

“Children of God,” 1 John 2:28-3:10 (Fifth Sunday of Easter, April 29, 2018)

²⁸ And now, little children, abide in him, so that when he appears we may have confidence and not shrink from him in shame at his coming. ²⁹ If you know that he is righteous, you may be sure that everyone who practices righteousness has been born of him.

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. ² 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. ³ And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure.

⁴ Everyone who makes a practice of sinning also practices lawlessness; sin is lawlessness. ⁵ You know that he appeared in order to take away sins, and in him there is no sin. ⁶ No one who abides in him keeps on sinning; no one who keeps on sinning has either seen him or known him. ⁷ Little children, let no one deceive you. Whoever practices righteousness is righteous, as he is righteous. ⁸ Whoever makes a practice of sinning is of the devil, for the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil. ⁹ No one born of God makes a practice of sinning, for God’s seed abides in him; and he cannot keep on sinning, because he has been born of God. ¹⁰ By this it is evident who are the children of God, and who are the children of the devil: whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is the one who does not love his brother.

PRAY

We are working our way through 1 John this spring and the focus of our passage for today is that Christians need to keep away from sin. Over and over again John the apostle writes about practicing righteousness and refraining from the practice of sin and the practice of lawlessness. By my count he uses some form of those phrases nine times in these verses.

Maybe you hear that – the focus of this passage is that Christians must keep away from sin – and you don’t get excited about hearing a sermon on these verses. It’s not the kind of topic that gets your blood pumping. Maybe a few of you grew up in churches where it seemed like that was all you ever heard, so you think you’ve got a thousand sermons like this one under you belt so you don’t need another.

And you know what? You’ll never want to hear a sermon on how to keep away from sin **until** you firmly believe that you will never really be truly happy until you’ve conquered the sin in your life.

We all too easily think our circumstances are what keep us from happiness. “If I had more friends, I had more money, if I were married, if I were married to someone else, if I had a different job, if I had kids, if my kids would grow up, if my kids would give me a call, if I didn’t feel so old and worn out *then* I would be happy.” It’s not true! And I can prove to you it’s not true. I can show you people who have exactly what you say you want *and they are less happy than you are*. Plus, I can show you people who have less than you have *and they are more happy*

than you are. And if I had just had the technology, I could put you in a time machine so you could see yourself ten years ago, twenty years ago, and show you what you wanted so badly back then. What you thought back then that if you got it everything would fine. And now *you have so many of those things you wanted so badly back then, and you're still not happy.*

Circumstances do not keep us from happiness and contentment – sin does. And by sin I don't only mean lying, stealing, cussing, and sleeping around (though those things are sin). I also mean anxiety, fear, pride, envy, lust. Until you've conquered those sins in your life you'll remain unhappy. ***Your happiness is on the other side of your holiness.***

The passage is primarily about resisting sin – verses 28-29 in chapter two and verses 4-10 in chapter three. But in the middle, in verses 1-3 of chapter three, we read of two promises all Christians can hold onto in their lives to help them conquer the sin that makes them so miserable. *First, Christians must remember what we are. Second, Christians must remember what we will be.*

First, we must remember what we are. I don't say what I'm about to say lightly, and I don't want to undermine anyone's trust in the English Bible, but I think the ESV translators really blew it when they translated the first third of verse 1. "See what kind of love the Father has given to us ..." 1 John 3:1a.

That simply does not do justice to what's written there, and other English translations show it. The King James says, "Behold what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us ..." You don't just "see" this love; you "behold" it, you don't take your eyes off of it, you gaze upon this in wild wonder. It's not just some "kind" of love; it's "what manner" of love. That's the same wording found in Matthew 8:27, when the disciples are on the Sea of Galilee in the middle of a hurricane and Jesus stands up and rebukes the storm and suddenly everything is dead calm. The disciples stare at him, they behold him, and they say, "What manner of man is this, that even the winds and the waves obey him?" Not what kind of love, what manner of love.

And the Father doesn't just give this love to his people; the King James version says he "bestows" it on his people. The NIV says he "lavishes" it on his people.

Why? Why the big deal about how this verse is translated? Read the whole verse and see what John is talking about: "See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are." 1 John 3:1.

Behold! John says – we are children of God. No other religion on the planet even claims such a promise for its believers, but that's the promise we have in the Bible.

One of the things that is so wonderful about the teachings we read in the Bible is that so much of it is so simple. The notion of being someone's child is an everyday, common idea – we can all relate to it. We all are someone's child, and many of us have or will have children of our own.

You don't need to be a genius to understand this. You don't have to have gone to seminary and know Greek or Hebrew. While I am a big fan of seminary and Greek and Hebrew, the truth is

that sometimes those things just get in the way of simply reading the Bible. So let's think: what does it mean to be someone's child? ***First, being a child means having access.***

I have four children, and at many different times over the course of their lives one or more of them have come into my bedroom at night because they had a nightmare or wanted a drink of water. I've even woken up in the morning and found one of these children in bed between me and my wife. One of my children had so much trouble sleeping that this child slipped into our bed every night for more than a year, and I'd wake up every morning to find that child in bed. And while my wife and I did wonder, "Is this ever going to stop? Are we ever going to have our bed to ourselves again?" I never remember waking up angry seeing that child there.

