

**“Children of God”
(An Exposition of 1 John 2:29-3:3)¹**

Introduction

Our text today is a momentous one, the subject matter so lofty and wonderful that it is more than a little intimidating to preach on it. No less a preacher than Martyn Lloyd-Jones said of 1 John 3:1-3 that these three verses “are perhaps the three most moving verses in the entire epistle . . .”² And of v.2 in particular he writes:

“I suppose we must agree that nothing more sublime than this has ever been written, and any man who has to preach upon such a text or upon such a word must be unusually conscious of his own smallness and inadequacy and unworthiness.”³

What is it about these verses that makes them so moving and sublime? It is the subject matter – *the love of God for sinners*. Here we are shown a glimpse of that love of God for sinners that Paul speaks of in Ephesians 3:18–19, where he tells us of **“the breadth and length and height and depth”** of **“the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge.”**

And what outworking of the love of God toward sinners does John single out in our text as being so worthy of our utmost *attention, contemplation, and adoration*? The love of God expressed in *our adoption in Christ as children of God* and the corresponding grace of God in *the new birth*.

If you are a believer in Christ, when was the last time that you thought about the greatness of the love of God toward you in Christ, and of His adopting you into His family as His child? It is a theme that is found *repeatedly* throughout the Scriptures, and *especially* in the New Testament.

We are told of it *repeatedly* in *the Sermon on the Mount* (Matthew 5-7), where our Lord Jesus speaks of God being *our heavenly Father* over and over again. We are taught to **'let our light shine before others, so that they may see our good works and give glory to our Father who is in heaven.'** (Matthew 5:16). We are also taught to **'love our enemies'** so that we **'may be Sons of our Father who is in heaven'** (Matthew 5:44-45). We are also told there, **“You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”** (Matthew 5:48)

And in the Lord's prayer we are taught to pray to *our Father who art in heaven* (Matthew 6:9). In Matthew 6:31–32 we are commanded *not* to be anxious. Why? Because *our heavenly Father* knows what we need!

The Apostle Paul bases his exhortation to us as believers to *live holy lives* on the love of God lavished on us in our adoption in Christ. In Ephesians 5:1–2 he writes:

“Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.”

God's love for sinners like us, and His grace toward us in adopting us as His children, should motivate us to live lives of holiness, seeking more and more to cultivate the family resemblance!

¹ All Scripture quotations are from the English Standard Version (ESV) unless otherwise noted.

² *Life in Christ: Studies in 1 John*, p.275

³ *Ibid*, p.281

One of my all-time favorite Christian books is *Knowing God*, by J.I. Packer. In that book he includes a chapter entitled “Sons of God.” There he says that the “richest answer” that he knew to the question “What is a Christian?” is that “a Christian is one who has God as Father.” (p.200) He also states that “Our understanding of Christianity cannot be better than our grasp of adoption.” (p.202)

But my *favorite* quote in the entire book (also found in that same chapter) is as follows:

“If you want to judge how well a person understands Christianity, find out how much he makes of the thought of being God's child, and having God as his Father. If this is not the thought that prompts and controls his worship and prayers and his whole outlook on life, it means that he does not understand Christianity very well at all.” (p.201)

Whether or not you think that you understand Christianity very well at all right about now, I think we can agree that we would *all* do well to think about these things more clearly. And so with that in mind, we hope to spend at least a couple Sundays going through this passage together.

The Love of God

1 John 2:29 marks a *transition* from what John had been saying about the necessity of our abiding in the truth of Christ in the previous verses (v.18-28) to the great subject of our adoption and the new birth. There the Apostle John writes:

“If you know that he is righteous, you may be sure that everyone who practices righteousness has been born of him.”

Abiding in Christ means *abiding in the truth of Christ* and not being led astray by false teaching (*especially* false teaching about Christ), but it also entails *following Christ* and obeying His commandments.

And so John tells us that “**everyone who practices righteousness**” has been born of God. It is a matter of *family likeness*. He is speaking of believers here, and *not* merely of those who, regardless of profession of faith in Jesus Christ, exhibit some manner of respectability or what might be called “civic righteousness.” Unbelievers who seem to be outwardly decent people are *not* born of God.

John is also *not* saying that practicing righteousness is the *root or cause* of being born again, as if we could earn our salvation. What he is saying here is that walking in righteousness according to the commandments of God is the *evidence or proof* of someone being born of God.

But before even delving into the grace of God in adoption and the new birth, John starts off by pointing us to *the fountain or source of our adoption in Christ – the love of God!* In v.1 he tells us:

“See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are. The reason why the world does not know us is that it did not know him.”

I like the way that the King James Version puts it: “**Behold, what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us, that we should be called the sons of God.**” *Behold!* The thought of this should provoke in us *a sense of wonder and awe!* It certainly did with John, even after all those years!

The Greek word that is translated “**what kind**” (ESV) or “**what manner**” (KJV) conveys the idea of something being *completely foreign to us* and beyond our understanding. You could say something like “*What in the world is this love of God that He has given to us?!?*”

Notice also that this great love of God for sinners like us is *given to us as a gift!* We do not even begin to deserve it or to be worthy of it! That is half the point, isn't it? And we cannot begin to comprehend a love like the love of God for sinners! Psalm 103:11 tells us that the greatness of God's love for His people is “**as high as the heavens are above the earth.**” God's love is simply *unfathomable* to us!

No wonder Paul writes this about how he prayed for the believers in Ephesus:

“For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, *may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.*” (Ephesians 3:14–19)

God's love for us in Christ “**surpasses knowledge.**” It is too lofty for us. We can only comprehend it in some small measure if God strengthens us by His Spirit and enables us to do so!

