

## The Letters of John: Being Children of God

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Spring is doing its thing, and as humans, we can't help but feel charmed by the sight of animals and their young. Ducklings swimming in a line after their mother, a mother bear with a pair of cubs (viewed from a safe distance, of course), and even a sow feeding her piglets bring smiles to our faces. We sense the goodness, the rightness of parents taking care of their little ones. Today, we celebrate Mother's Day, a day to acknowledge our mothers and the positive influence they have had in our lives. The nurture, care, and love of a mother is strong indeed. If you are a mother, or a father, you understand something of how strong the bond is between parent and child. Even when they misbehave, or torpedo your plans, you still love them fiercely, no matter what.

This is the imagery that the Bible uses to describe God's relationship with his people. Speaking through the prophet Isaiah, God says, "As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you; you shall be comforted in Jerusalem" (Isa 66:13). In other words, God has the compassion of a Mother for her children for his people. Moving back a few chapters, God says, "Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you!" (Isa 49:15). It is unthinkable that a mother would

neglect her own child; the bond is that strong. But God's love for his people is stronger still. Though God has revealed himself in Scripture as our Father—Jesus and the apostles refer to him as Father numerous times—it is also true that he does not lack the attributes of a mother. To give yet another example, in Matthew 23, looking out over Jerusalem, Jesus laments, “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!” If our earthy fathers ever lacked the maternal care and compassion of our mothers, we can rest assured that God, our Father, does not.

Yet the focus of the Scripture reading for today is actually on us. How do we know we are God's children? How do we distinguish between those who belong to God and those who do not? What is the nature of our relationship to God as his children? These are the questions that John is concerned with.

Before we proceed to our text for today, I want to balance what John says with something Paul says about our relationship to God as his children. Paul writes in his letters about God adopting us. For instance, in Romans 8:15, Paul writes, “For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption,” and in verse 23 he writes, “we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies.” According to Paul, we receive a spirit of adoption when

we receive Christ, but we are still waiting for this adoption to be fully realized. John sees the moment we receive Christ as a rebirth—the parallel to Paul’s declaration that, “If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation” (2 Cor 5:17). In the Gospel of John, Jesus tells Nicodemus, “no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above” (3:3). In one sense, God adopts us as his children, but in another sense, we are born again—we become something different. No longer dead in our sins (Col 2:13), we are alive in Christ.

The foundation for today’s Scripture reading is 1 John 2:29: “If you know that he is righteous, you know that everyone who does what is right has been born of him.” When you are ‘born of’ someone else, you share their nature. Cats have cats, dogs have dogs. My children are human, as I am—just in case you were wondering. But John is not saying here that we become God—the distinction between God as creator and us as created beings will never cease to be. Paul’s use of the language of adoption limits how far we can press what John is saying. For John, what we share with God by being born of him is his righteousness nature. Righteousness is being in the light, being filled with the love of God the Father. If we are born again, born of God, then we will be like he is.

“See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!” John continues. There are certain times in life when you truly feel amazed by something, whether it is the grandeur of

God's creation, an amazing work of art, or the birth of a child. You hardly feel able to take it in. Your translation should have exclamation marks because the Greek conveys John's amazement; he is astounded by the fact that we are not only called children of God, but we truly are, children of God. God's love goes further than purging our sin and turning aside his wrath against it—which came at a great price. It actually extends to welcoming us into his family and to making us righteous, like he is.

Because we have been born again, we are no longer like the world; just like the world did not know or understand Jesus, so it does not know or understand us. Going back to last week's sermon, the desires and pride that come from the world are not what ought to characterize us. We don't play by the rules of the world; we do not live for the same things that it does. Instead of being caught up in satiating our desires and getting ahead of the pack, we live for God. For it is only in God that we can find true and lasting satisfaction.