One of the pastors here on staff is Chris Teague. We've labored together at Grace for years now and have a good friendship and a strong working relationship. I think we could call on one another to do most anything for the other. But if I started waking up in the morning to find Chris in the bed between me and my wife because he had trouble sleeping, I'm pretty sure I'd be angry about it.

Why the difference? Is it because I don't like Chris? Is it because I'm mean? Is it because I don't care about his insomnia? No – I want Chris Teague to sleep well at night, just not in my bed. He is not my child, so he doesn't have access to me like that.

As children of God we have access and we can go to God at any time, in any place, with any request or thought or fear or worry – whether they are reasonable or not, whether they are spiritual or not. You don't have to be self-conscious in approaching God any more than our children are self-conscious in how they approach us! "Behold! What manner of love the Father hath lavished on us, that we should be called children of God."

Second, being a child means having provision. Parents sacrifice a great deal in order to provide for their children. They will go without many, many things in order to make sure that their children have what they need. At first, when your children are very young, you kind of resent it. This child cramps your style, you can't just go to a ballgame or go hunting or go out and have coffee with the girls on a whim like you once did. But just give it several years and you hardly think about it anymore. The sacrifice that was so great in the early years is now second nature, and though the sacrifices are great you don't expect anyone will give you a medal for doing them.

And truly being a parent means you are on the hook for life when it comes to your kids. I don't mean that parents are supposed to financially support their kids always, but what I mean is this: if something happens even to one of your full grown children, when they have children of their own – say you're seventy and your son is forty and he finds out he has cancer, and can't work anymore. What do you do as a parent? Do you say, "Sorry son, that stinks for you"? No, you do whatever you can even for your full-grown son. It never stops. You're on the hook for life.

Being a child means you'll be provided for. How much more, then, a child of God? "Or which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? ¹⁰ Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? ¹¹ If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children,

how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!” Matthew 7:9-11. We are, certainly in comparison to God but even sometimes in comparison to other parents, wicked – we sin against our children. Yet we provide, we labor to give our kids what they need.

How much more then will God as your Father provide for you? If you’re a child of God then he will give you precisely what you need. You will often in the moment not understand that God is giving you precisely what you need, any more than a five year old can understand that her parents are giving her what she needs. But it’s true – being a child of God means provision. “Behold, what manner of love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!”

Third, being a child means being delighted in. Parents, you know how happy you are when you see your child for the first time after having been away from them for some period of time. Maybe they are coming back from their first year of college, or their first day of kindergarten, or you’re just picking them up out of their crib after an hour-long nap. No matter how brief a time it is, you are so happy to see them!

Even if the last time you saw them it wasn’t pleasant. Even if the last time there was a nasty fight. You both said things you shouldn’t have. But then you see them again and you can hardly even remember why you got so upset. You’re ashamed you let yourself get so angry.

You delight in your children. And let’s be clear – you don’t delight in your children because of what they do, you delight in them for who they are. They are your children, and just by virtue of their status *as* your children they **have the power** to make you feel so strongly.

But, friends, don’t you see? In calling us children of God, the Bible tells us we have **the incredible power** to *make God feel*. The way we feel about our children is just a dull reflection of how God feels about us. Not because of what we do but because of who we are.

Now do you see why the ESV translation doesn’t cut it? It can’t be, “See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are.” It must be, “Behold, what manner of love the Father hath lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!”

Just like John, Paul in his writings also emphasizes this. “But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, ⁵to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. ⁶And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba! Father!’” Galatians 4:4-6.

Friends, if you know you are sinner, and if you hate your sins and want to be rid of them, and you look to Jesus Christ and no one and nothing else as your Savior, then you are a child of God. It’s one of the most powerful promises of Scripture.

But it’s not the only one. John says there’s another promise you must meditate and think on and long to see fulfilled if you want to conquer the sin in your life.

Second, we must remember what we will be. At some date in the future, unknown to us but fixed certainly by God, Jesus Christ will return from heaven. He reigns now in what the theologians call the “heavenly session,” but he will return bodily, physically, visibly to earth to usher in the fullness of kingdom in heaven and on earth.

And when he does we will see him. All eyes will see him. One of the hymns we sing at Grace Bible goes like this: “And Lord haste the day when the faith shall be sight; the clouds be rolled back as a scroll; the trump shall resound and the Lord shall descend.” That could easily be an intimidating sight. But if you know you are a sinner and you’re not too proud to cast yourself on Jesus’ mercy, then there is nothing to fear. “And now, little children, abide in him, so that when he appears we may have confidence and not shrink from him in shame at his coming.” 1 John 2:28.

If you humble yourself then you won’t shrink back in shame when Jesus returns. Instead, John says, *you’ll be changed*. “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.” 1 John 3:2.

