nicodemus, a member of the Pharisees and a high-ranking member of the Sanhedrin, came to see Jesus. The Pharisees were a Jewish group dedicated to faithfully observing the teachings of the Law. He said, “Rabbi (which means ‘Teacher’), we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one can perform the signs you do unless God is with him.” (verse 2) Although Nicodemus had diligently kept the Law for a long time, from his youth until he grew old, he lacked both the power and the conviction to perform signs. However, when he saw the signs that Jesus performed, he realized that Jesus must be someone with a faith completely different from their own, and that He must surely have come from God. This shows just how amazed he was by Jesus. And Nicodemus was not the only one.

After Jesus taught on the mountain, it is written: “When Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were amazed at his teaching, for he taught them as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law” (Matthew 7:28). Also, when he cast out demons, “the people were all amazed and asked one another, ‘What is this? ‘This is a new teaching with authority! He even commands the unclean spirits, and they obey him.’” (Mark 1:27) In Nazareth, people also said, “Many who heard this were astonished and asked, ‘Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him, and what are these miracles performed by his hands?’” (Mark 6:2)

Unless one has truly kept the Law, one cannot realize the limitations of the Law or the limitations of human strength. Both Luther and Paul earnestly kept the commandments. That is why they came to understand that people cannot be transformed or saved by the Law. So Nicodemus went to Jesus, wanting to know, “How can I become like you?” However, since anyone who became close to Jesus was subject to being ostracized by society, he came at night to avoid being seen by others.

Looking at it this way, we can see that there are two types of Christian faith: those who believe by human power, and those who believe by the power of God. The faith of the Pharisees was based on human power. Even when they taught the Scriptures, they lacked conviction and authority, so their words did not penetrate people’s hearts, and they could not change them. Jesus, on the other hand, was different. He taught by the power of God, cast out demons, and healed the sick. Jesus had authority and power because He truly knew God. There is a world of difference between the words spoken by someone who truly knows God and those spoken by someone who speaks only of knowledge about God. What I seek is to have faith through the power of God.

② 【What does “being born anew” mean?】

In response, Jesus said, “I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again” (verse 3). “To see the kingdom of God” means to see (or experience) the power of God. However, the man did not understand what it meant to be born again. “How can a person be born when they are old?” he asked. “Can they enter their mother’s womb a second time and be born?” Jesus replied, “I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit.” (verse 5). “Being born of water and the Spirit” refers to baptism. The Spirit here means the Holy Spirit. Jesus was saying that unless one is born again through water and the Holy Spirit, one cannot see the power of God.

Why did Jesus say “water and the Spirit”? “Water” signifies “death,” and “the Holy Spirit” signifies “life.” In the Old Testament, water was an instrument of judgment. Both the Flood of Noah and the crossing of the Red Sea signify death. Since we cannot be buried in the ground, we bury our old selves in water. Unless we die to our old selves in this way, the Holy Spirit cannot work. Jesus told Nicodemus, “Unless you bury your old self, you cannot become a new person, nor can you experience the power of God.” Many people mistakenly think of Christianity as a religion for refining the heart or as a set of ethical principles, but this is a complete misunderstanding. It is not about refining; it is about breaking down. It is a grave mistake to think that one can receive God’s glory without dying.

Normally, as people age, they lose their vigor and give up on many things. Yet I am amazed that this elderly man, Nicodemus, thought, “I want to be like Jesus.” It means that the “holy longing” within him did not fade even in old age. Nicodemus gives us courage. It shows that no matter how old a person becomes, there is always the possibility of change.

●When I look at Nicodemus, I am reminded of two elderly men. One is a member of the Osaka Orthodox Church named Mr. K. He was over 75 when I met him, but he enrolled in a new program at Osaka Christian Junior College in Abeno to study theology. Every day, he would leave his home in Takatsuki early in the morning and drive there at about 25 kilometers per hour. He studied Greek, wrote a thesis, and even bound copies of the Orthodox prayer book to give to me. The other is a member of Ogimachi Church named Mr. S. Although he was over 80 years old, he translated the sermons of the Church Fathers from English into Japanese and shared them with me. Both of them possessed a spirit of inquiry and a desire to improve themselves. They were wonderful people of faith whom I had the privilege of meeting in my life.

③ 【The wind blows as it pleases】

Jesus said to Nicodemus, “The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit” (verse 8). Here, Jesus is describing the Holy Spirit as the wind.

The wind blows freely and passes by. We cannot see the wind. Yet the wind always brings about a change in the people or things it touches. The Holy Spirit is the same. Though the Holy Spirit is invisible, those who receive Him are transformed as if they were different people. When the Holy Spirit blows, a new person is born within the old person. This is the meaning of “What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit” (3:6). Thus, within a single human being, two aspects coexist simultaneously: the natural person born of the flesh and the divine (spiritual) person born of the Holy Spirit. The natural person tries to live by his own strength, but the spiritual person seeks to live by God. We must continually put to death the outer, fleshly person and keep the inner, spiritual person alive. When the Holy Spirit fills this inner, spiritual person, he manifests tremendous divine power.

● A long time ago, I heard a heartwarming testimony from a mother at a gathering. Her son has a developmental disability and is addicted to paint thinner. To get his friends' attention, he would take money from his father's wallet to buy things and give them away to everyone. Whenever he was scolded, he would run away from home, and the family would have to search for him—this pattern repeated itself over and over. He started sniffing paint thinner at age 14 and continued until he was 30. The only time he didn't use it was when he was hospitalized. The mother would sneak out in the middle of the night without telling him and throw away his 20-liter paint thinner cans in the bushes, but the next day, the cans would be back in his room. He would steal them from paint stores. He would take a taxi home in the middle of the night. The noise would wake up the neighbors. He would scream loudly in the middle of the night, disturbing the neighborhood, so the mother would go pay the taxi fare. When she went to the hospital, she would be scolded, “Mom, are you still doing that?” His mother attended a self-help group without fail. Her son was hospitalized in a staggering number of psychiatric hospitals over the course of 10 years, and she realized that addiction cannot be cured in a hospital. When he had cried his heart out, he heard a mysterious voice saying, “It's okay to be alive.” His mindset shifted to, “I am being kept alive.” Until then, he had lived complaining, “Why am I the only one going through this?” but from that moment on, he changed. When she saw him, his mother knew at a glance that her son had changed. And she changed too. “Both he and I are precious people. I am precious too. I used to look down on my son. But I realized that he has many good qualities in his own way. I no longer interfere with my son's life. Once I accepted that ‘he is him, and I am me,’ I stopped getting angry. It was painful until now, but it was all so I could realize this.” Finally, his mother said something interesting. “People who dwell on sadness become unhappy. We must be grateful. When I wake up in the morning, I pray to the One above (God) and live each day to the fullest. At night, I pray again, giving thanks. The One

above is watching.” How wonderfully she encountered God and was transformed! Her son has now started a youth group to help others recover from addiction and is even traveling around the world to carry out his work.

Faith always requires us to be “empty” and “zero.” When our own strength is reduced to zero, God’s power comes in. At that moment, the Holy Spirit will blow freely and use me to perform God’s work.