Although we are presently God's children, "what we will yet be has not been revealed," John tells us. There are things God has not seen fit to reveal to us yet, much like a parent who wraps presents and places them under the Christmas tree. John is content with not knowing, with waiting. So we must be too. We are still in the process of being sanctified; in other words, God is making us more like Jesus. John writes, "What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him,

for we will see him as he is.” I love that verse. Recently, my daughter received a butterfly kit for her birthday. Her birthday was some time ago, but we had to wait until the weather was warm enough to release the butterflies. We received a package in the mail that contained transparent containers with caterpillars and food. We watched them move about and feed, and then we saw them attach themselves to the roofs of these containers and transform from hungry caterpillars into chrysalises. After a period where they hung dormant, they began to emerge from their chrysalises with their wings wrapped around them. Then, hanging down, they first unfurled and then spread their wings, revealing a profoundly changed nature. I imagine our own transformation will be as startling and remarkable. It is indeed a promise to cherish. And, if that were not enough, John adds, “And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure.” Just keeping this promise in our sights helps to move the process along!

Now we pass on to the more difficult part of today’s Scripture reading. John makes some very stark comments about the connection between doing right and belonging to God, or sinning and belonging to the devil. Thankfully, it starts out quite straightforwardly. John defines sin as lawlessness. Imagine an ice hockey game with no rules beyond getting the puck into the other team’s net. Imagine trying to sing a worship song if our musicians did not bother getting in tune with one another. Imagine if the rules of English grammar forgo I did. Refusing to live

according to God's plan revealed in Scripture and written on our consciences is living outside of God's law. Outside of God's law, we damage our relationship with him, our relationships with one another, and even our relationship to the rest of creation. Instead of understanding God's good creation and using it for its intended purposes, we use it for our own selfish gratification, bending and twisting it in the process.

John continues in verse 5, saying that Jesus was revealed to us to take away sin, and that in Jesus, there is no sin. So far, so good; this is pretty straightforward stuff. But then John writes, "No one who lives in him keeps on sinning. No one who continues to sin has either seen him or known him." If we take John to mean that once we become followers of Jesus we stop sinning altogether, we have a problem, because in 1:8 he writes, "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us" and in 2:1 he writes, "My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous." Like I was saying at the beginning of this series, John makes stark contrasts in his letters between light and darkness, love and hate. If we misuse his words by failing to read them in the context of the letter as a whole, then we will end up developing strange and ultimately damaging doctrine. In context, John's comments about ceasing sin must be taken as a generalization or a goal to reach for rather than an absolute statement.

William Mounce suggests that in this passage John is like a coach telling his team, “We do not lose!” or a mother telling her daughter that, “Good girls don’t do that!” Now, we all know that even ‘winning teams’ lose some of the time and that ‘good girls’ will sometimes mess up. The point is to encourage by pointing towards the goal, even though the journey towards it may be spotty.

In the next verse, John again warns his readers against being deceived—perhaps by the ‘antichrists’ he mentions in chapter 2. According to John Stott, these antichrists may have, “indulged in the subtly perverse reasoning that somehow you could ‘be’ righteous without necessarily bothering to ‘practise’ righteousness” (128). As a side note, I’m afraid that when it comes to the letters of the New Testament, a little speculation is sometimes necessary. The trouble with reading someone else’s mail is that you don’t necessarily have access to all the relevant information. You have to reconstruct the situation from clues in the text and may even have to draw on historical and archeological information. Getting back to the text, John makes it clear, contrary to what these antichrists may have taught, that if you do what is right, you are being righteous, just like God is righteous. It is not enough to claim that you are a child of God; your life has to show that you are. If you have been born again, you ought to share God’s righteous nature. “The one who does what is sinful is of the devil, because the devil has been sinning from the beginning.” John doesn’t pull any punches here. If our lives do

not demonstrate that we are children of God, we are ‘of the devil.’ John leaves us no middle ground. God is the sole source of light and goodness; living in a way that is opposed to his love and goodness means you belong to the darkness. If a ‘good girl,’ or a ‘good boy’ for that matter, consistently, deliberately, and defiantly chooses wrong instead of right, are they really ‘good’?