Not only do we not comprehend this love of God, but we ourselves certainly do *not* love this way on our own! In Romans 5:6–8 Paul writes:

“For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die— but God shows his love for us in that *while we were still sinners*, Christ died for us.”

Likewise in Ephesians 2:4–5 Paul tells us:

“But God, being rich in mercy, *because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved.*” (italics added)

We should never cease to be *amazed* that God, who is *infinitely holy and just*, who is *infinite in majesty and glory*, should set His love upon unworthy sinners like us!

Children of God

That brings us to our second point. John told us to behold the wonder of the love of God for sinners in Christ, then he points our attention to one particular saving grace that God lavishes on us because of that love - “**that we should be called children of God**” (v.1).

Here the Apostle John is speaking of the grace of God in *our adoption as His children in Christ*. If God's love for sinners like us amazes us, the fact that He adopts us as His children in Christ should leave us dumbstruck.

What is adoption? The Westminster Shorter Catechism defines it this way:

“Q. 34. *What is adoption?* A. Adoption is an act of God’s free grace, whereby we are received into the number, and have a right to all the privileges of, the sons of God.”

As if God justifying sinners in Christ (*forgiving us and accepting us as righteous* in His sight for the sake of Christ's righteousness alone) were not amazing enough, He goes so far above and beyond that in the grace of adoption, that it is hard to put it into words.

In Christ through His gospel, God takes sinners who are *dead in sin* (Eph. 2:1) and “**by nature children of wrath**” (Eph. 2:3); who have *rebelled against Him* and were His “**enemies**” (Rom. 5:10); and who were worthy of nothing but judgment, condemnation, and an eternity apart from God in Hell; and unites us to Christ by His Spirit, making us spiritually alive from the dead and working faith in us; reconciles us to Himself and frees us from condemnation and death – and then *adopts us* into His family as His beloved children in His Son!

That God should justify us in His Son, reconciling us to Himself should boggle our minds; but that He should *go so far above and beyond even that in adopting us as His children* and giving Himself to us as our eternal inheritance? Words should fail us!

Now it must be said here that *no one* is naturally a child of God. We are not *all God's children* by virtue of being born. *You must be born again!* God is not everyone's Father. That is half the point of what John is saying here in our text! Many speak of the so-called *universal fatherhood of God*, but that is a lie. You will not find that taught in the Bible. Such a notion is nothing less than a denial of the gospel itself.

Born of God

Last but not least, John speaks of the corresponding grace of God, not just in our *adoption* as His children by the act of His grace, but also in our being *born of God* by His Spirit. We as believers are not just God's children in a forensic or declarative act, but also by the work of God within us – by making us born again!

As we read in James 1:18 last Sunday, “***Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures.***” The King James Version renders it “***Of his own will begat he us.***” We are *begotten of God* by the new birth! This is what John was speaking about back in v.29 of the previous chapter, when He said that “***If you know that he is righteous, you may be sure that everyone who practices righteousness has been born of him.***”

And so the work of God that is begun in our new birth and conversion is then carried on throughout this life in our sanctification, where God 'renews us after His image and enables us more and more to die unto sin, and live unto righteousness.¹⁴

In v.1 John tells us “**The reason why the world does not know us is that it did not know him.**” Why does he say this? We might think that if we are children of God, then our whole life in this world should somehow be all sunshine and rainbows, trouble-free and prosperous. But we begin to find that the world hates us. They do not “**know**” God's children, but rather *reject* and *persecute* them!

Why? In a strange way, although they don't **“know”** us (just as they didn't know Christ and rejected Him), they often see the family resemblance – the likeness to Christ! - and so they treat us in some ways the same way they treated Christ Himself, in rejection and persecution.

And so what are we to do? *Shrink back from that family resemblance? Try to blend in with the world by compromise and sin? Heaven forbid! What does John tell us? Look again at v.2–3:*

“Beloved, we are God’s children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is. And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure.”

He says, **“We are God's children *now*.”** That does not wait until heaven. We as believers are *not what we used to be*, so take it as a backwards compliment when the world hates you. But while we are not what we used to be, God isn't finished with us yet while we remain in this life. John goes on to tell us that **“what we will be has not yet appeared.”** (v.2)

When will that appear? When will our status as the children of God be made fully manifest for all (including ourselves!) to see? When Christ returns gain in glory. John writes, **“we know that *when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is.*”** (v.2) Believers will share in Christ's glory when He returns!

And so what are we to do? Sit around and wait? No! *We should not be content to wait!* We should so look forward sharing in the glory of Christ and being conformed to His image that we seek to be as conformed to His likeness in holiness of life in the here and now!

In fact, in v.3 John tells us **“And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure.”** If we have truly set our hope on Christ, we will purify ourselves from the sin that remains more and more by the work of His Spirit within us. And if we do not, are we really hoping in Christ at all?

But how? In v.2 John said **“we know that when he appears we shall be like him, *because we shall see him as he is.*”** There is something about our beholding of Christ in all His glory that will have a *transformative effect* upon us!

This brings to mind Paul's words in 2 Corinthians 3:18, where he tells us:

“And we all, with unveiled face, *beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another.* For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.”

We behold the glory of the Lord in His Word, and God uses that to transform us bit by bit in this life, until we one day behold His glory when He returns. And so let us continue to behold Christ's glory in His Word, and seek to **‘purify ourselves even as He is pure,’** knowing that we are beloved children of God in Christ, and one day our experience of that will be made full and complete, to the glory of God!