That promise should stagger us. Jesus is God, he is the incarnate deity. But John is saying we will be like him. That means that when Jesus returns we are going to be like God. How?

It can’t mean that we will actually *become* God. We won’t all of the sudden become omniscient beings when Jesus returns, knowing all that can be known. We won’t become infinite. We won’t become omnipotent.

But we shall be like God. How? *We will be perfectly happy*. As I said earlier in the sermon, it’s not your circumstances that keep you from happiness. It’s your sin. Another way to put that is that your desires, your loves, are totally out of whack. We all want certain things in our lives more than we should and we don’t want other things enough. It makes us miserable.

Haven’t you experienced that? Certain things you know are bad for you but you can’t help it – you want them anyway. You take them into your life. They cause you and the people around you pain. And other things you know are good for you, other things you know you should do, situations where you know you really should say something, and you can’t do it.

Some people like to throw around the term “free will,” and they say that humans have it. Don’t be fooled. Human beings have free agency, the ability to make choices, but we don’t have free will. A totally free person would be in control of their desires and appetites; we are not.

However, when we see him all that will be changed. “We shall be like him for we shall see him as he is.” Something about seeing the Lord Jesus face-to-face, in the fullness of his glory, transforms us so that our desires will be perfected. Our appetites and loves will be rightly ordered, so that we will never be frustrated again. We will have free will again, just like Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden only better because seeing him as he is will keep us from ever sinning again. Perfectly happy because we will be perfectly holy.

But how does that work? What is it about seeing Jesus that will do that to us? Here's the way I think about it. One of the best movies that came out when I was in college was the James L. Brooks' movie *As Good As It Gets*. Jack Nicholson and Helen Hunt both won Academy Awards for their performances. In it, Jack Nicholson plays a first-rate jerk. He plays Melvin Udall, one of the all-time toads in movie history. Melvin a famous writer, wealthy, but he is miserable and he has a severe case of obsessive compulsive disorder and he hates everyone *except* Helen Hunt's character. Her name is Carol, and she is the waitress at the restaurant Melvin goes to every day to order the same food and he brings his own sterilized utensils in because he's has a paralyzing case of germophobia. Melvin always sits in Carol's section because he's in love with her. Of course, she sees what a jerk he is and she wants nothing to do with him.

But somehow they wind up on a date anyway, and Melvin being Melvin insults her horribly before they even get their food. He doesn't mean to, but that's Melvin. So she says, "Say something nice to me or I'm walking out." Melvin begs her to sit down and he thinks and then he says, "I have a great compliment. Here it goes. I have this condition. You know what it is. My doctor says that most of the time a pill can really help. But I hate taking pills. They are dangerous. I can't emphasize how much I hate taking pills. But last night, after you told me you'd never get into a relationship with me, I started taking the pills." Carol says, "I don't get how that's a compliment to me." And Melvin looks down, looks back up into her eyes and says, "You make me want to be a better man."

A lot of men have thought, "If I just had the love of a good woman, then I would change. Then I would be a better person." Every other country song it seems is about that. And a lot of us have had the experience of meeting someone wonderful from the opposite sex and it made us want to be a better person. For a time it changed our desires. We started doing things we should have been doing, we started exercising, eating better, and we stopped doing other things that are bad. For six weeks or six months or maybe six years, we really do change. We become better people.

But that kind of change never lasts. No human being is ever glorious enough or beautiful enough or amazing enough to change you permanently.

Jesus, however, is. He is the fairest of ten thousand, he is the bright and morning star, the lily of the valley. He is the Lion of Judah, the lamb of God, the king of kings, the Lord of Lords. He is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning of the end. And when you see him in all his glorious perfections, you won't just want to change. ***You will be eternally changed.*** His glory changes you.

John tells us is that if you want to conquer sin today then you must meditate and think on and long to see that promise fulfilled. You must focus your energy on the certainty that one day you will be like him for you shall see him as he is and you will be happy. "And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure." 1 John 3:3. Do you realize what John's saying? To even want to see Jesus will change you. To even hope and long in that direction begins to transform you.

It is so interesting to me that nowhere in the Bible does it ever say to believers, “If you want to conquer sin, remember that decision for Christ you made when you were nine years old.” That’s what it seems like I’ve been told an awful lot in my life, but that’s not in the Scriptures.

The Bible never says, “Remember what you have done.” It says, “Remember who you are and what you will be.” In Romans 13:11-12, “Besides this you know the time, that the hour has come for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed. ¹² The night is far gone; the day is at hand. So then let us cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light.”

Salvation in its fullest New Testament meaning is not only something that happened to us when we first believed. That’s when we became a Christian, that’s when we started following Christ, but it’s not salvation. Salvation in its fullest sense is yet to come. It comes when we see Jesus, and we are fully, finally, and forever delivered from sin.

Christians, remember what you are: a child of God, loved, cared for, delighted in by the king. And remember what you will be: perfect, sinless, holy. To the degree you continually remember those promises, you can be, no matter the circumstances, happy. AMEN.