I’m going to take a bit of an excurses or rabbit trail here to talk a bit about the devil. What does John mean when he says “the devil has been sinning from the beginning?” If you will permit me a little theological reasoning here, I believe it is safe to say that the devil is a created being and that God did not create him with an evil nature. If God is light without a trace of darkness, if he tempts no one with evil, he did not create a bent and twisted being. Therefore, the devil must have had a fall. Furthermore, it makes sense that this fall occurred prior to the fall of Adam and Eve. When we first encounter the serpent in Genesis 3, his identity is not immediately clear. According to Genesis, “the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the Lord God had made” (Gen 3:1). So is the serpent in Genesis 3 merely an animal? Aside from the time God enabled Balaam’s donkey to speak, animals in Scripture don’t speak human languages. Furthermore, this serpent is clearly a moral agent—that is, capable of actions that are sinful or righteous—while animals are not. Although some Old Testament scholars will disagree with me, I think it makes sense to identify the serpent in the garden with



the devil on the basis of how the New Testament fills in our knowledge of who he is. John, the author of Revelation, brings together the image of the serpent with that of the devil; he writes about, “that ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray” (Rev 12:9). In the Gospel of John, Jesus says that “When [the devil] lies, he speaks his native language, for he is the father of lies” (John 8:44), which is consistent with the serpent’s deception of Eve. The devil, then, has been around from the very beginning of humanity. We have always had a choice of who to follow, consciously or unconsciously. In other words, when we rebel against God, we are not boldly striking out on our own; we’re simply following in the footsteps of another rebel, a powerful and malevolent one at that.

Next, John tells us that, “The Son of God was revealed for this purpose, to destroy the works of the devil” (3:8). From John 8:44, we know that the devil is a liar and a murderer. Ever since his fall, he has been working to corrupt and deceive humanity. This is the work Jesus came to destroy. By his sacrifice, he does away with the sin that follows from the devil’s attempts to corrupt humanity—though, as James points out, we cannot say, ‘the devil made me do it,’ because we are fully capable of being tempted by our own desires (1:14). As John says earlier, we can be purified from all unrighteousness. By being “the way, the truth, and the life,” he shines a light through the veil of the devil’s lies, revealing and dispelling them. By his sacrificial love, he counters the murderousness of the devil, overcoming evil

with good. Evidently, the works of the devil continue in our world, but his ultimate destiny is not in doubt. The capital city has fallen and the enemy has run for the hills. The decisive battle in the war has been won; even though the enemy continues to fight, the outcome is not in question. Checkmate is inevitable.

John's following thought is difficult to interpret with certainty. "Those who have been born of God do not sin, because God's seed abides in them," he writes. Some suggest that this seed is the Word of God, pointing to passages such as 1 Peter 1:23, which says, "You have been born anew, not of perishable but of imperishable seed, through the living and enduring word of God." Others counter that John sees the new birth as something brought on by the Holy Spirit in the Gospel of John chapter 3. However, I don't think it is impossible for John to look at the new birth from different perspectives. It certainly fits well with what the psalmist writes in Psalm 119:11, "I treasure your word in my heart, so that I may not sin against you." Even though we may not be sure of John's exact meaning, the general idea is that something from God abides in us when we are reborn as God's children.

John moves from here to reiterating the line he draws between those who belong to God and those who belong to the devil. If we are indeed children of God, the righteous nature that he passes onto us means that we will live righteous lives. When we do fall into sin, we are not acting according to this nature. While John

draws the line so sharp that we would misinterpret his meaning if we didn't place his words in the context of the rest of his letter, in Romans 7, Paul provides us with something that resonates more with our—or perhaps I should say my—experience. “Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me,” he writes. The righteous nature we inherit from being born of God indeed cannot sin. This nature is our true nature—the nature that will live forever. As children of God, we may not always live up to this true nature, but our lives should point in that direction. And a key ingredient in that nature is love towards one another.

Being children of God is a wonderful thing. God our Father is not a distant or aloof God; he is a Father who can comfort his children like a mother, and a Father whose ties to his children are even stronger than a mother's maternal instinct. He loves us. Not only does God deliver us from darkness, bringing us into the light, he also gives us his righteous nature and urges us to live up to it. In the midst of all this goodness though, is the stark reminder that if we claim to be born of God while living lives characterized by unrepentant sin, we don't belong to God at all. So remember who you are in Christ, that you are born of God, that you have inherited his righteous nature. Remember that Christ came to destroy the works of the devil, and that you are on the winning side. Remember that when we at last see

Christ, we will, at last, be like him, because we will see him as he is. Remember most of all that you are a child of God, and that he loves you very much. Amen.